

An Historical Cup of Tea with Betty...

Betty Hopson shares the history of Social Justice In Early Childhood with Miriam Giugni
October 2001

It was a warm spring afternoon when I entered the workplace of Betty Hopson in down town Canterbury Council. The warm sun beamed in through the large windows that reflected Betty's welcome smile as she entered the room. We meandered our way through the corridors of the offices and found ourselves in Betty's office. With a cup of tea in hand the conversation began and with every sip of tea came the following dialogue...

Miriam: Betty can you give a history of when the Social Justice in Early Childhood group began?

Betty: The Social Justice Group has an interesting history. It arose out of a number of groups that were operating before 1995 focusing on Anti Bias and multicultural issues. 1995 was the 'International Year of Tolerance' and a number of people within peak organisations in the early childhood sector were invited to get together to organise a conference addressing early childhood related issues within the 'International Year of Tolerance'. The conference was a huge success, and importantly, those of us who were part of the conference organising committee found that we really enjoyed working together. We were like minded people that had particular views around social justice issues and so we felt inspired through the organisation of the conference. At the completion of the conference we organised a wrap up session where we wanted to evaluate the conference and how successful it had been.

It was exactly at that time in 1996 that the Federal election had been called, and we met for our wrap up session two or three days after the election when the Howard Government came to power. During our discussions many of us were talking about the concerns we felt about the direction of this new government because as one may recall Pauline Hanson came to the fore during this election. Many members of the group were very unhappy that the coalition didn't seem to be making any strong representation against some of the racist comments that Pauline Hanson was making. Moreover when the Howard Government was elected we were concerned about the direction that it might take in relation to their lack of response to these serious issues. The committee was concerned that the government may back track on the approaches

to reconciliation and land rights that had been addressed by the previous Government. We were also concerned that the new government may take a backward step in terms of multiculturalism and other related social justice issues.

As a result, we felt that it was important that as a group we came together to look at those broader social justice issues and keep them to the forefront of Early Childhood. Consequently, a new group was formed and we decided to call ourselves the 'Social Justice In Early Childhood Group.'

Miriam: Betty, can you highlight some of the aims of the group to give an image of the construction of the group and what it represents?

Betty: I'm happy to do this.

Firstly: *To focus on issues of social justice as they relate to early childhood.* Due to the fact that we were all early childhood professionals, ie: some of the group were academics, some were working in managerial positions and others were people who were working face to face with children, we thought that it was important to see how social justice issues related directly to early childhood.

Secondly: *To raise an understanding of social justice issues within our profession.* This aim expresses our focus in trying to broaden the horizons of professionals within the field and also to highlight the idea that these social justice issues impacted directly on the profession.

Thirdly: *To liase with peak organisations to promote social justice issues in the political arena.* We felt that SJIEC was a very important cog in the wheel of social justice, after all we were working with children and families. We thought that it was imperative that peak organisations should raise social justice issues in the political arena and we wanted to ensure that that happened.

Next: *We want to advocate and lobby for social justice in the early childhood sector.*

And lastly: *To develop strategies to ensure that the rights of children are paramount within the political and professional arena.*

So those are our aims.

Miriam: The group has had a high profile in the community, could you give an overview of some of the events that the SJIEC has put together?

Betty: Yes, I'd be very happy to do that. Perhaps I should mention that when we first came together as a group we met in a very informal way, what I think is a very civilised way, we'd meet in local coffee shops! It was rather reminiscent, I suppose, of the Left Bank in Paris but it was a great way to get us thinking about what we wanted to do. We decided that in order to address social justice issues in early childhood the best way to start was through inviting guest speakers to come along to what we called 'issues nights'. We would choose an issue that we thought was particularly pertinent to the field and have an evening of discussion around it. For example, the first one was around Aboriginal and Torres Strait issues. We had Linda Burney, who is a very well known person within NSW working with and advocating for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues. We've had Gillian Calvert who's the commissioner for young children; and Barbara Holborow who has worked as a magistrate in the Juvenile Justice system.

I'm delighted to see that as the years have progressed that we have expanded our community participation from issues nights. We have spoken at conferences addressing social justice issues in relation to children and early childhood for example, the NACBACS state conference and the AECA conference in Melbourne in 1997 and Sydney 2001. We had a presence at the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, we have also celebrated 'Sorry Day' and reconciliation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues with children within the community and they have been very successful.

Miriam: These are things where professional have been invited, not just early childhood professionals but people from the wider community who are involved with children and with a concern for Social justice, Issues.

Betty: Yes that's correct

Miriam: And so behind the scenes what other activities does the SJIEC take on in terms of advocacy and lobbying are there those kind of components as well?

Betty: Yes there certainly is and I think that it's something that we need to become even more involved with because lobbying and advocacy at every level is very important. I'm delighted to hear you say that we have a high profile in the field, I would like to think that we have and it seems that as the years go by people are starting to hear more and more of the group.

One of the most enjoyable things about the group is that it's wonderful to be with like minded people. It's exciting to have the opportunity to share your thoughts and aspirations with others. The people in the group value the diverse opinions of one another and try to create a safe environment to express oneself. So that even if you may say something controversial you know that it is going to be respected. Of course others may challenge your opinions, however, this is a real growth process for all of us, and that is something that I have enjoyed within this group.

Now we are meeting in one another's homes. We have dinner and conversation and bring in guest speakers to talk about issues that are of particular importance to us.

I feel that in troubled times, and I believe these are difficult times for this country, to be with people who you know feel as passionately as I do, and I'm sure that most of the group do, it's very supportive, and to me that's one of the great advantages of having a group like this.

Miriam: I'm glad you mentioned the idea of growing from conflict Betty, you and I shared a lovely moment of enjoying a moment of dissensus at the AECA conference and the growth and friendship that comes from those things.

Betty: Yes that's right!!

Miriam: Lastly, drawing on your vision for the future, what do you see as the future of the group?

Betty: Well certainly I would like to think that people would go on to bigger and better things. To me, as someone who has been in this field for over 30 years, it is tremendously rewarding to find young people who come in and share this passion and vision of what this country can be. More importantly a vision for early childhood and the way early education should be. These young people have an energy, and a commitment, and a vision that is important and again I think for those of us who have been around for a long time it's very comforting to know that our work is not going to be lost. New people are coming in and they're taking up these challenges. I believe that it's going to be to the betterment of the field, I think that early childhood is so important for children and families and for society as a whole and that's what I hope the group will continue to advocate for.

Miriam: Thank You Betty this has been a wonderful contribution to the future of the group and a fabulous cup of tea!