A snapshot of 40 years in early childhood education and care through oral histories

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Abstract

The year 2012 marked 40 years since the introduction of the Child Care Act 1972 and the federal government introduced financial support for the provision of child care services in Australia. Significant changes have occurred in social, political and theoretical contexts of early childhood education and care (ECEC) during this time. Bringing these to life, this paper investigates archival data of key changes in ECEC in association with oral histories of staff, parents and children associated with *The Gowrie Qld* during the years 1972–2012. With narrative analysis considered alongside historical information, two dominant issues emerge as integral to ECEC in the past, now and the future. These are: 1) what constitutes effective teaching and learning in the educational program and 2) professional expectations in ECEC. Building an historical picture, this paper provides for critical reflection on the past to inform current and future practices.

Introduction

An increased commitment to the early years within economic, policy and educational reforms has occurred during the past 40 years. This paper investigates key changes in early childhood education and care (ECEC)[1] in association with oral histories of staff, parents and children associated with *The Gowrie Qld* during this time. Oral history is the assemblage and study of stories of people's reported experiences (Candida Smith, 2002). The stories are typically collected from interviews and conversations that are transcribed and analysed. This paper reports on a study in which *Queensland University of Technology* (QUT) Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) preservice teachers held informal interviews with past staff, parents and children as they attended a 70-year reunion celebration at *The Lady Gowrie Child Centre,* Brisbane. In line with oral history approaches, this paper draws on the recalled

narratives of those who worked in or attended the early childhood programs during this time along with factual information of the social, political and theoretical contexts.

Marrying oral histories with key factual information allows for first-hand understandings and rich description of dominant influences. Building an historical picture from the recalled narratives and a review of archival data during the years 1972–2012, this paper provides for critical reflection on the past to inform current and future practices.

The context of the study

This paper details the historical narratives of those who were involved in early childhood programs at *The Gowrie Qld* over the past 40 years to investigate changes in ECEC during this time. For over 70 years *The Gowrie Qld* has provided a range of early childhood services (e.g. child care, kindergarten, family day care), parenting education and child and family support. Over the period 1939–40, the Australian Government funded the establishment of a *Lady Gowrie Child Centre* in all state capitals to demonstrate excellent practice in the care and education of young children (Roberts, 1990). The Lady Gowrie centres mark the federal government's first financial investment in ECEC in Australia. Building on the vision of Lady Zara Gowrie, wife of a former Australian governor-general, the centres represent an early model of integrated service provision (Irvine, 2008) and were designed to improve outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The centres maintained a strong focus on promoting children's health, learning and wellbeing, but also worked to support parents in their parenting role to achieve and sustain the best outcomes for children. *The Gowrie Qld,* a non-profit community-based organisation, embraced this leadership role and soon became a main site for early education, parenting information and education and training early childhood teachers.

In order to investigate changes in ECEC over the past 40 years, this paper provides the historical background of ECEC within the period in question. First, international and national social, political and theoretical reforms of the past 40 years are reviewed, making explicit the historical context for the recalled narratives. Second, oral histories of past staff, parents and children who worked at or attended the early childhood programs of *The Gowrie Qld* during the past 40 years are explored. Analysis of oral histories along with the review of literature identified four themes. These themes are: 1) changing ideas and challenges for educators; 2)

image of children as confident and active in the educational program; 3) the sense of freedom to explore and play as key elements of the educational program; and 4) the importance of relationships and community. The last section of the paper draws on this historical information to consider current and emerging challenges for the field for ECEC in Australia. Thinking about these themes in relation to the context of ECEC today and the future, two main issues were identified, relating to 1) what constitutes effective teaching and learning in the educational program, and 2) professional expectations in ECEC.

Oral histories on their own provide the recalled views of participants. Recollections involve thoughts and feelings that may be seen as subjective and lacking rigor in historical research (McCullough & Richardson, 2000). Oral histories have more credibility, however, when linked to historical events based on fact. When oral histories are used alongside information regarding the social and educational time frame, a deep understanding of past events and experiences is gained (Gahan, 2005; Candida Smith, 2002). The next section presents a review of events influencing ECEC in Australia over the past 40 years in order to understand the historical context for the collected narratives of staff, parents and children.

