



Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools

WITNESS STATEMENT OF DR KATIE JANE WRIGHT

I, Dr Katie Jane Wright, Associate Professor, of La Trobe University, Melbourne Campus, located at Kingsbury Drive, Bundoora, in the State of Victoria, say as follows:

1. I make this statement on the basis of my own knowledge, save where otherwise stated. Where I make statements based on information provided by others, I believe such information to be true.

Qualifications and experience

2. I am a practising academic with 17 years' experience in the field of sociology. I have the following qualifications:
 - (a) Bachelor of Arts (with Honours) from La Trobe University (2000); and
 - (b) PhD in Historical Sociology from La Trobe University (2007).
3. In July 2019 I was appointed to the position of Associate Professor, Sociology, within the Department of Social Inquiry at La Trobe University. Alongside my duties teaching sociology at La Trobe University, I undertake research with a current focus on activism and children's rights and public inquiries into institutional abuse.
4. Prior to my appointment as Associate Professor, my roles included:
 - (a) Between July 2015 and June 2019, I held the position of Senior Lecturer, Sociology, within the Department of Social Inquiry at La Trobe University.
 - (b) Between June 2014 and December 2019, I undertook research examining the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and previous Australian inquiries for my Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (DECRA) grant, funded by the Australian Research Council.
 - (c) Between January 2013 and June 2014, I held the position of Melbourne Research Fellow at the University of Melbourne where I taught in the Graduate School of Education and conducted research on youth wellbeing.
 - (d) Between January 2009 and December 2012, I held the position of ARC Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Melbourne, funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery grant, where I investigated the history of child guidance and counselling for children and adolescence and the role of

psychology in educational reform as part of a broader cultural history of adolescence and schooling in Australia.

- (e) Between January 2007 and January 2009, I held the position of Research Fellow in the Department of Education at the University of Melbourne, where I first worked on a project investigating educational connection for young people with chronic health conditions, and then worked on a project examining education curriculum policy and reform in Australia.
- (f) Between July 2005 and January 2006, I held the position of Associate Lecturer in Sociology in the School of Social Sciences at La Trobe University.

- 5. A copy of my curriculum vitae with a more extensive list of my professional background, qualifications and publications is attached to this statement and marked **KW-1**.

Research

- 6. My current research is broadly concerned with social change and social justice, with a focus on public inquiries, child rights, and the history and development of activism against institutional child abuse. As part of my research, I have reviewed and catalogued public inquiries into historical institutional child abuse, both in Australia and internationally. I also have an ongoing research interest in the social and cultural effects of the spread of psychological knowledges and therapeutic discourses, both in the past and in the present. Grounded in the traditions of historical and cultural sociology, I conduct interdisciplinary research across three intersecting fields, namely:
 - (a) activism and child rights;
 - (b) public inquiries into institutional child abuse; and
 - (c) studies of psychologisation and 'therapeutic culture'.
- 7. I am currently leading two funded projects examining activism, child rights and child safety. The first project is entitled *Reclaiming Child Rights: Activism, Public Inquiries and Social Change*. I commenced this work in July 2022 and anticipate completing this research in 2025. This project, funded by the Australian Research Council, is an historical sociology of activism against institutional child abuse from the 1990s to the present. It examines the reform strategies, actions and rationales of activities before, during and after the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, and it investigates the mobilisation of child rights discourse in Australia and internationally. The project expects to generate new insights into child rights and victim-survivor activism, new understandings of a globally significant Royal Commission, and

new knowledge of research translation. Expected outcomes and benefits include an archive of activist stories, a digital memory project, and a new model for public engagement with sensitive topics.

8. The second project is entitled *Creating Safer Futures: Raising Public Awareness of Child Sexual Abuse Among Young Adults through Digital Storytelling*. I commenced this project in July this year and anticipate completing this research in 2025. This project, funded by the National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse, investigates how people can be encouraged to engage with difficult topics when the urge is to turn away. This research aims to identify a new approach to raising awareness among young adults about child sexual abuse by creating a storytelling prototype suited to the digital media age.
9. I recently completed an Australian Research Council funded study of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and previous Australian inquiries that either investigated child abuse or considered this issue within a broader remit. In addition, I am leading a study of the rise of historical institutional child abuse inquiries internationally. Research publications and other outputs may be accessed electronically here:
 - (a) <https://scholars.latrobe.edu.au/kjwright/publications; and>
 - (b) <https://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/research/ageofinquiry/index.html>.

