

# One woman's crèche is a bureaucrat's child-minding centre

## 'The Flat' at Footscray High School 1976–1986

'One woman's crèche is a bureaucrat's child-minding centre: "The Flat" at Footscray High School 1976–1986';  
*Provenance: The Journal of Public Record Office Victoria*, issue no. 15, 2016–2017. ISSN 1832-2522.  
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### Abstract

**State archives present historians, particularly social historians, with challenges. For many decades oral history has been used to fill the gaps in archives and to bring historical stories to life. This paper concerning the establishment of Footscray High School Crèche goes further. It aims to use a dialogue between archival and oral sources to extend the story into different directions and open new perspectives on the past. The crèche was set up by a group of teachers in 1976 and ran for ten years. The history of the centre is not well documented in the archives, although there are clues to its existence. However, it featured very large in the lives of the parents who used it. This article considers the meaning of the different sorts of information about the crèche that can be gleaned from the archival records and from oral testimonies and suggests that this is indicative of the practical meaning of the crèche for its users and state administrators.**

It is a truism that, in writing history, oral history can bring the story to life and fill the gaps in the archival record. The reverse is also true: there are histories for which the archive carries very little or even no trace, such as those of entirely non-literate societies. Their histories must be constructed from oral accounts preserved in the minds of living men and women and called up into the hearing of modern historians when they are told. 'Oral traditions make an appearance only when they are told' as the historian and anthropologist, Jan Vansina, puts it, 'the utterance is transitory, but the memories are not'.<sup>[1]</sup> Between the two, lies a category of histories that are largely oral, because what they describe is beyond the purview of governments or organisations or corporations. They may be about the same things that concern bureaucracies, but the point of view is so different that

their archival traces are diffuse, not easily glimpsed, even fleetingly. Yet, they are there and they can be discovered by following the suggestions provided by the oral evidence. When they are followed, the archival strands can be linked together to provide a completely new set of stories. This is a different dynamic: the oral histories no longer simply fill the gaps in the archive, but they push the story into directions that can open up understandings of the past and the concerns of the consumers of government as well as—not instead of—its purveyors.

Sometimes, the process of cross-checking the oral and the archival sources shows new lines of enquiry that go far beyond the discrete material provided by one form or another. What is important to one informant may also be important to others and encapsulate a problem, a theme or an event that the archives of government either miss or document scantily because the concerns of bureaucrats are different from those of the individuals they administer. This is necessary because bureaucrats have to provide and administer systems that serve many people, not just a few. These limitations, on both sides, create a tension that illustrates the difference between what the state wants, what administrators consider they need, and what the wider society needs.

This article illustrates a very small example of this tension, but one that clearly shows how some Melbourne mothers in the mid-1970s understood their needs and how Victorian state officials tried to translate these needs into administrative action and fit them into a wider policy. This tension only emerged as my research moved back and forth between oral interviews and archival research at Public Record Office Victoria. That, of course, is a very common practice in modern social history, but in this case, it makes clear a much wider theme than the

micro-history of a single case study; one that clearly demonstrates how the personal and the bureaucratic approaches operated from very different standpoints.

It is certainly a micro-history.[2] In 1976, a group of teachers set up a crèche at Footscray High School. The severe shortage of qualified teachers at the time made the principal receptive to the idea of the crèche as a way to attract and retain women teachers. The crèche cared for a maximum of ten children at one time and ran for ten years: at most, it affected 100 families. The very informality and ad-hoc nature of the crèche as described by my interviewees means it is hard to find in the archives. By focusing on this informality through oral testimony, this article goes beyond social and political forces such as feminism and government policy, which certainly played a part in the history of the crèche, and moves into the personal, lived experiences of my informants.[3]

It would be easy to say that the importance of this story lies in how it illuminates the changes in family life in a working class Melbourne suburb in the late 1970s and early 1980s. That would position it as a piece in the building of a larger cultural story—part of my wider research project about women’s memories of bringing up children in suburban Melbourne in the second part of the twentieth century.

Even then, it is quite a small piece of the story. The footprint of the crèche in the public record is not large. There are some passing references in the archives and local newspapers, but it excited no controversy to attract the attention of bureaucrats and journalists. Could it be their refusal to accord it their attention reflected its lack of importance in the larger picture? Alternatively, could the silence of the print and government records reflect the tendency to ignore individual endeavour? I assembled the story of the crèche from interviews with three informants. Does the process of recovering the story, stitching together its public traces with the private memories of the participants, do more than simply add another small story to a wider theme?