Social, political and theoretical contexts of ECEC in the past 40 years

Significant changes have occurred in social, political and theoretical contexts of ECEC within the years in focus. The year 2012 marked 40 years since the federal government introduced financial support for the provision of childcare services in Australia. The new *Child Care Act 1972* (Commonwealth of Australia, 1972) was introduced to provide a basis to fund the expansion of childcare centres in Australia. The policy intent was to support the increasing participation of women in the workforce, and to address social disadvantage through investment in not-for-profit community-based quality child care. Until this time, the provision of ECEC services had remained a philanthropic endeavour, with the single exception of the federally funded Lady Gowrie demonstration centres. Furthermore, community interest in preschool education had resulted in some state governments becoming involved in the provision of part-day preschool services. As Press and Hayes (2000) noted, however, these sessional programs largely failed to meet the needs of the growing number of working mothers. The Act responded to social change within Australian society, and the provision of child care was linked to women's rights, industry needs and improved national productivity. Seeking some balance in terms of needs and benefits, the new Act also

emphasised the importance of providing good quality care to meet children's developmental needs and initially supported the employment of qualified teachers in these centres (Press & Hayes, 2000). However, over the next couple of decades, the focus on parent as primary consumer and child care to support workforce participation resulted in changes to childcare policy and funding. As demand for work-related child care grew, various federal governments sought to manage the spiraling cost of providing child care. A range of policy measures, most notably the introduction of parent fee subsidies for private childcare centres in the early nineties, led to significant growth in the provision of private for-profit child care and the beginning of Australia's mixed childcare market. Seeking to ensure the provision of safe and suitable child care, and accountability for public funding, this period also marked an increase in government regulation and quality assurance in ECEC.

An historical milestone and catalyst for the expansion of ECEC services in Australia, the Act, by its title and scope, served also to strengthen distinctions between care and education; distinctions that continued to be reinforced by separate policy, funding, quality assurance and administrative arrangements for child care and preschool education within government.

While the link between child care, workforce participation and economic productivity remains strong to this day, international interest in children's rights and a growing body of evidence promoting the importance of early life experiences and learning have also shaped ECEC in Australia. Internationally, interest in the early years and children's rights have been at play since the signing of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) (UN, 1989). Suggesting that the early years are a 'critical period for realizing children's rights' (UN, 2005, p. 3), the United Nation's *General Comment No 7: Implementing child rights in early childhood* called for early years organisations and programs to become more active in acknowledging and addressing children's issues in policy making (Burr, 2004; Sidoti, 2005). Giving strength to this argument is longitudinal research promoting the immediate and ongoing positive effects of access to high-quality ECEC on children's health, learning, development and wellbeing (Heckman, 2013; Schweinhart, Barnes & Weikart, 1993) The promotion of quality education and care, prevention of risk factors and early intervention are increasingly emphasised within early years research (Boivin & Hertzman, 2012; Heckman, 2013).

Responding to this evidence, and prompted by comparative reports in the OECD Thematic

A snapshot of 40 years in ECEC through oral histories

Review of ECEC policy (2001, 2006) that identified poor output and expenditure in ECEC by Australia, the Australian Government's investment in the years before compulsory schooling has increased dramatically over the past decade. Situated within a human productivity agenda, the current National Early Childhood Reform Agenda is based on a dual discourse of starting strong and investing in the early years (Irvine & Farrell, 2013). This investment strategy is clearly articulated in the Council of Australian Governments' *Investing in the early years – a national early childhood development strategy* (2009a). Key reforms include the achievement of universal preschool provision by 2013 and implementation of an integrated *National Quality Framework* (NQF) (COAG, 2009b) for ECEC and school-aged care that combines minimum legal standards (i.e. regulations) and higher quality standards to support continuous quality improvement.

The NQF introduces higher qualification requirements for some educators, improved adult to child ratios and has a strengthened focus on the educational program. Defining features of the NQF include coverage of all ECEC services (i.e. child care and preschool education) and the introduction of performance-based standards that support professional judgment and enable different ways of working in different community contexts. Seeking to strengthen early learning and to support successful transition to school, the NQF includes a learning framework for ECEC and a second framework for school age care. Principles, practices and outcomes supporting the education of young children are articulated in Australia's first national early years curriculum: *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework* (DEEWR, 2009). Implementation is now widespread, with ECEC services aligning their programs to outcomes that recognise the importance of relationships; emphasise children's active engagement with learning; and recognise the influence of early experiences on children's future participation in society (DEEWR, 2009). These social policy reforms have a focus on delivering quality ECEC, driven by comparative reports of the OECD (2001, 2006) and informed by shifting theoretical ideas in ECEC.

