



# **SUBMISSION TO THE PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION STUDY INTO THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE NOT FOR PROFIT SECTOR JUNE 29 2009**

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## **1 Introduction**

SDN Children's Services inc started as the Sydney Day Nursery Association in 1905 as one of the country's earliest not for profit organisations. A group of young, well educated and well resourced women were concerned about the welfare of young children living in families marginalised by poverty, and took action to address the issues they saw before them. At that time, Australia had inadequate social welfare policies in place. As a consequence, many single parents, mostly mothers, were forced to work to provide for their families. But there were very limited childcare options available to them. Those that were available were usually unsafe. Some mothers took their children with them to their work places; some left their children in the care of relatives or friends; some left them in the care of older siblings, many left them unattended and at risk of injury and harm.

The Sydney Day Nursery Association was established to provide safe, reliable and nurturing care for the city's youngest citizens. But the members of the Association did much more than this – they also lobbied Government and worked to keep children's and women's rights on the political agenda. It has been proud of its not for profit roots and still values the contribution of women predominantly in the furthering of its current vision, which is to work towards a world where:

- Children realise their promise and potential;
- Families and communities are strong and caring;

- Children's services are valued and well resourced.

Since 1905, SDN has continuously evolved in response to society's rapidly changing needs. One of the first organisations to offer long day care for children in Australia, SDN now owns and manages 23 children's education and care centres in metropolitan Sydney, rural NSW and ACT, as well as providing a range of highly regarded award-winning support services for vulnerable families; early intervention and special education services for children with additional needs; training and support for Aboriginal women and advice and support to other service providers on the inclusion of children who face challenges.

Our services reach approximately 6000 children, and their families each year; and we support about 1,000 other child care providers.

SDN has a turnover of \$30m per year and employs over 500 staff from a range of educational and cultural backgrounds, who share our vision, values, mission and philosophy.

Our submission will address the following terms of reference of the Productivity Commission's Study:

- **Contribution of the Not for Profit sector**
- **Enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the not for profit sector**

## **2 The contribution of the not for profit sector**

While the Issues Paper (the Paper) produced for this study into the Contribution of the Not for Profit (NFP) sector acknowledges the place of the NFP sector and cites several Australian and international studies that outline the economic, social and civil value provided, we contend that this value is currently poorly understood or accepted in the area of early childhood education and care in this country.

*Comments are invited on how well previous Australian studies have captured the contributions of the sector.*

Up until 1991, the provision of early childhood education and child care was shared between state governments and small and larger not for profit groups running preschools; and small local businesses, and larger not for profit groups providing child care. Significantly in NSW SDN Children's Services had pioneered since the 1930s the employment of early childhood degree qualified

teachers in long day care, leading to the Department of Community Services Regulations which cover all children's services in NSW (regardless of their auspice) requiring the employment of teachers once a centre caters for 30 or more children. Thus, in 2009, in half of the long day care centres in NSW, preschool education is integrated into the convenience of long day care hours. While not all of these centres are provided by a not for profit auspice, the majority are.

Previous studies by the Productivity Commission which have reviewed government service provision have failed to count the participation of children in such centres as participation in preschool education. This may well be a consequence of the integration (of early childhood education with child care) being so seamless as to become invisible.

However the efficiency and effectiveness of this integration has in those cases been overlooked and discounted.

#### **Further indication of the not for profit sector's contribution being poorly understood**

As indicated above up until 1991 Australia's provision of early childhood education and child care was predominantly in the hands of state/territory governments, small and larger not for profit providers, and local businesses. In 1991, federal parent fee relief funding previously only available to the NFP sector was also given to for profit providers. This was followed in 1996 with the removal from the NFP sector of the federal government operational subsidy. And a few years later the national planning system for fee relief was dismantled. This system had ensured that the parent fee relief (now the means tested Child Care Benefit, and the non means tested Child Care Tax Rebate) was only made available to centres who could demonstrate sufficient demand and need for child care in the location they were going to be built.

