



## Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care

Session 5 – Friday 27 January 2023

### Drawing on the diversity and strength of early childhood education in South Australia

A panel to discuss the history and key innovations in SA's preschool system: from the kindergarten union, through to role of community children's centres, Fraser Mustard residency, government children's centres, Carla Rinaldi's thinker in residence etc.

#### Intended outcome:

- *To draw out the core values underpinning early childhood education in South Australia over a long duration*
- *To identify where innovation in early childhood education has come from in SA*
- *To understand why the discussion about three year old preschool might look different in South Australia from elsewhere.*



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## A. Background

The terms of reference for the Royal Commission include a focus on three and four year preschool and how universal quality preschool programs can be delivered in SA, including considerations of accessibility, affordability, quality and how to achieve universality for both age cohorts.

In 2016 data (Mulhearn, 2018) indicated that there were 778 early childhood education and care services in SA including 349 long day childcare centres situated with preschools or delivering a preschool program, and 368 where preschool programs were delivered without long day childcare.

Based upon 2021 data from the Child Development Council's Outcomes Framework (Child Development Council, 2023), there are 19,100 three year old children and 19,400 four year olds in SA. Enrolment rates for four year olds in preschool was 84.1% for all children and 90.4% for Aboriginal children aged four. Enrolment rates for three year olds at preschool was 63.7% and 81.5% for Aboriginal children. Furthermore, 63.7% of three year olds attended an approved child care service.

Developments in early childhood policy and research outcomes (Mulhearn, 2022) both in Australia and internationally (UK, Europe and the USA) over the last decades accept that learning occurs from birth (and in utero) and that systems need to respond to the learning and development needs of children from birth to five, building a process of continuity of learning, high quality curriculum and effective interventions and support in this crucial period of a child's life. What happens for children under three is as important as the learning approaches for children aged three to five years.

Research (summarized in Mulhearn, 2018, p. 8) has demonstrated the following important findings:

- The early years of life, particularly the first three years have a crucial and lasting effect on individuals' wellbeing, health, education, employment, and social and economic status.



- The economic returns to society on investing in the early years can be as much as \$US16 for every \$US1 spent, brought about by prevention rather than later intervention.
- Children learn from birth.
- Attending an early childhood program has a positive effect for children when compared to not attending.
- There are strong benefits in attending early childhood programs for children who are living in disadvantaged circumstances.
- Early childhood education programs in which there are highly qualified teachers with specialised knowledge have better outcomes for children than those without such teachers.
- Children do better when they attend high quality programs.
- Conversely, low quality programs can have a detrimental effect on children.
- Structural factors of quality (such as staff child ratios, group size, staff qualifications), make a difference because they can provide a foundation to enact process factors of quality related to pedagogy.
- High quality programs combine intellectual and social/emotional experiences for children in a play-based program.
- Helping children develop dispositions, with educators building in children trust, confidence and independence, social and emotional well-being, supporting and extending language and communication, supporting learning and critical thinking, and assessing learning and language are all important elements of a high quality early childhood program.
- Children make gains in programs where there are respectful relationships in which children are engaged and can make decisions, and there is a balance between adult initiated and child chosen activities. One of the challenges of developing and implementing curriculum and learning frameworks for educators of young children and programs for children is getting a balance between the here-and-now of childhood and the future adult who is to develop.



Given the importance of quality early learning and the increasing numbers of children who attend an approved early childhood education and care service it is no longer appropriate to differentiate between preschool and childcare, but as the National Quality Standard (ACECQA n.d.) and the regulations attest, all early childhood education services should deliver quality curriculum, supported by appropriately educated and qualified staff.

B. Lessons from history relevant to the idea of universal offering of preschool for three and four year olds

1. The employment of democratic principles in decision-making, based on democratic values, with children as contributing citizens from birth recognised as competent agents in their own learning.
2. The role of leadership in educational thought, policy and curricula that focuses on holistic play-based pedagogy, including relational, and appropriate to children's age.
3. Prioritising the qualification level of educators and teachers. Four year early childhood education university degree qualified teachers in leadership and teacher roles are needed in sufficient numbers to create a rich and culturally responsive learning environment for children. Four year degree qualified teachers must have equivalent pay scales to teachers in the schooling years.
4. Recognition and valuing the role of women, non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal, in the establishment and building of early childhood education in the state.
5. Early childhood education provision to be philosophically based in reconciliation with Aboriginal Australia.