Changes are also evident in the theoretical ideas informing ECEC over the past 40 years. Throughout the 1970s a constructivist regime reigned in Australian ECEC with teaching beliefs adopting a child-centred approach. This approach maintained that education should be directed towards children's interests, needs and developmental growth, as well as informed by an understanding of child development (Burman, 1994). The resulting pedagogy and curriculum was one from a developmental framework, in which appropriate developmental

practice was given priority. As awareness of the influence of social factors on a child's learning grew, a social-constructivist approach that drew on sociocultural theory came in to play.

In the 1980s, early childhood education embraced understandings that took into account the social context for learning with the key idea being that learning is co-constructed. Most significantly, the work of Vygotsky (1978) has been taken up to construct pedagogic principles that accounted for sociocultural perspectives. With social interactions found to be such an influencing factor, other aspects that might affect children's learning, such as the role of culture and the participation of members, were considered.

Major shifts in thinking about children have also taken place outside of education since the late 1980s and early 1990s as post-modern and sociological paradigms emerged. In these understandings, perspectives from reconceptualising early childhood education, post-structuralism and the sociology of childhood were proposed as new lenses through which to view ECEC. Key ideas in post-modern frameworks tease out nuances of identity regarding power, culture and gender (MacNaughton, 2004). The sociology of childhood perspectives focus on the view of childhood, not as a predetermined stage in life in which children develop according to a set life trajectory, but rather a view of childhood as a social construction (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998).

Within the field of ECEC, the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education has had widespread attention in Australian ECEC. This approach fosters pedagogy of negotiated learning with components 'design, documentation and discourse' (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998). It also involves recognition of the physical environment and its ability to support social relationships (Rinaldi, 2006). While these perspectives are not yet considered as major informants to ECEC pedagogy and curriculum in Australia, increasing shifts and widening of theoretical underpinnings have led to a review of children's social status. Collectively, a focus on interrogating taken-for-granted understandings of power, gender, culture, class and disability has surfaced in ECEC. Today, attention to diversity and inclusive practice is key to political, theoretical and pedagogical positions in ECEC.

National educational reforms in this time frame have occurred within a backdrop of a global financial crisis and increasing demand on educators for the children and families in their care.

A snapshot of 40 years in ECEC through oral histories

This section has provided an historical context for the collection of oral histories during the past four decades.

The study

Preservice teachers were invited to collect oral histories of past staff, parents and children attending *The Gowrie's* 70th Reunion Celebration. This opportunity provided practical links of academic learning with 'real world' experiences for those preservice teachers enrolled in a foundational historical unit at *QUT*.

The project required preservice teachers, as novice researchers, to conduct a brief interview with reunion participants to elicit memories of their time spent at *The Gowrie*. The interviews were conducted informally during the event and captured by audio-recording. The preservice teachers' and reunion attendees' participation in the project was voluntary and not related to assessement requirements at *QUT* and ethical approval was gained. In preparation for the interviewing process, the preservice teachers were provided with an introduction to interviewing techniques and a series of prompts to guide the interview process. These included: *Tell me about your experiences at The Gowrie. When and why did you first come to The Gowrie? What are your fondest memories of being at The Gowrie? Any lessons we can learn from our past?*

The reunion event took place at the original *Lady Gowrie Love Street Child Centre*, Brisbane. The study participants included nine Gowrie staff members, three parents, and three past children, who were interviewed by nine preservice teachers. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed. Information and consent forms informed the participants that the aural records gathered would be used in a publication.

The oral histories were produced in a favorable context, as the participants reminisced about their time at *The Gowrie* with friends and colleagues. Reunion attendees understood the interviewers as 'novices', not only to interviewing but also, as first year preservice teachers, new to *The Gowrie* and early childhood education in general. A sample of the oral histories that related specifically to the past 40 years are analysed in this paper and the analytic process is now outlined.