Attitudes and approaches towards children and child safety

Summary

10. In my view, to contextualise historical institutional child sexual abuse that occurred in government schools in the 1960s and 1970s, it is important to include consideration of the following:
 - (a) the regulatory framework for schools and the ways reporting within schools occurred, the system of school inspection, and how teacher discipline was managed at that time;
 - (b) the legal context pertaining to child sexual abuse and the social norms around childhood, including how children were viewed, treated and expected to behave;
 - (c) the cultural taboos and silences around child sexual abuse, how child sexual abuse was understood by the community and professionals and the language available to children to describe their experiences; and

(d) the role of gender and how it may have impacted the likelihood of reporting or speaking up about child sexual abuse, and the trauma associated with child sexual abuse.

11. Whilst I do not hold the necessary expertise to provide opinion in relation to paragraph 10(a), the following paragraphs set out my views in relation to paragraphs 10(b) – 10(d).
12. My knowledge in relation to paragraphs 10(b) – 10(d) is informed by my own empirical research, findings from public inquiries and by works of historians and other scholars who have researched the period of the 1960s and 1970s more specifically in relation to child sexual abuse.

1960s and 1970s – the position of children in the family and evolution of children’s rights

13. In order to contextualise attitudes and approaches towards children and child safety in the 1960s and 1970s, it is helpful to also consider the preceding decade to provide context behind existent social attitudes.
14. The 1950s was a time of nation building, and social norms and attitudes that idealised domestic life and the nuclear family formed part of this. Christianity played a key role in notions of morality and gender roles were clearly demarcated, with men as breadwinners and women as homemakers. While this did not represent the reality of people’s diverse experiences, these values nevertheless shaped prevailing social attitudes. Those values continued into the 1960s; however, they were also called into question by cultural and social changes that challenged notions of the family, traditional authority and gender relations.
15. While the United Nations General Assembly had adopted the 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child, children’s rights were not yet on the broader social agenda. Attitudes towards children were slowly changing but remained hierarchical and it was not until later that children were widely viewed as rights bearers. This contributed to a culture in which children’s views and concerns were often dismissed.
16. Reports from public inquiries and works of historians who have researched the period of the 1960s and 1970s indicate that there existed considerable dismissal of children’s concerns. With regard to child sexual abuse, this dismissal is extensively documented in reports from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and other public inquiries.
17. Even though prevailing views of traditional authority, marriage and gender relations were challenged by social reform movements - particularly feminist and sexual

liberation movements - there were still strong societal taboos around sexuality. There were also strong cultural silences around child sexual abuse. That is, while there was awareness of child sexual abuse, it was not openly discussed. Within this context, when children did disclose experiences of sexual abuse, they were often not believed, viewed as unreliable witnesses, treated with suspicion that their disclosure was the result of an over-active imagination, and at times punished for speaking out.

18. While the notion that children 'should be seen and not heard' was diminishing, in broad terms, children were expected to be compliant and subservient to their parents and other adults and there was a lack of recognition that children had rights. We know from the findings of many public inquiries that children did speak out and allege child sexual abuse during the 1960s and 1970s. However, too often those claims were not believed or not acted upon.
19. In the late 1970s children's rights began to emerge as an important issue, propelled by the International Year of the Child (1979). However, it was not until the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and Australia's ratification of it in 1990, that the issue of child rights came to the fore.

1960s and 1970s - understanding of child sexual abuse and child grooming behaviours

20. Since the early colonial period in Australia, laws have criminalised the sexual assault of children. While the criminal code has been amended and refined over time, it clearly demonstrates longstanding awareness that child sexual abuse occurs and that laws are needed to protect children. Laws provide an important basis for wider social norms. The Australian Institute of Criminology prepared a paper for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse providing an historical review of sexual offence and child sexual abuse legislation in Australia. A copy of that paper can be accessed electronically on the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse website [here](#).
21. In the context of the 1960s at a cultural and community level, there was little public discussion of child sexual abuse and limited understanding of what we now term 'grooming' behaviours.
22. By the mid-1960s there was emerging professional and public attention paid to child abuse but at the time, the issue was thought of primarily in terms of physical abuse. Attention to child abuse in the 1960s followed findings from a highly influential American study of child maltreatment undertaken by C. Henry Kempe and colleagues, which examined unexplained fractures in children and provided the foundation of the concept

of the “battered child syndrome”. A copy of this article is attached to this statement and marked **KW-2**.