NB: This submission focuses principally upon colonial SA until the present day; however, also recognises in precolonial times the education of children was central to the life-worlds and continuity of cultures of First Nations communities living in this region



## C. Themes

### 1. Creation of a society, including early childhood education, based on equity and democratic values

The intention in colonial South Australia to create a society based on democratic values formed the basis for action in the state, including regarding early childhood education and care. Early childhood education was not about charity but about the principles of economic and social equality through educational reform.

In early colonial times, some provision for early education was set up for children whose families could pay fees, however, the principal philanthropic concern focused on education for children who were living in poverty to improve their life chances.

The 1971-1973 the SA 'Karmel Inquiry' (Mulhearn, 2022, p. 70) highlighted the existing social and economic inequity in education, leading to major reforms to address these challenges, and an invitation to undertake the same report nationally, which was published in 1973. The reports noted that equity in education was the most important single weapon in promoting equality and overcoming social, economic and language inequalities. The Inquiry also considered preschool education and highlighted the importance of universal access to preschool education for children from age three, with priority for children in disadvantaged communities.

### 2. Leadership in early years educational thought, policy and curriculum

A major initiative occurred in 1904 when Bertram Hawker, Anglican clergyman, educationist and benefactor, invited Sydney-based Frances Newton with Lillian de Lissa to come to Adelaide to show the community the benefits of kindergarten for those living in poverty. In 1905 Lillian de Lissa became the first teacher in the Franklin Street Kindergarten.

The Hawker initiative led to the 1907 establishment of the Adelaide Kindergarten Training College led by de Lissa, following the notion of democratic educational theorist John Dewey that teachers are makers of society.



Lillian de Lissa subsequently influenced the creation of early childhood teacher training colleges in other states of Australia and established the Gypsy Hill Training College in the United Kingdom (Mulhearn, 2022, p. 60).

What has subsequently developed in SA is a well-established 'pre-school' system, with a large number of government preschools, with degree-qualified early childhood teachers supported by educators providing a play-based curriculum. All childcare centres and integrated centres are required, however, to employ qualified early childhood teachers to lead programs for four year old children.

Nationally, the Lady Gowrie Child and Family Centres opened in 1939/40, in a major initiative across the country to systematically offer preschool education for children two to six years, addressing poverty, health and social inequity. The South Australian Gowrie is now located two sites, in Thebarton and Underdale. The centres had a unique focus on the integration of health and education concepts in well planned, inclusive environments, with large accessible outdoor and indoor spaces for children.

Gowrie SA in particular, continues to focus on social justice, inclusion, in-service teaching and learning in the field and Reconciliation. The Centre provides support for families and children living with health and fiscal challenges, and offers parenting programs.

'The Penny Report' (1977) highlighted the need for qualified Aboriginal early childhood educators and in 1978 SA-led the country with the Kindergarten Union SA and the South Australian College of Advanced Education offering the 'Aboriginal Early Childhood Education Program' (AECEP) (Ebbeck and Palmer, 1990) pathway to teaching for Aboriginal peoples living in regional and remote areas. This initiative provided a model, next employed nationally, for bringing Aboriginal peoples into teaching positions.

In the 1970s the Education Department SA established school-based preschools called Child Parent Centres, largely in disadvantaged schools eg Mansfield Park, Peachey Road, and Christie Downs, where access to Kindergarten Union sites was not sufficient or available.



In 1985 the SA Government established a Children's Services Office with its own legislative framework, consultation structures reporting to the Minister and responsibility for the management and delivery of a range of children's services including preschool education, family day care and out of school care and the regulation of early childhood centres (Mulhearn, 2022, p. 112).

Responding to child-parent centre staff requests for more guidance, in 1989 'Learning in Early Childhood Curriculum: what does it mean in practice?', was developed, followed by the 'Foundation Areas of Learning' curriculum in 1996.