Initially the crèche seemed a small part of my research, but when I went to the archives to check the details against other sources, it opened up a much larger line of enquiry. A simple search for confirmation of dates led me to ask questions about working mothers and their attitudes to childcare. A deeper methodological problem arose: what is the relationship between oral

history recorded from Melbourne women and the history of Melbourne women recorded about them in the archives and in the press? In this case, the first discovery of the story of the crèche came from the oral testimony of a participant named Therese Keys.

### Interviewee Therese Keys

Therese Keys mentioned Footscray High School Crèche to me when interviewed about her life experiences as a mother in suburban Melbourne. Therese was born in Spotswood in 1955 in the post-war baby boom. Her father had grown up in rural Victoria and recreated a little of the country in their ‘huge’ city backyard with ‘chooks, veggie gardens’ and space for the children to play ‘lots of ball games’.[4] In the 1950s, leftover industrial land in Spotswood was increasingly being re-developed for housing. Therese’s parents bought a block of land and built a war service house. This was one of the many bungalows built around the Maribyrnong area during this post-war period.[5] With eight children in the family, the large washing line in the back garden was well used and Therese recalls that at kindergarten all she ‘ever used to paint was nappies on the line’. As the oldest daughter, Therese helped look after her younger siblings, especially as a teenager in the months when her mother was recovering from a stroke and her father returned to his work as a tram conductor on the Port Melbourne line. Therese remembers enjoying the fact that babies were always around her and wanted to ‘experience having a baby’ herself. In 1979, at the age of 24, and four years after she married, Therese was delighted to discover she was pregnant with her first child:

I was very excited about becoming a mother; I had a history of being one of eight children, and always around babies, always. I was the eldest girl, of those eight children, and always had a little baby nearby to play with, or help, or whatever, and I just really wanted a baby of my own.[6]

Therese had not planned to work after having children. Therese’s mother had stopped working in the office of the Catholic newspaper, the Advocate, when she married. However, Melbourne in the 1970s was not the same as in the 1950s. Family life was changing. One of the significant changes was the increase in married women and mothers in the paid workforce. In 1954, 13 per cent of married women were in paid work. By 1974, this had increased to 40 per cent. Many of these married women were mothers. In 1973, 50 per cent of mothers of school

age children and 27 per cent of the mothers of pre-school children were working.[7] The Royal Commission on Human Relationships released its findings in 1977 and estimated that 28 per cent of children under the age of six were the responsibility of a working parent—most often the mother.[8] Of course, working mothers were not a new phenomenon in Australia, but the dramatic increase in numbers in two decades made it more visible. Working mothers were a social reality by the mid-1970s, and as journalist Anne Deveson wrote in 1978, ‘to ignore this social reality is to ignore the interests and well-being of thousands of young children’.[9]

The reasons for this change were complex and varied: smaller families with children spaced more closely together, feminism, suburban development, economic factors, increased school retention rates and legislative changes such as the abolition of the marriage bar for public servants in 1966 and the gradual introduction of ‘equal pay’ for women. For these women, the primary reason most often given in interviews for returning to work was financial. However, such responses can obscure reasons that are more complex. Of course, there was often a financial impetus. By the mid-1970s, the economic stability of the 1950s and 1960s had disappeared. Economic growth had slowed, inflation was high and unemployment was increasing. The 1970s credit squeeze was felt particularly keenly in working class areas such as Spotswood and Footscray, which had traditionally been heavily reliant on manufacturing. Job insecurity meant more women took up work to protect their families in case of future job losses for their husbands. A February 1976 Gallup poll showed that inflation and unemployment were the greatest sources of concern, and newspapers were full of political promises to improve housing affordability for families.[10]

Like many others, Therese discovered one income was no longer enough to support her family:

I needed to, I needed the money, and I needed, we needed the money. And the good part was, I got the further education my self, and I’ve been able to help the family, and have a good job, you know, because of that, and get through where, you know, the last, what, how many years we’ve had to have two jobs, and that’s been good.[11]

Therese repeats ‘needed’ four times in one sentence, but perhaps more interestingly she changes the subject from ‘I’ to ‘we’. The family needed the income, but Therese also needed the work for herself and her independence.