This effectively oversaw the supply of new centres, ensured the viability of existing centres and monitored the government's expenditure of Child Care Benefit (currently in its uncapped, unmonitored state running at a cost to government of \$2.1b per year).

We contend that government removal of support from the not for profit sector reflected a poor understanding of the contribution of the sector to quality outcomes for children and families and a poor understanding of the nature of the 'product' being provided. It is our view that successive federal governments of the past 30 years have regarded early childhood education and care as a

'commodity' that could be as easily, as well and perhaps more efficiently provided by the for profit sector in an open market environment.

This view, we contend failed to recognise the 'public good' aspect of what was being provided and the conditions of 'market failure' which existed. That is, the provision of early childhood education and care does not exist in a perfect market; and has benefits to the whole community beyond those provided for those who receive and pay for the service.

### **Public good of early childhood education and care**

We all benefit if services for children are of the highest quality possible, when children are well cared for, warmly nurtured and when their early learning potential is fostered. We all benefit if more people can be in paid employment (which child care facilitates). Thus if public good benefits exist, and there are pockets of the community that could not afford the quality required to achieve the public good outcome, then subsidizing this level of quality is money well spent. The subsidizing of the NFP sector that did exist up until 1991 did produce and contribute to public good outcomes; outcomes that we contend have since been eroded by the shift in provision from the NFP sector to the for profit sector.

### **Conditions of market failure in early childhood education and care**

Several conditions of market failure exist which governments have failed to appreciate when they opened the gates to large listed companies, whose legal imperative was to generate wealth for shareholders.

Hansmann<sup>1</sup> (1980) states that nonprofits develop in any situation when market failure makes market production unattractive. Hansmann contends that in a situation of market failure a number of problems make it difficult for consumers of a particular commodity to police the conduct of producers by normal contractual or market mechanisms.

One of these problems is that the quality of the product being provided is difficult to assess. Mostly in the perfectly functioning market system the price charged for a product is reflective of its quality as it is assumed consumers can 'judge what they see in front of them, and will not purchase lower quality goods when other firms offer better quality' (Cleveland<sup>2</sup>, 2007, p.20.)

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<sup>1</sup> Hansmann, H. (1980). The Role of Nonprofit Enterprise. Yale Law Journal, 89, 835-898.

<sup>2</sup> Cleveland, G., Forer, B., Hyatt, D., Japel, C., Krashinsky, M. (2007). Final Report. An Economic Perspective on the Current and Future Role of Nonprofit Provision of Early Learning and Child Care Services in Canada: University of Toronto at Scarborough.

However in the case of a 'product' such as early childhood education and child care the consumers are at a disadvantage. The quality of interactions, facilitation of learning and the care provided are not easily assessable features of the product; further the product is being purchased on behalf of another and the younger the actual consumer of the product is, the less capable they are of evaluating the product and providing the actual purchaser (the family) with the information they need.

In these situations, Hansmann<sup>3</sup>, (1987, p.29) contends, 'a for-profit firm has both the incentive and the opportunity to take advantage of customers by providing less service to them than was promised and paid for. A nonprofit firm in contrast offers consumers the advantage that owing to the non distribution (of profits) constraint, those who control the organisation are constrained in their ability to benefit personally from providing low-quality services and thus have less incentive to take advantage of customers than do managers of a for-profit firm.'

Has this situation occurred in Australia by the listed companies? Has quality been compromised by for profit providers?

Studies such as that conducted by the Australia Institute in 2006 (Emma Rush, Child Care Quality in Australia<sup>4</sup>, Discussion Paper no 24), clearly identified that higher quality was provided by the not for profit sector, and that the worst quality was in centres whose auspice was a listed, for profit company.

Thus the contention that quality (or the product) is the same, whether provided by a for profit or a not for profit has actually been shown to not be the case. Of course there will always be some, individual for profit centres that are better than a nearby not for profit; however on average the not for profit or non-distribution constraint that Hansmann refers to, does seem to have had a flow on effect on quality provided. And thus the opportunity to provide lesser quality (because consumers find it hard to judge the quality) does seem to have been capitalised on by for profit providers. Market failure does exist.