23. In terms of broad understanding at a community level, there remained limited discussion of child sexual abuse as a widespread problem that caused significant harm. Given the cultural taboo around these topics at the time, euphemisms were common, including in official reports and media coverage. Throughout the twentieth century, for example, ‘interference’, ‘tampering’, ‘molestation’ and ‘immoral conduct’ were some of the terms used to describe conduct that today would be referred to as child sexual abuse.
24. Understandings of child abuse evolved over time. During the 1970s, as part of the women’s liberation movement, male violence against women and children began to be more widely recognised and openly discussed. Sexual violence against children formed part of that discussion. Feminist attention to the ‘personal is political’ challenged cultural silences and new understandings of child sexual abuse emerged. However, during the 1970s, child sexual abuse was primarily understood in terms of the experiences of girls as victims of intra-familial abuse. In the 1970s there was little public discussion of institutional abuse against children and limited understanding of boys as victim-survivors.
25. While the feminist movement of the 1970s advanced understandings of child sexual abuse, particularly as it affected girls, it was not until the 1980s that institutional abuse was conceptualised as a distinct form of child maltreatment, and boys’ experiences became more widely recognised. While institutional abuse first emerged to describe experiences of young people in residential ‘care’, it soon expanded to also encompass other settings, particularly as clerical child sexual abuse became more widely recognised as a major social problem. Until this time, there was limited understanding of boys as victim-survivors of child sexual abuse.
26. Historically, the sexual assault of boys was understood as a ‘subset of homosexual behaviour’. In light of the negative societal views of homosexuality, this likely contributed to the culture of secrecy, shame and denial that existed during the 1960s and 1970s. For boys who were victim-survivors of child sexual abuse, the lack of understanding of child sexual abuse as distinct from homosexuality provided particular challenges. It affected the willingness of children to disclose and influenced the responses of others when children did speak up, for example, by suggesting that the male victim-survivor was homosexual. A copy of the work entitled ‘*Child sexual abuse*

in faith-based institutions: Gender, spiritual trauma and treatment frameworks' by Deborah Sauvage and Patrick O'Leary is attached to this statement and marked **KW-3**.

27. It was only in the 1970s, that a language to describe child sexual abuse began to emerge, as societal taboos around sexuality and men's violence were challenged. In the context of limited understandings, and in the absence of a language to explain child sexual abuse, it was difficult for children to disclose. We do know that children did try to speak out, but their disclosures were often met with inappropriate responses and inaction. The higher level of trust in institutions and authority figures in the 1960s and 1970s presented another barrier for children to disclose.
28. During the 1980s there was increasing societal recognition of sexual abuse against children perpetrated by people outside of the family. It was also at this time that the concept of 'grooming' began to emerge, although it was not until later, in the 1990s and 2000s, that grooming became more widely understood. A copy of an article by Kenneth Lanning entitled '*The evolution of grooming: concept and term*' is attached to this statement and marked **KW-4**.

Contemporary attitudes towards children and children's safety

29. Recognition of child rights developed slowly throughout the twentieth century but came to the fore from the late 1970s onwards with the International Year of the Child (1979) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Expanding recognition and understanding of child sexual abuse in the 1980s and 1990s therefore went hand in hand with a growing understanding that children have rights, and that those rights need to be protected.
30. The discourse of child rights provided a new framework for understanding children, including their right to be free from sexual abuse. Alongside this, and in addition to the discourse that emerged from feminism in the 1970s, the growing social and cultural influence of psychology and counselling in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries helped victim-survivors understand, and talk about, what happened to them as children.
31. There is now a language available to victim-survivors, and the community more broadly, to speak about child sexual abuse and frameworks for adults to understand, in retrospect, what happened to them. This language was largely absent in the 1960s and 1970s.
32. One example of a concept that is now widely understood, but was not in the 1960s and 1970s, is the concept of 'grooming'. We now have a much better understanding at a

societal level about what constitutes inappropriate boundaries between adults and children and the sort of behavioural patterns that are problematic. This includes, for example, teachers or other adults paying particular attention to children or treating them as 'special'. In the absence of clear understanding and concepts to categorise types of behaviours, it is difficult for adults, parents and children themselves to understand and identify behaviours as inappropriate and problematic.

33. Importantly, it often takes some time for the development of a concept to shape wider community understandings and public discourse. For example, knowledge generated by the feminist liberation movement in the 1970s had more social and cultural influence in subsequent decades than it did at the time.