Gaining a tertiary education (the first in her family) meant Therese was able to help the family financially and it became evident in her interview that this gave her a great deal of confidence as a mother. This small shift in emphasis points to the variety of reasons women entered and re-entered the workforce after motherhood.



Footscray High School, Wembley Avenue, Spotswood, circa 1953. Maribyrnong Library Service, image ID 4808.

### **‘It was a little home’: Therese introduces Footscray High School Crèche**

Through her sister, Therese found a part-time job in the library at Footscray High School. She had worked at various retail jobs after leaving school, but this was the first time she had worked in a library. Footscray High School was built in Spotswood in the 1950s and opened just before Therese started primary school. As the photograph above shows, it featured the long straight corridors typical of the ‘chicken coop’ schools of the time. Initially, it accommodated the post-war migration boom, but was still a busy school in the 1970s. Accepting the position at the school created a problem for Therese and her husband. Who would look after their 12-month-old daughter? Therese’s mother lived in the next street and was supportive. Therese remembers her mother would often ‘grab washing’ and help with babysitting. However, her mother was still caring for her own children—Therese’s younger siblings. This was not unusual and reflects a wider story again.

The gradual decline in the median age of mothers in Australia dropped from 28 in 1945 to 25 in 1970—the lowest on record. Fertility rates were over 3.0 children per family between 1950 and 1965.[12] This combination of younger women having babies in the 1970s, but often coming from larger and more widely spaced families, meant new grandmothers were not always available to look after grandchildren. In suburbs like Footscray with high numbers of post-war migrants, grandparents were often not around at all. As Therese explains, the deciding factor in accepting the job was that there was a small child-minding centre on-site:

When she [daughter Jessica] was one, I started the job, and I think I must have started studying, maybe two years into the job, or 18 months into that job. The job eventually became full-time, oh sorry, permanent part-time, it was only part-time. Oh it was lovely! There was a crèche at the school. Run by a mothercraft nurse, and there were only teachers, and staff, children, and there was a maximum of ten, and it was very, very rarely ten, so it was a little home, within the school, a proper home, because it used to be a residence.

Yes, it was set up as, it was beautiful, it was really. And we all took turns, the staff all took it in turns, at lunchtime, relieving at the day-care centre, the crèche, and as I was just part-time, sometimes I worked there too, so, they'd give me a bit of it ... you'd have school, the high school students there as well, at, but you'd be in charge, when the mothercraft nurse wasn't around, or had a day off, or whatever, and yes, I worked there sometimes too, which was nice.

Oh, it was perfect, just perfect.[13]



Footscray High School Crèche, 1978. Photograph provided by Jillian Hargreaves.

The emotional aspect of putting children into care outside the home is one I have found mothers remember and talk about at great length decades after their children have grown up. Therese repeated several times that the crèche was a 'little home' and emphasised how 'you almost felt as though you weren't leaving them'. However, she was leaving them and her sadness about this came through later in her interview when she spoke about returning to work after her second child was born:

Even though it was under those good conditions, it was at the school, it was, you know, I'd just drop him off at one room, and go to another myself, I still wanted to be home with him a bit longer... I felt I would have liked a bit longer, as a mum.[14]

The photograph above of story time illustrates the homely atmosphere of the crèche. Jill, the mothercraft nurse, sits with one child on her lap and another nestled into her, while Lyn, the woodwork teacher's wife, reads a story. In emphasising the intimate nature of the crèche, Therese may also be commenting on what some other child-minding centres were like in 1970s Melbourne.

### Child minding legislation

This question about childcare sent me back to the archives. The archival records suggest not all centres were as homely as Footscray High School. According to the *Health (Child Minding) Act 1964*, the Department of Health regulated child-minding centres in the 1970s. These regulations were primarily concerned with the health and safety of the children and focused on the physical environment: the height of door handles, ventilation, height of toilets and sinks, heater guards and first aid cupboards. They do not mention the child-minders' experience with caring for children. Perhaps this focus helps explain the reservations of mothers such as Therese about child-minding centres and her emphasis that Footscray was a crèche (not a 'child-minding centre') and run by a 'fully qualified mothercraft nurse'. Deborah Brennan points out that the term 'child care' was also complicated as, until at least the 1960s, it was closely associated with 'child welfare'. [15] Documents in the Department of Health files suggest an increasing concern from the department as well as the public about the child-to-staff ratios as well as the quality of care. Community Child Care, a feminist grass-roots association, shared some of these concerns. Founding members of this group noted in 1981 that the Department of Health requirements in the 1970s, 'seemed