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<sup>3</sup> Hansmann, H. (1987). Economic Theories of Nonprofit Organization. In W.W. Powell, ed., The Nonprofit Sector: A Research Handbook. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 27-42.

<sup>4</sup> Rush, E. (2006). Childcare Quality In Australia: The Australia Institute.

*Comments are invited on any other international studies of the contribution of the not for profit sector and their relevance to measuring the contribution of the sector in Australia.*

Several overseas studies have also carefully investigated the contribution of the not for profit sector in the provision of early childhood education and child care. The final report of a group of Canadian economists: *An Economic Perspective on the Current and Future Role of Nonprofit Provision of Early Learning and Child Care Services in Canada* (Cleveland et al, 2007) drew on three data sets:

- The Grandir en Qualite data
- The Longitudinal Study of Child Development in Quebec
- Children's Services data from the city of Toronto in addition to data collected specifically for the *You Bet I Care!* Study.

This study concluded that 'non-profit status has important causal effects on quality even when differences in financial resources and clientele are held constant' (Cleveland et al, 2007, p.10.)

SDN commends this study to your attention for its readability, quality of analysis and detail on what contributes to quality and in what circumstances.

Interestingly the authors of the study observe that the ability of the not for profit sector to provide higher quality is maximized in what they call 'thick' markets. This is markets where there are large numbers of children aged birth to five, where demand is high. In these circumstances utilisation is high enough to pass the 'break even' point (of approximately 80%) and this allows the additional users (who would in a market dominated by for profit providers, be providing the profit margin for the owners) to 'subsidise' the cost of providing the higher quality.

This capacity is reduced in 'thin' markets where demand is not as great and the lack of 'viable' centres means that quality is inevitably reduced.

The impact of operating in thin and thick markets is experienced by early childhood education and care providers like SDN Children's Services. However due to our size and the number of centres we operate, we have the opportunity to 'cross subsidize.' As a group of centres we can provide the same level of quality to all users, regardless of where they live, or whether they are in a thick or thin market, because we can intentionally allow some centres to run at a loss because other centres (in thick markets) are producing a surplus.

This is one example of where the commitment to quality and the non-distribution constraint of the NFP auspice makes a substantial contribution to public good outcomes for Australia's children and families.

This addresses the issue raised in the Paper of the quality of *service delivery and enhancing the community endowment*.

The Paper also refers to the contribution the NFP sector plays in *connecting the community and building social capital*.

This role is played by most child care centres almost incidentally regardless of auspice, due to the friendships families form with each other, however it is those auspiced by NFP providers who have made the greatest inroads into substantially addressing inequalities in our society in an intentional manner.

This is an additional contribution that is possible from larger NFP providers of children's services such as ourselves because of our capacity and strength. We have been instrumental in addressing social, economic and developmental disadvantage because of our social justice motivations, our research and evaluation capacity and our ability to access a range of public and private grants.

SDN Children's Services has pioneered approaches that have sought out families not currently using child care at all and found creative pathways to include them in the life of our centres.

The *Parent Resource Program* was one of the key approaches SDN developed to overcome barriers for socially isolated families. In 2000 SDN trialed its *Parent Resource Program* in just one SDN child care centre in inner city Sydney. It was later expanded to 6 other SDN centres (with federal funding) and now it runs in 60 services in NSW.

It has been evaluated (Taylor, 2002; Goodfellow et al, 2004) and found to achieve:

- Improved developmental outcomes for children;
- Improved parenting skills and increased parenting confidence;
- Increased social and economic participation for families;
- Greater community connectedness and integration.

### **Key replicable elements of the SDN *Parent Resource Program* model:**

The model includes four core elements that were **added** to the service delivery of mainstream early childhood education and care services:

- **A scholarship** which made child care **affordable** for families (and which had three conditions: a fee of \$5 a day still payable; the child's attendance must be regular and within core hours and parent/s must participate in a parenting education program);
- **Parenting education** for the families (openly available to all families in the centre);
- **Training and support** for the child care staff ( to ensure scholarship **families were welcomed** and understood);
- **Time** for selected child care staff to participate in local agency networks and make **home visits** as needed.