A snapshot of 40 years in ECEC through oral histories

Analysis

Narrative analysis supports the 'historical interpretation' of oral histories (Candida Smith, 2002). While narratives collected from oral histories are not factual reports, they can provide information and events otherwise not available (Johnson & Christensen, 2000).

Our analysis focused on the 'what' of the oral histories. In other words, the 'told' aspect was our focus, 'rather than "how", "to whom" or "for what purpose"' (Riessman, 2008, p. 54). We selected 'brief, bounded segments' (Riessman, 2008, p. 61) from oral histories and examined these in conjunction with historical and theoretical contexts. In other words, our prior knowledge of the social, political and theoretical aspects of the time frame complemented the themes that emerged from analysis.

Analysis was conducted in two stages. The first stage of analysis examined the accounts of the past staff members, made up of teachers and some ancillary staff, which comprised the largest participant group. The first reading of the oral histories showed changing ideas and challenges for teachers emerge as the main focus theme. In the second stage of analysis, the oral histories of the collective group of participants were examined and key themes identified. Three key themes emerged from this analysis: 1) the image of children as confident and active in the education program; 2) the sense of freedom to explore and play as key elements of the educational program and; 3) the importance of relationships and community. Subsequent readings in each stage of analysis searched the accounts chronologically within these themes and according to the decade in which the participants worked. At times, a changing focus and reflection dependent on the decade in context was apparent, while other themes transcended decades and participant type.

Stage 1 theme: Changing ideas and challenges for teachers
Changing ideas and challenges for teachers were the focus of the accounts of the staff participants within the four decades in focus:

1970s

> Account 1: *We would write observations, we had something like a sociogram to capture the social interactions ...we were asked to do running records, event sampling ... and time sampling. We were really taught to respect the confidentiality of the*

> *records we made. The professionalism of the teachers and their sense of purpose and having a really clear identity about their work as teachers* (staff 1, circa 1972).

This account suggests that the field as a whole held high the professionalism and integrity of early childhood staff at this time. For example, one staff member associated with *The Gowrie* when the *Child Care Act 1972* was introduced commented on how she was struck by the professionalism of the teachers at *The Gowrie*. It was clear that the requirement for a teacher to keep records of children's learning and development was a high priority.

This account was situated within the era named the 'expansionary era' in 1965−75 (Byrne, 1986). In 1971 training colleges for teacher education were included in the tertiary education field, continuing a strong focus on child study and development. This was significant as it enabled graduates of institutions such as the *Brisbane Kindergarten Teachers College* to gain credit toward a degree.

1980s

Accounts from the staff who worked in the 1980s hinted at longstanding tensions that have existed in ECEC literature regarding the role of the teacher—as educator or carer:

> Account 2: *We're not just caring for children. We're educating children* (staff 4, circa 1985).

> Account 3: *Definitely back in the 80s your emergent curriculum and things wasn't around yet. We were still planning in boxes* (staff 1, circa 1972–1980s).

Two participants described an increasing focus on professionalism, reflective practice and the theoretical aspects of the curriculum (accounts 2 and 3). At this time, there was growing attention to the role of qualified teachers in promoting early learning, in part due to the influence of Vygotsky's theories. In sociocultural approaches, teachers were seen as significant others, important in helping children to bridge the gap between what they knew and what they accomplish with assistance (Robbins, 2005).

> Account 4: *There wasn't the focus on reflective practice – more about nice ladies looking after children than quality service provision .... focus on looking at what children were doing rather than the whole environment and adults interactions with children as having an impact* (staff 4, circa 1985).

Nevertheless, as evidenced in this account, there remained differences in community views about the purpose and nature of ECEC, with some continuing to perceive early childhood

teachers as just 'nice ladies who loved children' (Stonehouse, 1989, p. 61). In addition, as the staff member in account 4 suggested, the professionalism of teachers and commitment to reflective practice and ongoing learning has continued to increase with higher expectations of teacher to deliver quality programs.

Stage 2 Analyses

Analysis in Stage 2 was conducted across all participant groups. Three key themes: 1) the image of children as confident and active in the educational program; 2) the sense of freedom to explore and play as key elements of the educational program and; 3) the sense of community in *The Gowrie* centres were revealed.