to be more concerned with the children's physical hygiene and ensuring that children of one yearly age-grouping didn't mix with any others, than with the social and cognitive development of children'.<sup>[16]</sup> By the 1970s, the public as well as bureaucrats were asking questions about the 'adequate number of staff employed on duty' and this correspondence was used by the Secretary of the Department of Health in May 1974 to support recommendations to amend the regulations to 'overcome loop-holes in relation to the employment of group leaders at Child Minding Centres'.<sup>[17]</sup> In 1985, the newly-created Department of Community Services took over registration of child minding centres noting that it 'would appear to be more relevant to that Department now'.<sup>[18]</sup> With this move came further regulatory changes and a greater emphasis on the quality of care in child minding centres.

However, some working parents had little choice in childcare. The lack of suitable childcare was a considerable problem in the 1970s. In 1977, the Royal Commission on Human Relationships reported that, although improving, there was 'still a serious shortage of child care of all kinds'.<sup>[19]</sup> Mothers coped with this by adjusting their work lives by working part-time or working at night or taking jobs out of their career field that fitted within school hours. As one of the commissioners, Anne Deveson, explained, 'many of the working women had solved the child care problem by avoiding it'.<sup>[20]</sup>

### **Child minding centre files**

Public Record Office Victoria holds the Victorian Department of Health records for 1962 to 1980 and they include close to 1,000 child minding centre files. Many of these were what Deborah Brennan has termed 'home-based childminders' and not formal childcare centres as we understand the term now.<sup>[21]</sup> The files are stored in 37 boxes, catalogued at the box level with no further information on the box label or in the catalogue record other than the child minding centre number. These records are incomplete as Footscray High School Crèche (child minding centre number 890) is not included in any of the boxes.<sup>[22]</sup> There are traces of the crèche in the archival record such as the plans submitted to the Department of Health in the building files.<sup>[23]</sup> The establishment of the crèche was reported in the local Footscray newspaper, the Mail, but, being 1976, this falls into the un-digitised 'black hole' of Australian newspapers and so not easily searchable.

### **'Last-ditch move to attract teachers': establishing the school crèche**

So I returned to oral testimony. I was able to locate and interview one of the teachers involved in setting it up as well as the mothercraft nurse who ran the crèche. Footscray High School Crèche was the idea of one teacher, Lana Malakunas, and achieved by the collective efforts of a small group of teachers. In 1975, Lana, an English and history teacher at Footscray High School, was upgrading her teaching qualifications at the University of Melbourne. She noticed their family club which had been set up as a cooperative day nursery and kindergarten in 1965 and thought: 'what a wonderful idea because if you have your child close by and in a place with people you feel comfortable with, it means so much to you as a working parent'.<sup>[24]</sup> Lana knew from personal experience that formal childcare was not readily available and she knew other mothers who also wanted to work outside the home. At the end of the school's home economics wing was a section known as 'The Flat'. Set up as a replica house with a kitchen, bedroom and sitting room, it was a relic from the days when schoolgirls were taught all aspects of home making—including the correct method of making beds.<sup>[25]</sup> By the early 1970s, 'The Flat' at Footscray High School was no longer used. Lana saw it had other possibilities: it would make an ideal crèche. Together with three other female teachers, she prepared a proposal to set up a cooperative child-minding centre on the school grounds. The school principal agreed; minor alterations were made to 'The Flat'; the necessary paperwork was completed for the Department of Health; and the committee began advertising for a mothercraft nurse. In 1976, Footscray High School Crèche was established. It ran successfully for the next ten years under the supervision of former students and recently-qualified mothercraft nurse, Jillian Hargreaves.