### **What contributed to the model's success?**

#### **Impact of the model's design**

The model works with **multiple layers** of human experience, and addresses multiple social challenges, **simultaneously**. It is this aspect of the SDN *Parent Resource Program* that is unique and has attracted such widespread interest.

The model operates concurrently and not sequentially, with the benefits experienced by one layer flowing on and making benefits in another layer more likely. The model:

- **improves child development** outcomes (through regular attendance in a high quality early childhood development environment); **and**
- **enhances individual parents' skills and confidence**, through participation in formal group and informal learning sessions; **and**
- **builds social networks** for isolated families, as they participate in the welcoming life of the centre, attend centre functions and events like working bees, join the centre committee, listen to and learn from the parenting struggles of 'normal' families and make friends; **and**
- **increases scholarship families' work readiness**, initially through the drop off and pick up requirement of the scholarship, then through developing self confidence and increased social networks and finally being able to take advantage of opportunities to undertake study and training while children are at the centre; **and**



- **enhances local community connectedness** within neighborhoods and among local agencies.

As all three levels - child, family and local community - are being affected simultaneously the benefits are multiplied and significant (Stanley, 2003; Wise, 2001).

### **Benefits related to the early childhood education platform**

There are several particular benefits that derive from the nature of the early childhood education service platform. These are:

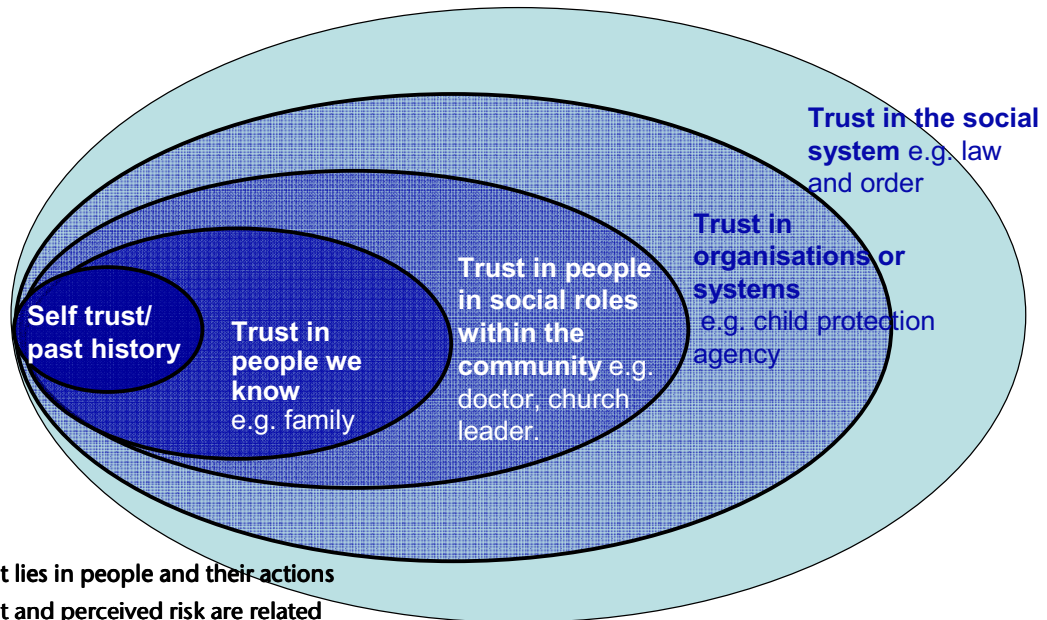
- The focus of service delivery is the **child**. Parents more easily engage with a service which does not put them under scrutiny as the main client.
- Centres are **non-stigmatising**, universally available services which do not imply that families are or have 'problems.' It is a normalising activity for a child to attend 'kindy' and allows isolated families to find a pathway into a mainstream community. This should not be underestimated. Many of the families who participated in SDN's *Parent Resource Program* reported feeling 'normal' for the first time in a long time.
- Furthermore non-stigmatising, non-targeted services have been demonstrated to be **more successful** in attracting vulnerable families (Stratham, 1997; Tomison, 2002), while also reinforcing the view that help-seeking is everyone's right (Harbin and McNulty, 2000).
- Early childhood education and care centres are responsive and **flexible** and are able to adapt to the needs of the families who attend. One *Parent Resource Program* parent reflected that her participation in the program gave her the opportunity to recover from years of physical and mental exhaustion that had eroded her ability to think and plan. For the first three months when her daughter was in the centre she was actually able to have the first relaxed sleep she had ever had. She was able to renew her own physical strength so that she had the mental capacity to start to get her life in order. A structured program with strict guidelines may not have worked for this family.
- Long day care centres in particular allow intervention and help (for families and children) to be **accessed as early** as possible. Staff in the SDN *Parent Resource Program* have had experiences of helping parents to wean children off constant bottles of cordial, and helping children learn