Theme 1: Image of children as confident and active in the educational program

The first theme that emerged in the collective analysis was the image of children as confident and active in the educational program. These accounts discussed the practices and experiences that supported children as confident and active learners. A slightly different emphasis is evident according to each decade. When situated within the historical context of the time, these accounts provide historical understanding of the key ideas of that decade.

1980s

> Account 5: *We believed very much in the autonomy of the individual child. Children had access to puzzles and books and collage materials and without being told what to do, they used their own initiatives* (staff 2, 1985).

> Account 6: *Everyone was an individual and they all have different needs that need to be addressed* (parent 2, circa 1983).

Staff members were encouraged to help children to become increasingly responsible for their own learning as accounts 5 and 6 indicated. Such ideas resonate with contemporary early years curricula (DEEWR, 2009) that promote children as active investigators and problem solvers in their world. As mentioned by a staff member in account 5, the children were in charge of their own learning. Account 6 provided a theoretical understanding of the time in the late 1980s where ideas regarding the competence of children were taking the fore. The recognition that each child was unique, with differing needs, was reflective of core practice during this time. Later, a dominant early years curriculum document *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) similarly endorsed

recognition of children's unique abilities and rights as integral to the development of a quality early childhood service

1990s

The importance of providing children with opportunities to explore and actively engage with their learning environment continued to be a theme in quality ECEC, evidenced in the following comment from a past parent from the 90s:

> Account 7: *They were to explore, they were to create, and they were to work out their own strengths, limitations. Each child had their own unique abilities; they were allowed to develop them. We used to be able to borrow books from here ... massive numbers at a time ... it was an encouraging, supportive, let the child grow at the child's pace environment* (parent 1, circa 1992).

This account demonstrated the continuing emphasis on children's autonomy and right to learn at their own pace. Children's independence and agency for their learning was also fostered. Theoretical influences emerging at the time were reflective of the understanding that children have influence over their social settings (James et al., 1998).

This account is evidence of alignment between past practices and philosophies and those endorsed within the current national *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009), in particular the desire for children to have a strong sense of personal identity. Based on the reflections of past staff members and parents, it seems this was also a strong practice at *The Gowrie* during the 1990s. The emphasis here was on interacting with others in ways that display care and respect. As account 7 suggested, however, a shift is apparent as children are considered as part of a broader community of learners.

2000s

> Account 8: *The core focus of children first* (staff 8, circa 2001).

There were few accounts collected from those who worked or attended the centre during the decade of the 2000s. The account presented here suggested a 'child first' approach. In the 1990s children's interests and needs were central to all aspects of the program. This might suggest a fundamental shift in how adults are expected to engage with children, possibly influenced by a 'child rights' discourse from the introduction of the rights of the child in 1989 (Burr, 2004; Sidoti, 2005).

Account 9 reflected on technological advancements within the last decade and a shift toward incorporating information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the classroom:

> Account 9: *Children are very aware of technology and often teach me new things* (staff 8, circa 2001).

Over recent years, the educational program has been the subject of change with more focus on intentional teaching and also spontaneous moments. Today, the educational program is in the spotlight and a key area in the measure of quality in the early years (COAG, 2009b). Current curriculum frameworks for the early years encourage educators to provide children with a range of resources and different media, so that children begin to explore texts, numerals, symbols, including different technologies (DEEWR, 2009).

Theme 2: The sense of freedom to explore and play in the educational program

The second theme to emerge from this analysis was the sense of freedom to explore and play in the educational program. The oral histories provided an understanding of the sense of freedom the children were afforded within the learning environment at *The Gowrie*. This theme was emphasised regardless of the decade in which the participant attended *The Gowrie*.

> Account 10: *The openness of the room and the way that children could move from the indoor and the outdoor area outside under the trees* (staff 1, circa 1972).

> Account 11: *You could play in the bamboo. You would hide in it. It was their little hidey spot, their little zone, their place to go and be themselves. Like you have these days in book corner and in their little quiet places. They had it out there.* (staff 7, circa 1991).

The accounts remark upon the openness and freedom of the physical learning environment. *The Gowrie* in Love Street was described as a 'paradise for children' with the playground seen as 'an extension of the playrooms where young children would spend most of their playtime out-of-doors' (Roberts, 1990).