In 1994 the Children's Services Office was amalgamated with the Department of Education to create an integrated department of Education and Children's Services to strengthen continuity of learning for children from birth to 18 years of age. South Australia led the country in deciding upon one single department for all aspects of schooling and early childhood care and education, including preschools, primary and secondary schools, family day care, out of school hours care and the regulation of long day childcare. Within the Children's Services Office and the Department innovation in curriculum development and programs (defined as changes to improve outcomes for children and families) was a key feature of the Department's work. The Department undertook work to address gender equity and cultural inclusivity. Research and training programs were established to support early childhood staff across the state, early literacy programs were developed for families and multicultural initiatives were established. Partnership arrangements to support young children and families were established across education, health and Child and Family Health Services. Key programs were introduced to support the training and qualifications of Aboriginal staff particular in rural and remote locations. A joint Professorial Chair was established between the Education Department and the University of SA and regular early childhood education conferences were held to bring internationally renowned early childhood experts to SA.

In 2001 the 'South Australian Curriculum and Assessment' (SACSA) curriculum which was inclusive of the years birth to 18 commenced, uniquely recognizing that education begins at birth. The framework contained birth to two years, three to five





years and Reception to year 2 sections: in many ways is still a ground-breaking curriculum.

2003 saw the commencement of the 'Learning Together' program, in which very young children and their parents learned together, enabling marginalized young parents to gain a qualification by developing their parenting skills, in the process advancing children's development.

Although from the 1980s SA Aboriginal children and children living in adverse circumstances were informally attending from 3 years of age, this arrangement was formalized in 2005.

2005 'The Virtual Village: Raising a Child in the New Millennium' report emphasized the importance of regarding children as citizens in the present, however also recognized their future value as contributing members of society (Mulhearn, 2022, p.112). The report observed the need to reduce the silos currently in early childhood services. The SA Education Department extended the concept of integrated children's centres with the idea of 'one stop shop' regarding early childhood education and other services, such as health, social work, and education for parents.

2006-7 Premier and Cabinet's Thinker in Residence, the Canadian physician and scientist Professor Fraser Mustard resulted in a greater knowledge of and implementation of measures supportive of early brain development as a foundation for children's long-term health (mental and physical), behaviour and capacity to learn. Fraser argued that the early years of childhood had a long reach into adult life. He recommended that the state collect '*reliable and comprehensive data on early childhood development and learning*' (Fraser, 2007, p.5). Thus, Fraser recommended the setting up of the 'Early Development Index' to collect data on children's development to allow a basis for policy development regarding children and families. In time the Index was adopted nationally and became the 'Australian Early Development Census' for five year olds, conducted every three years in the first six months of every child's schooling, with reference to all domains of children's development. In another recommendation, Fraser proposed the development of integrated early childhood education, services connected with schools.



In 2008 the locally developed 'Respect, Reflect, Relate' assessment tool for birth to five year settings, developed by Dr Pam Winter et al. from the SA Education Department, created scales for teachers and others to assess - *children's relationships, the active learning environment, children's wellbeing and their involvement in learning*. The tool was adopted nationally in 2010. Consistent with the history of early childhood education in this state, this assessment tool emphasized holistic development including emotional and social, not predominantly intellectual and physical.

The principles underpinning the Early Childhood Education and Care system in SA (Dawn Davis, development team member, personal communication, Jan 2022) informed the development of the national 'Early Years Learning Framework' (2009) and associated objectives, principles and practice standards. They included:

- the individual development needs of children
- the integral role and involvement of parents and caregivers in children's learning and development
- that learning and development occurs from birth and continuity of learning is crucial regardless of setting
- the need to consider the provision of early childhood education and care as a coherent system; one that now sits within a national framework of legislation and regulation
- the importance of qualified early childhood education professionals to deliver quality early childhood programs and services, along with training and development
- the key role of evidence-based research and assessment

In 2013 the national introduction of universal access to preschool was made much easier in SA by the existing structure that provided universally funded preschool for most four year olds. In contrast, in other states preschool in other states where preschool was offered it was on a combination of Government funded and fee paying user paid basis.