to walk who have been constrained in walkers for most of the day. If these issues weren't addressed as early as they were, damage to the child's development could have become irreversible.

- **The group setting** of the centre allows parents to gain an understanding of normal child development (through the parenting groups and just seeing all the children together at the centre) leading to more appropriate expectations of behaviour.
- The **food and nutrition** supplied in long day care centres is another important aspect. This is just part and parcel of the service provision but is so crucial to vulnerable families and children.
- Centres are also **well connected** to other agencies and services that families can be referred to. Additionally many centres invite health professionals into the centre to make assessments and provide guidance to staff and families alike. Because this is done in the caring, relaxed environment of a centre where families begin to feel they belong, we have found that this kind of help is more easily accepted.
- The **community life** that families become involved in becomes an important contributor in its own right to the inclusion processes. For example one parent in the *Parent Resource Program* had stopped coming to the centre. After the Centre Manager called round to visit her, she said that that no-one had ever checked up on her like that, just to find out what was wrong instead of to 'rouse' on her.
- **Trust and continuity** of relationships is essential. It is the establishment of trust through the continuity of staff and service provision that builds the basis from which change can happen. A model (developed by J.Goodfellow, 2007) of how this applies in this context is reproduced on following page.

# an ecological trust framework

(adapted from the work of Sztompka, a Polish sociologist)



- Trust lies in people and their actions
- Trust and perceived risk are related
- 'Trust culture' (e.g. coherence, stability, transparency, familiarity and accountability) may vary over time, between individuals and across communities
- Degree of trust rises with extent of trustworthiness of information about the trustee.

It is this element of trust where the NFP sector has an advantage over the for profit sector and why the capacity to deliver such programs is as strong as it is.

## The history of the model

The SDN *Parent Resource Program* was funded initially by the Federal Government after a visit to an SDN centre by the then Federal minister, Jocelyn Newman, in 1999. It was later expanded to six centres under the Federal Government's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. In late 2003 after media attention on the effectiveness of this approach (Horin, 2003) and external evaluation by Macquarie University (Taylor, 2002) SDN won the Early Childhood section of the National Child Protection awards granted by the Commonwealth's Australian Council for Children and Parenting (ACCAP).

The NSW Department of Community Services *Brighter Futures* program (of which is SDN is one of 14 Lead Agencies) has incorporated some of the elements of SDN's *Parent Resource Program* (such as child care placement) into this recent state based early intervention program. SDN currently runs a variation of

*Parent Resource Program* in 60 early childhood education and care services in NSW; and in the FaHCSIA funded Child Care Links project at the SDN Child and Family Learning Centre at Riverwood (visited by Jenny Macklin in 2007, and most recently by the minister for Early Childhood Education and Child Care, Kate Ellis).

Over nearly ten years, SDN Children's Services has evaluated and demonstrated that this innovative approach has achieved positive advances in social inclusion for families and greater participation in early childhood education for struggling and challenged families, some of whom are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. It has also come to the attention of the WA Department of Communities who has also implemented elements of this approach with success. It has been shown that it can be taken to scale.