Understanding the concept of trauma and its impacts following child sexual abuse

34. Trauma as a consequence of child sexual abuse is typically understood primarily in relation to the effects of abuse on the individual, both at the time of the abuse and as an ongoing consequence.
35. Trauma can also be a collective experience. Collective trauma refers to shared experiences of trauma. For example, this might occur during war or a natural disaster, when people are experiencing the same situation or event alongside others. This can generate a sense of shared understanding and collective experience. In the context of child sexual abuse, which mostly occurs in private, there is often not a sense of shared trauma at the time. However, collective trauma can emerge over time as victim-survivors share their experiences and the wider community begins to learn about their histories and the occurrence of abuse. Put another way, the trauma unfolds through emergent understandings that something terrible has happened within their community.
36. Understanding the extent of trauma experienced by victim-survivors has evolved over time. This is also true for the traumatic impact on secondary victim-survivors, as well as understandings of collective trauma experienced by groups of victim-survivors and wider communities. These concepts were not widely understood in the 1960s.
37. In the 1970s understandings of trauma expanded. Rather than being conceptualised as a time-limited experience following an event, it was increasingly recognised that trauma could be long-lasting. Understandings of the traumatic nature of child sexual abuse slowly extended to the wider community. This emerged partly from the work of feminist liberationists, but also through research and the clinical work undertaken by psychologists, psychiatrists and other professionals.

38. From my own knowledge and research, I consider the concept of collective trauma, as it relates to child sexual abuse, to be a more recent development. I am not aware of the concept of collective trauma being widely used in the late twentieth century in relation to child sexual abuse.
39. Collective trauma is one way in which the broader community impacts of institutional child abuse have been understood in more recent years. For example, as the extent of clerical child sexual abuse was revealed, it became apparent that the traumatic effects extended beyond victim-survivors to also encompass wider communities.

Sociocultural impacts within government school institutions

40. There are some broad social and cultural characteristics of the 1960s and 1970s that should be considered in relation to historical child sexual abuse in educational settings. These include the formal power structure of schools, the way students and teachers interacted, and how institutions responded to suspicions, allegations and instances of child sexual abuse.
41. Of particular note is the hierarchical structure of schools and the institutional authority embodied in teachers. While there remains inherent power imbalances between children and adults today, social norms of the 1960s and 1970s dictated a greater deference to adult authority. As a result, children were expected to be compliant and not question adults, which meant that school staff could exert considerable power over children. The use of corporal punishment reflected the exercise of power, while at the same time normalising physical violence against children.
42. Recognition of the potential for institutional child sexual abuse by male teachers in schools is longstanding. From the late-nineteenth century onwards, specific legislation was enacted across most Australian states criminalising sexual 'relationships' between teachers and students.
43. There is evidence of a long history of awareness of child sexual abuse in educational institutions. However, the self-protective nature of institutions, including schools, has meant that institutions often respond in ways that prioritise the institution, rather than the victim-survivor. Historically, this includes the failure of schools to take appropriate action, in response to teacher misconduct, including suspicions and allegations of child sexual abuse, despite knowledge of the problem.
44. This is apparent as far back as 1882, as outlined in the Victorian Education Commission's *First Report of the Royal Commission Appointed to Enquire into and Report Upon the Administration, Organization, and General Condition of the Existing*

System of Public Instruction; Together with a Portion of the Minutes of Evidence. This report detailed the practice of transferring teachers to other schools if there were allegations of, or if it was suspected that, a teacher was engaging in so-called ‘immoral’ or ‘indecent’ conduct. The report of this very early Royal Commission clearly demonstrates concern about this practice at the time. A copy of the Victorian Education Commission’s First Report dated 1 May 1882 is attached to this statement and marked **KW-5**.

45. Also reflective of the social values at the time, the 1891 Victorian Crimes Act included a higher maximum penalty for sexual offences committed by schoolmasters and teachers against their students. It was noted by the Sentencing Advisory Council that the legislation that followed “continued to reflect the view that offending of this nature by persons in positions of authority was considered to aggravate the offending”. An electronic copy of the Sentencing Advisory Council’s consultation paper regarding maximum penalties for sexual penetration with a child under 16 may be accessed at [https://www.sentencingcouncil.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-08/Maximum Penalties for Sexual Penetration with a Child under 16 Consultation Paper.pdf](https://www.sentencingcouncil.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-08/Maximum_Penalties_for_Sexual_Penetration_with_a_Child_under_16_Consultation_Paper.pdf).

Observations regarding public inquiries into historical child sexual abuse

46. I am leading a study of the rise of institutional child abuse inquiries internationally, a link to this study is provided in paragraph 9(b). From my knowledge and work on this project, I make the following observations about inquiries and approaches to healing and memorialisation.