The idea of having a crèche on school premises was innovative and challenged social norms of the times, but it was generally well received by the principal, staff and school council. However, there were certainly teething problems. Lana remembers one senior male teacher in particular who vigorously objected to the idea of a crèche. The school principal was able to ignore these objections as there was a severe teaching shortage at the school, and the crèche was strongly promoted by the advisory committee as one way to 'attract and retain teachers'.<sup>[26]</sup> The teacher shortage was a widespread problem, but it was felt particularly keenly in more disadvantaged

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schools such as Footscray High School in the western suburbs. The school had been employing temporary teachers from the USA. Retaining staff was also a problem. The school principal reported in 1978 that the school 'has had a staff turnover rate between 30 and 40 per cent each year,' but 'the Crèche is helping to reduce that rate'.<sup>[27]</sup> A local newspaper article about the crèche in 1976 ran with the rather depressing headline: 'Last-ditch move to attract teachers'. An advertisement ran in the same paper was 'urgently' looking for teachers in term two for boy's craft, history, science, migrant English and remedial English.<sup>[28]</sup>

To an extent, the crèche was an example of work-based childcare established in response to employer needs. Deborah Brennan points out this type of childcare was criticised by sections of both the union movement and the community childcare movement for tying the children and parents to the workplace.<sup>[29]</sup> In reality, the number of childcare centres of this type was so small that this concern seems to have been a little misplaced. A 1970 Federal Government Department of Labour and National Service report into childcare centres in Australia identified only two 'child care centres in Australia which employers conduct for the benefit of their employees'. Both were in Victoria: the first was a manufacturer of telephone equipment and the second a Melbourne hospital.<sup>[30]</sup> In 1977, a real estate developer established a childcare centre as part of an industrial estate in the Sydney suburb of Ryde. The *Women's Weekly* reported the development as being 'the workplace of the future' and 'revolutionary', suggesting that it was unusual but attractive.<sup>[31]</sup> This was echoed in 1979 in another *Women's Weekly* article, this time on German factory on-site kindergartens, which began, 'children's centres designed as part of the work-place are still largely a dream in Australia'.<sup>[32]</sup>

The Footscray High School Crèche was also clearly more than a desperate attempt to solve a teaching shortage. At the time, teachers at the school talked about it as 'an important social experiment' and a 'modern trend'.<sup>[33]</sup> The school principal described it as 'one of the school's contributions to the spirit of the *Equal Opportunity Act*'.<sup>[34]</sup> There seems to have been a sense among the advisory committee of being trailblazers. Lana wrote a detailed statement of the procedures followed to set up the crèche in response to other schools 'wishing to know how we were able to establish a child care centre on Education Department premises, so they could make

use of our experience as a basis for their own work'.<sup>[35]</sup> Now, four decades later, Lana sees the objection to the crèche as reflecting some of the larger social disquiet about women, and especially mothers, in the workplace:

... and the senior teaching group were men. And there was one in particular who thought it would be very, very nice for the senior teachers to have their own quarters in the school. And so it was a toss-up between, do the male senior teachers have this as their office space or do we use it as a crèche? [relaxed laughter] And, I had to stand my ground. Mmm, so, it worked out well [laughter]. But, I think they were the days also when women were becoming more seen in the workforce. And, to have women with children being part of the workforce was [pause] they were early days [pause] they were pioneering days in just so many ways. And, so, you know it made people think and question and challenge [laughter]. And, but, that's ok. That's part of the evolutionary process. On the whole people were very, very supportive.<sup>[36]</sup>

Lana's use of the work 'pioneering' evokes a sense of real hardship, creating new ground and overcoming significant barriers. I asked Lana about this and she agreed this was how she and her female colleagues felt. However, she was also keen to remind me that the role of men was also changing. In her case, her father who had just retired looked after her two children rather than her mother who continued to work.

Nevertheless, there were tensions about these changes and these were evident beyond Footscray High School. In 1976, sociologists Jan Harper and Diane Worrell conducted a study of young mothers in Melbourne called *Two options or a double bind*, funded by the Royal Commission on Human Relationships, in which they described a divide between mothers and working mothers in the 1970s. In their interviews with almost 200 Melbourne mothers, Harper and Worrell discovered that mothers were caught between two negative stereotypes: 'dull housewives' if they stayed home to care full-time for their children, or 'neglectful and selfish' if they entered the paid workforce. As Harper and Worrell put it: 'you're damned if you do and damned if you don't'.<sup>[37]</sup> Neither Therese nor Lana remembers the divide being quite so clear, but other interviewees have spoken about this division.