### **Evidence and theoretical base of the model**

The model was developed and is currently run on the evidence provided by a range of research findings, including:

- The effectiveness of early intervention for children and families (Heckman, 2006; Hertzman, 2002; McCain and Mustard, 1999; Mustard, 2002; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2002);
- Findings from neuroscience and early brain development (Perry, 1996);
- Protective and risk factors work by Ross Homel (National Crime Prevention, 1999);
- Ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2004) and socio-cultural (Rogoff, 2003) theories of human development that recognise the interconnectedness of social systems, and
- The critical nature of families on children's later development, (Dunst, 2000; Irwin, Siddiqi and Hertzman, 2007).

It is also underpinned by principles of social inclusion, participation and work 'readiness.' There is a recognition in the model that social and economic participation are linked (van der Gaag, 2002).

### **Pedagogical framework**

The early childhood education program provided for the children is of the highest quality, reflecting current notions of children as **civic participants** (Nimmo, 2002; Nuttal and Edwards, 2007; OECD, 2006) It is delivered by early childhood teachers working with well trained child care workers, who also liaise with and involve professionals of other disciplines. An integrated system needs 'integrated workers' (Moss, 2006a, p.32; Cameron 2004).

The provision of learning opportunities for families is based on principles of adult education and self directed learning. Importantly all staff are committed to principles of social justice and social inclusion and can work in a 'holistic' way (Moss, 2006b) and are skilled in establishing rapport with a range of children and families (Tait, 2001).

### **Extensions into Aboriginal communities**

Later iterations of this model (currently jointly funded by the NSW Department of Community Services for 250 families across 60 centres, together with the FAHCSIA Indigenous Children's Program and the private Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation) have involved the development of additional elements such as Aboriginal scholarships, Aboriginal specific playgroups, and an Aboriginal Project Coordinator who provides additional resourcing to our centre staff and an Aboriginal Resource Officer. These people, together with a range of other particular engagement strategies (such as the employment of Aboriginal staff in our centres) have enhanced and increased the involvement of Indigenous families in SDN's centres and programs.

SDN is currently collecting information on how these strategies have been viewed by the Aboriginal families and staff and what has made these strategies successful.

### **A conceptual framework for measuring the contribution of the sector**

SDN Children's Services supports the submissions by others who have referenced the Results Based Accountability model as a way of reporting on outcomes. SDN also works within such a framework and has developed the following set of outcomes that governs all our work. We have started to cross reference these outcomes with outcomes mentioned in our funding agreements, legislation, Regulations and other government documents, such as the NSW State Plan. This is work that is still in progress but has already started to show us the similarities in desired results across a number of jurisdictions.

## **OUTCOMES FOR THOSE WE WORK WITH AND FOR**

In the next 2 years SDN will make (MD) and demonstrate (DD) a positive difference in the world by contributing to children, families, communities and other children's services being safe, connected, empowered and respected.

### **MDC Making a difference with and for children**

SDN's work will contribute to children being:

MDC 1 Safe

MDC 2 Secure and having a sense of belonging to their family, culture and other social groups

MDC 3 Active and confident contributors to these groups and their own learning

MDC 4 Respected for their skills, capacities and ability to influence decision making

### **MDF Making a difference with and for families**

SDN's work will contribute to families being:

MDF 1 Safe places

MDF 2 Connected to each other

MDF 3 Able to make choices and to access and influence the services they need and want

MDF 4 Resilient in the face of life's ups and downs, putting their children first

### **MDCO Making a difference with and for communities**

SDN's work will contribute to communities being places where:

MDCO 1 People feel safe (State Plan R1)

MDCO 2 People feel connected to each other (State Plan R4)

MDCO 3 Participation is welcomed and facilitated but not forced (State Plan and R4; DADHC ECI)

MDCO 4 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are respected and influential (State Plan F1)

### **MDCS Making a difference with and for children's services**

SDN's work will contribute to children's services being inclusive learning communities where SDN's agreed outcomes for children, families and communities are realised because the people who work there are:

MDCS 1 Safe

MDCS 2 Reflective of, and form connections with, their local community

MDCS 3 Skilled and resourced professionally with information, continuing education, mentoring, time, space and adequate financial support

MDCS 4 Respected for their professional role in the lives of children, families and the community

We support the development of a common set of outcomes across all government departments, with organisations left to develop their own strategies, indicators and measures of achievement towards these outcomes.