In 2013-14 Premier and Cabinet's Thinker in Residence world-wide acclaimed Italian educator and pedagogue Carla Rinaldi (2013) argued for integrated education settings for children three to six years, and an image of the child as a competent, contributing citizen from birth. The early years education sector continues to engage with Reggio Emilia Project principles, showing deep impact on thinking and practice in the field. A series of teacher study tours to Reggio Emilia were critical to that impact.

3. Recognition of the importance of registration and the attainment of higher level qualifications and salary for teachers and educators working in the early years

Qualifications for those working in early childhood education have always been regarded as important in SA. At a time when teachers in the schooling years were required to undertake just two years of preparation for the field, from 1924 a three year diploma was required to become a qualified early childhood teacher in South Australia. Later, the de Lissa Institute of Early Childhood and Family Studies (UniSA) commenced a three year early childhood education university degree, the first in the country. In 1995 a four year early childhood education undergraduate university degree with honours was introduced by UniSA, leading the country in both the length of the qualification and the honours offering. The degree continues to this day.

Teachers working in preschools within the SA Education Department uniquely have long been paid at the same rate as teachers in the schooling sectors. Many other teachers working with birth to five year olds in the for profit, not for profit and private sectors come under the Modern Award which offers a significantly lower pay scale.

In SA the recognition of early years teachers as being qualified to work with children birth to eight years is unique, not birth to five as is common in the eastern states. This requirement means that educational pedagogies employed are better attuned to children's actual development, making the transition between birth to five settings and the compulsory years smoother.

SA led the country in registering all teachers in 1976, with those teaching in settings for children birth to five years registered in 2014.



#### 4. The role of women in the building of SA's early childhood education

##### *Non-Aboriginal women*

A key historical theme was the work of women, both in paid and voluntary roles, in the establishment and building of early years education in SA.

The early childhood education sector run by women almost exclusively has positioned itself as somewhat independent from the schooling sector, exemplified in 1910 by refusal to amalgamate with the Education Department. The basis for this positioning has been a concern about being overtaken administratively and pedagogically by the powerful schooling years agendas, a concern that remains today.

##### *Aboriginal women*

Many Aboriginal women, both qualified and unqualified, have taken on teaching and caring roles in SA schools and centres. Aboriginal women who were ground breakers in early childhood education in SA and who had significant influence on the sector include

- Yankunyatjara and Stolen Generation woman Nancy Barnes graduated from the Kindergarten Training College in 1957 and after teaching in Adelaide kindergartens, became the inaugural director at the Ida Stanley Kindergarten in Alice Springs 1959-62. (Whitehead et al. 2021)
- In 1958 Amy Levai (O'Donoghue), Yankunyatjara and Stolen Generation woman, was the first Aboriginal woman to qualify as a teacher in the SA Education Department. She began work as a qualified 'infant' teacher. (Whitehead et al. 2021)
- In 1968 Dr Alitja Rigney commenced her career as the co-director of Point Pearce kindergarten, completing her Kindergarten Training College teacher qualification and, after time in the field, becoming in 1986 the principal of the Kurna Plains Primary School. She was the first Aboriginal principal in SA and the first Aboriginal female principal in Australia (MacGill et al. 2022).



## 5. Reconciliation

More than a decade ago, the national Reconciliation Action Plan framework was created by Reconciliation Australia to support organisations and businesses to prioritise reconciliation initiatives and outcomes, building basic understandings of Aboriginal history and cultural protocols.

The Lady Gowrie Child Centre (Gowrie SA) was one of the first early childhood settings in Australia to engage with this framework (Lynne Rutherford, personal communication). Reconciliation as a priority supports authentic inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, learnings and artefacts into the curriculum for children birth to five years. Children learn and share this learning with their families and communities. Culturally responsive pedagogy is critical to creating culturally safe and respectful places, supporting children's growth and learning from the earliest years.

Since the creation of the RAP framework, a simplified version, 'Narragunnawali' (n.d.), was created by Reconciliation Australia for education sites. The engagement in these frameworks has been slow, however momentum has been building over the last two years, in SA in particular.



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