The discussion about working mothers was framed around the best interests of the child. The British psychologist John Bowlby's theories of maternal attachment still seemed to be influencing ideas about childcare and the role of the mother in early attachment. However, it is difficult to know how much this discussion

reflected the social structures of the day. As Harper and Richards point out, it can be ‘difficult to separate the norms from external factors, like availability and suitability of child-care’.[38] A viable childcare option, such as an on-site crèche, allowed mothers to make choices about work, choices they would not have been able to make a decade earlier.[39] Choices, as Lana explained in her interview, some people found challenging.

## Conclusion

The research behind this paper started out as a simple exercise in fact checking of oral material. It developed into an understanding of how the expectations of individuals and the considerations of government interacted and differed. As research, it resulted in an extended dialogue between the archival and oral sources. To return to Vansina and his point that oral stories are fleeting, as ‘most of the time they dwell only in the minds of people’.[40] The personal histories of my informants are only known because I interviewed them—otherwise the story would probably never have surfaced and the memories, however long-term they might have been, would eventually have died with them. Without those memories, a much more important story would have been lost. The archive alone would never have suggested the extent of the difference between personal expectations and the provisions of government. The formulation of ‘crèche versus child-minding’ as contrasting outlooks between government and individuals is the difference between informal, cooperative on the one hand, and formal, and prescriptive on the other.

In its own terms, Footscray High School Crèche ran successfully for ten years showing its value to the staff who used it and to the school as a whole. In the end, the informal and cooperative nature of the centre, as well as its small scale, proved unsustainable. In 1985, the newly-created Department of Community Services took over responsibility from the Department of Health for child-minding centres in Victoria and the regulations around childcare began to change. Jillian, who ran the centre, explained that the new staff-to-child ratios and increasing bureaucracy meant that it was no longer financially viable to keep the centre open. Footscray High School Crèche closed in 1986.

However, in just a decade, the crèche made an enormous difference to some families. Social changes such as the creation of teaching studentships, increased mature age university entry and the introduction of free tertiary education, allowed women like Lana and Therese to take up work and educational opportunities that had not been available to their mothers. The opportunity to obtain tertiary education has led to long and interesting careers. An on-site and homely crèche allowed them to continue in the paid workforce after having children. Therese formally trained as a librarian technician and worked in an academic library for more than 30 years. Lana taught in secondary schools for many years and then moved into education administration before retiring a few years ago. Like many other working mothers in the 1970s, neither remembered consciously planning a career. As Lana explained, ‘we worked, we didn’t think of it as a career’. Yet, a career is what they achieved.

## Acknowledgement

This paper was possible because three women, Therese Keys, Lana Malakunas and Jillian Pearce (née Hargreaves) generously shared their memories of the crèche and searched for documents, photos and papers stored away in boxes for the last four decades. I would like to thank them. Also, thank you Richard for the title—and more.

The research underpinning this publication was undertaken while completing a PhD at La Trobe University, Melbourne, and approved by the La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee (ethics approval number 2088-14).

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[31] Gillian Chalmers, 'It has a child care centre, parkland, lake and fitness track: the workplace of the future', *Women's Weekly*, 21 December 1977, pp. 34–35.

[32] Elizabeth Murphy, 'A Berlin factory's roof-top kindergarten', *Womens Weekly*, 24 October 1979.

[33] These comments came from V J Heaney & G Hunter, Notes prepared by the Advisory Council of Footscray High School Crèche in 1976. Copy provided to author by Lana Malakunas.

[34] Sevier, Memorandum.

[35] Document provided to author by Lana Malakunas.

[36] Lana Malakunas interview.

[37] Jan Harper and Lyn Richards, *Mothers and working mothers*, Penguin Books Australia, Ringwood, 1979. p. 30.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 111.

[39] The marriage bar for teachers in Victoria was removed in 1956 but remained in place in all public services until 1966. Married women teachers did not receive equal superannuation entitlements until 1982. See Glenda Strachan, 'Still working for the man? Women's employment experiences in Australia since 1950', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2010, pp. 117–130; Donna Dwyer, 'Justice at last?: the Temporary Teachers Club and the *Teaching Service (Married Women) Act 1956*', *Labour History*, no. 91, 2006, pp. 151–168.

[40] Vansina, *Oral tradition as history*, p. xi.

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