### **3. Enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the not for profit sector**

#### **Access to human resources**

##### ***Comment on our experiences attracting staff with appropriate level of skill***

SDN has found that while pay may be less in the NFP sector we have had several staff join us because of our dynamic and supportive culture. We invest heavily in the continuing education we provide through our Learning and Development staff and the numerous workshops, reflection groups and Communities of Practice we facilitate. We have recently received a DEEWR Workplace Innovation grant to trial the use of e-learning strategies with our staff and we have also attracted private donations for scholarships for our staff to continue their study.

##### ***Thoughts on pre-requisites for success (including stand out models)***

It is SDN's experience that a certain amount of 'critical mass' in organisational infrastructure is needed if really meaningful investments in staff development and innovation in recruitment and retention strategies are to be made. The following stories written by SDN's Continuing Education Coordinator reflect the level of investment SDN has made.

**"Huong has just completed her Diploma in Children's Services. She studied at Meadowbank TAFE via flexible delivery. Huong works with 2-3 year olds at SDN Marrickville Children's education and Care Centre , & is proud of being their Vietnamese translator.**

When I visited Huong she enthusiastically shared some documentation she was working on for TAFE, & believed her studies have made a real difference to everything she does in the centre. I sent Huong written questions before I visited, & when I arrived, she had prepared detailed answers but we still talked about her study & I was privileged to hear what a great experience she has had at TAFE.

I began by asking 'What's been exciting about being a student?' Huong talked about her course structure. She appreciated the weekend workshop format, & the chance to be part of a group of like-minded students.

Huong wrote:

*"I took advantage of being a student so I could learn ideas/strategies/knowledge from my teachers & classmates who have been working in childcare too. We had a class every third Saturday & discussed our practice together. I learnt a lot more about other childcare (centres) in NSW from these people."*

I also asked Huong about the challenges she'd faced. She admitted sometimes it had been hard, but there had been help along the way.

In Huong's words:

*It has been stressful & challenging. Working full time & studying is hard. It made me learn to manage my time.*

*My family & colleagues have been giving me support though. My colleagues check my grammar & spelling when I write. Fiona (Harvey, Director at Marrickville) has been great & encourages me all the time.*

**Frida has been at SDN for 7 yrs. She was first employed when SDN took over management of SDN Petersham TAFE Children's Centre, & has since enjoyed working at our centres at Linthorpe St, Newtown & Redfern. She has been studying for her Early Childhood degree, & when I visited, she had just completed her last ever uni assignment, & was eagerly awaiting the start of another journey - the birth of her first child.**

Frida began her work in children's centres in 1999. After completing her HSC she started a fulltime Child Care course at TAFE. After graduating, she worked for 2 years before joining SDN Petersham. Frida remembered this as an exciting opportunity to start a new role, & it got her thinking about a long term career in children's services, & the commitment to further study.

Frida decided to start her Bachelor of Teaching at UNE (University of New England) & thought the two & a half year external program would give her an opportunity to continue to learn lots in the workplace, but take her other study to a new level.

When I asked Frida about the decision to go to uni she knew it was a big decision. She said she remembered feeling nervous about 'going to uni'. She knew what her grades & study had been like at School, & even TAFE, but thought uni would be another step up again. No-one in her family had ever completed a University degree & this could be the start of something really special. Frida knew she was already wondering: *"Am I good enough? Can I pass at uni?"*

But now that question has been answered. Of course she could do it!

The workload & hours of study are all behind her now. Frida looked back at all the things that she has conquered over the past few years...she said *"even though I had no children, I was working full time work, and the hours of study had a huge impact on my social life."* Frida knows she made sacrifices - not attending every family social events - & admitted that being up late & working hard to get assessments done has not always been easy.