General observations

47. Internationally, the success of public inquiries into child sexual abuse has been varied. Some inquiries have faced major challenges during their operation. However, a wider pattern is that the larger challenges arise after an inquiry has concluded. This is generally in relation to implementing recommendations made by a public inquiry and providing redress and support for victim-survivors. Redress is an area of particular dissatisfaction among victim-survivors, both in Australia and internationally.
48. A notable trend over the last decade is that there has been greater emphasis on inquiries engaging with victim-survivor communities and advocacy groups and working with them before, during and after a public inquiry. This has been an important development in better understanding the experiences and needs of victim-survivors, particularly in terms of their support requirements.

Raising awareness of child sexual abuse

49. Over the last two decades, there have been many public inquiries commissioned to investigate historical child sexual abuse. Every inquiry has its own terms of reference and limitations in relation to its scope. At times, inquiries uncover issues that warrant further investigation, which may prompt the establishment of a new inquiry. Inquiries are also established to investigate areas not covered in a previous inquiry.
50. One of the areas of my research focuses on understanding the catalysts for public inquiries. The background to many inquiries is an alliance between victim-survivor advocates and the media. Often, media scrutiny puts pressure on governments to respond to demands that certain issues be investigated. Often this takes the form of calls for a public inquiry. Inquiries into institutional child abuse have many functions. Among these functions are:
- (a) raising community awareness;
 - (b) documenting victim-survivor experiences and institutional failures and creating a historical record; and
 - (c) making recommendations so that victim-survivors can receive justice and child safety in institutions is strengthened for children in the future.
51. From a broad sociocultural perspective, there is greater community awareness of institutional child sexual abuse today than in the 1960s and 1970s. There has been extensive reform from a regulatory perspective. For example, as noted by Ben Mathews in his report for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, mandatory reporting of child sexual abuse was introduced in Victoria in the 1990s. A copy of this report may be accessed electronically on the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse website [here](#).
52. Looking specifically at educational institutions, there is now a comprehensive range of safeguarding policies aimed at protecting children. However, research is needed to ascertain how effective current educational policies and practices are in preventing and responding appropriately to suspicions, allegations and instances of child sexual abuse.
53. In the area of community awareness and public discussion about the occurrence of child sexual abuse, there continues to be considerable challenges. During the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, for example, there was extensive media coverage and therefore, public discussion, about child sexual abuse. While there are always risks of re-traumatisation of victim-survivors, public discussion of

child sexual abuse is an important element of raising community awareness. Following the Royal Commission's conclusion, there has been less sustained public attention to child sexual abuse. The question of how to continue to effectively raise public awareness and normalise discussions around child sexual abuse requires ongoing consideration and work. This is important for both supporting victim-survivors and preventing child sexual abuse in the future.

Approaches to healing and memorialisation

54. Internationally, there has been considerable debate around the issues of redress for historical institutional child sexual assault, the role of memorialisation, the meaning of apologies and paths towards healing. Victim-survivors have widely called for inquiries. However, they have also grappled with experiences of re-traumatisation through their participation in inquiries. A common theme internationally is that victim-survivors do so in the hope of the truth being exposed, justice being received, and other children being spared the trauma of their own experiences. Following an inquiry, or sometimes preceding it, a common approach taken by governments is a formal acknowledgement of victim-survivor experiences and institutional wrongdoing and making a formal apology. Memorialising the past is another component of acknowledgement and redress approaches. However, the question of how we remember difficult histories is complex. Successful approaches have foregrounded wide and meaningful engagement with victim-survivors and affected communities.
55. A novel approach to memorialisation of experiences of victim-survivors followed the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (**IICSA**) in England and Wales. The inquiry's Legacy project comprised more than 150 memorial benches and plaques placed at locations across England and Wales. The benches and plaques contain messages of hope and encouragement from victim-survivors and details of IICSA's legacy website so that visitors can learn about the inquiry's work and find information on support services. Designed in collaboration with victim-survivors, the intention was to provide recognition of victim-survivors, whilst also creating a space for reflection and conversations about child sexual abuse.
56. With respect to apologies, whilst fairly common following public inquiries into child sexual abuse, there are many different views about the extent to which apologies are truly meaningful for victim-survivors. From my research, I consider that a dominant view is that they are necessary but not sufficient. Action needs to follow.

Signed:



Name: Dr Katie Jane Wright

Date: 23 October 2023