The staff interviewed indicated the importance placed on affording children opportunities to interact with different people, groups, resources and settings as well as finding places to 'be themselves' and ponder the world. The accounts provide a picture of the free-flowing and relaxed nature of the childcare setting, with a value placed on caring for others and enjoying the outdoors.

The next accounts highlighted the importance placed on children being provided with opportunities to have experiences and meet challenges:

> Account 12: *The outdoor experience, the freedom they had on the equipment – they didn't have to be too careful, they didn't have to be too neat. They were encouraged to be children, to explore all that that entailed, it was wonderful. Let the children be children ... let them play ... don't mollycoddle them ... If they get a scratch in the day... then that's childhood for heaven's sake. Don't wrap them up in cotton wool* (parent 1, circa 1992).

> Account 13: *A big sand pit and it had – we used to make volcanoes out of milk cartons and put something in there and then you put colouring in it and it would explode* (child 2, circa 1995).

> Account 14: *Children wanted to play, children learned through play and it was fun ... they played without even realising what they were learning* (staff 6, 1996).

The importance of play as a vehicle for learning was recognised in these accounts by staff, parents and child. Each account suggested the provision of a range of activities, with particular emphasis on allowing children to investigate and experiment with different concepts. The focus here on play and active involvement also resonates with current learning frameworks that continue to suggest that educators provide experiences to foster children's curiosity, confidence and persistence. The children were given opportunities to explore their abilities, meet challenges and to develop a sense of resilience.

These participant accounts reflected the historical context of the 1990s. At this time, play was viewed unquestionably as the main vehicle for children learning in the years before compulsory schooling and observed as a fundamental right of childhood (UN, 1989). Play was endorsed as 'a primary vehicle for and indicator of mental growth' in children and 'an essential component of developmentally appropriate practice' (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, p. 3). Play, as a means for learning, has been increasingly under scrutiny, particularly in the early years of compulsory schooling and still provides a challenge for educators today.

Accounts from a staff member and parent from the late 1980s and 1990s, however, suggested that children in the past may have had certain freedoms that are now more restricted:

> Account 15: *You got to interact with the children. I think they were given more opportunities to come into the kitchen and speak, where nowadays you're just sort of separate.* (staff 5, circa 1986).

> Account 16: *They could climb as high as they liked. Then restrictions started to be put on how far they could climb* (parent 1, 1992).

Changes in the playground due to safety regulations were noted in accounts 15 and 16. One staff member reflected on how in the past children were allowed greater freedom to move around the centre, and often visited the kitchen. Such comments draw our attention to the realisation that interactions, available to children in the past, may not be so readily available due to health and safety restrictions in ECEC today.

Theme 3: The importance of relationships and community

The third theme to emerge was the importance of relationships and community fostered by the *The Gowrie*. Comments evident in this theme highlighted the practices and approaches that helped children and parents to report on a sense of community. This theme was evident regardless of whether it was a staff, parent or child and crossed all decades.

> Account 17: *The staff were wonderful from the office right through to those in the kitchen ... it's that - getting to know the families, getting to know the people that the staff are supporting and the little idiosyncratic bits of everybody ... everybody was just really great together. Parents were involved –we organised lots of bazaars ... we participated in these and everybody was a big family. My kids still know kids from when they were three.* (parent 2, circa 1983).

> Account 18: *Expected rules of behaviour were – you will look out for other people, you will look after other people. You took care, you considered their feelings ... you shared, you picked up your own things, you helped to move things away* (parent 1, circa 1992).

> Account 19: *Staff know what the children liked and didn't like and it seemed to be one big family. We need to respect children for them to begin to respect us* (staff 6, circa 1996).

> Account 20: *We all kind of became close family and friends* (child 2, circa 1995).

Here parent and staff both placed importance on positive learning experiences that fostered positive interactions. Relationships between children, parents and staff were considered paramount to building a sense of community and ultimately the quality of the early childhood program. This sense of community was one that continued as children grew and left *The Gowrie*. Such ideas continue to be valued today as learning frameworks informing ECEC emphasise a sense of belonging to different groups and communities (DEEWR, 2009).