So what kept her going?

For Frida it was easy - it was her supportive manager. Frida praised the way Liz Farry, (Director at Redfern), reminded her to *"be the best you can"* & to put lots of time & effort into her assessments. Liz was involved in Frida's course & supported Frida to bring all her new ideas into the centre.

Frida loved being able to share her course readings & inspiring stories from her lecturers with her team, & she acknowledged that being able to do this in the SDN Reflection Groups last year has also helped her practices."



## **Models of best practice in the training, support and employment of Aboriginal staff**

We have also invested in supporting the employment of Aboriginal staff and have found that this is one area where considerable time and personnel is needed. A smaller NFP provider would find such challenges daunting. We have found that Aboriginal staff need to be employed in small groups of at least 2 and an organisation has to have the financial capacity to do this. We have employed an Aboriginal Projects Manager and she has developed our award winning *Tracks in Learning* model described below.

### **Tracks in Learning – Aboriginal Community Learning Model**

*Tracks in Learning* is a proven and award winning (EOWA 2008 Business Achievement Award) model of culturally appropriate learning being taken to the community in direct response to community needs. It has succeeded in providing both work and life skills for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people with child and family responsibilities that have been excluded from mainstream learning and employment opportunities.

#### **Description of the model**

It is this balance of providing both life skills (practical) with further education (formal learning) to young Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander women and men that makes *Tracks in Learning* a successful educational model. The practical skills are transferable into student's lives and the formal learning supports them in work and/or sets them up for further study. Life skills increase through networking. One example of this is the women in the group sharing their experiences and knowledge of where to buy cheap food or household goods. Parenting skills increase through the informal and formal learning and the training is transferable to other learning opportunities. The program has provided hope to older mums who have had their children removed. By attending the playgroup where they improve their knowledge and skill around early childhood development and importantly keep connected and develop a positive sense of community whilst going through a very difficult experience.

Women and their children who are active participants in their lives and those of others develop strong networks and can identify parenting and child rearing issues that this model intentionally addresses and supports.

#### **Evidence base**

*Tracks in Learning* is an innovative model that can be framed in terms of the Canadian First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model (2009). *Tracks in Learning* exhibits fundamental aspects of this best practice international model including:

- Respect for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander culture, history and traditions
- Experiential learning
- Balances experiential learning, formal learning and Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander culture
- Trans-generational - includes elders as guest teachers and has trans-generational impacts

- Peer learning
- Mentors providing both initial contact with participants and some providing tutoring/homework support
- Parental and family support

*Tracks in Learning* is successful because it incorporates the following important elements as described by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth commissioned paper: *Report on Indigenous Early Learning and Care*<sup>5</sup> (ARACY 2007):

- The employment of Indigenous staff
- Reflexive non-Indigenous practitioners
- Acknowledgment of the importance of relationships to successful programs
- Inclusion of shared care by extended family
- Provision of transport to and from services
- Incorporation of Indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world
- The role of history –acknowledging the past and learning together
- Holism – ‘joined up services’ addressing all aspects of health and wellbeing

## **Conclusion**

The meaningful work SDN provides in an atmosphere of challenge, clear accountability and frequent tangible and intangible reward and recognition has gone a long way towards us reducing our staff turnover rate from 36% in 2007, to 31% in 2008 and now at a low of 20% (compared with an industry standard in children’s services of 40%).

## **Capacity to innovate and use resources to best effect**

SDN has regarded the documentation of and reflection on our work as central to us being a learning organisation. The research and evaluation we have undertaken has been intertwined in our service delivery and has been seen as much about staff development as it has been about service development.

The fact that we have trialed innovative approaches has forced us to document them. This has given staff opportunities to present the findings of our investigations at conferences and in journals and thus contributed to the interesting nature of our workplace. However this also takes a certain critical mass of infrastructure to support.

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<sup>5</sup> ARACY, 2007. Report on Indigenous Early Learning and Care.

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