A snapshot of 40 years in ECEC through oral histories

This study aimed to explore changes in ECEC over the past 40 years and use this information to consider the challenges for the field in the years ahead. Narrative analysis of oral histories of past staff, parents and children provided a snapshot of the last 40 years in ECEC. The first stage of analysis showed that the largest participant group, the teaching staff, focused on the changing role of teachers and teaching. The key themes from the second stage of analysis were 1) the image of children as confident and active in the educational program; 2) the sense of freedom to explore and play as key elements of the educational program; and 3) the importance of relationships and community. Although this study only collected a small sample of views of this time, analysis of the oral histories provided 'connections … among past, present, and future' (Riessman, 2002, p. 702) and highlighted prevalent ideas and pivotal points where change has occurred in social, political and theoretical contexts in ECEC.

Discussion

The analysis presented above attended to 'the broader contexts that shape the personal accounts' (Riessman, 2008, p. 58). When the themes of analysis are considered alongside historical information, two dominant issues emerge as integral to ECEC in the past, now and the future. These are: 1) what constitutes effective teaching and learning in the educational program and 2) professional expectations in ECEC.

The first issue, what constitutes effective teaching and learning in the educational program, continues to be a topic that attracts a range of views. In ECEC programs play remains a dominant medium for teaching and learning. Reflecting many of the values evident in the historical accounts of *The Gowrie*, the EYLF defines play-based learning as 'a context for learning through which children organise and make sense of their social worlds, as they engage actively with people, objects and representations' (DEEWR, 2009, p. 6). However, over the past 40 years, a subtle shift is evident, away from free play to play-based learning supported by the active engagement and intentional teaching of a qualified educator. Examining the role of educators in play-based learning is critical for play-based learning to continue to be valued and accepted in ECEC. Studies advocate that play is relevant for learning but requires high-quality teaching for it to have most benefit. For example, the *Effective Provision of Pre-school Education* (EPPE) study found that 'rich talk', i.e. talk that occurs through joint expression of ideas by educators and children leads to 'sustained shared

thinking' (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2008, p. 5). When focused teaching is applied to scaffolded activities, children are more likely to engage in advanced play, self-regulation and higher order thinking (Basler, Wineski & Reifel, 2011; Miller & Almon, 2009). These studies suggest that active engagement by educators and intentional teaching support play-based learning. However, the notions of intentional teaching and play do not always sit comfortably together for educators (Theobald & Kultti, 2012; Thomas, Warren & deVries, 2011).

The second issue identified for ECEC today relates to professional expectations. Analysis of the oral histories from *The Gowrie* highlighted a focus on professional practice throughout this period, which was underpinned by a view of children as active and competent learners and the importance of building positive relationships with children and their families. It is interesting to note that these perspectives remain prevalent in contemporary quality standards and curricula. The NQF (COAG, 2009b) increases quality expectations in relation to the provision of ECEC and the professional practice of educators. Reflecting contemporary research, key quality determinants include a focus on children as active and competent learners as the basis for the educational program, the need to build trusting and respectful relationships with children and the importance of collaborative partnerships with families and communities. Scrutiny of professional practice in recent times means educators are expected to engage in critically reflective practice and ongoing learning and to develop a strong evidence base on which to make pedagogical decisions (Busch & Theobald, 2013). Critical reflection is viewed as a professional responsibility in which educators develop and employ 'reflective practices that focus on implications for equity and social justice' (DEEWR, 2009, p. 45) and support quality educational programs that are inclusive of all children and families. The aspect of quality practice that seems to have most changed over this time is the opportunity to allow children freedom to explore and play, a trend that may be explained by an increased focus on risk management in the early years and related regulatory requirements.

Change and educational investment within the past 40 years have not occurred in a vacuum. As the analysis of oral histories and review of the key influences presented in this paper showed, ECEC is a result of the social, political and theoretical contexts in which it exists. Oral histories examined in this paper have provided critical reflection on the past to inform current and future practices in ECEC.

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* Pseudonyms used

[1] In this paper, the term ECEC is used to refer collectively to all formal education and care services for children birth to five years prior to entry to school (e.g. childcare centres, family day care). The term child care is used in its historical sense to refer to a subset of ECEC services, offering extended hours education and care to support parental workforce participation.

Acknowledgements