

Children, a life interest

a biography of Joan Fry OBE

Dr Leone Huntsman





1956

Nursery School Training College graduation.
Joan Fry, front row, third from right

“Above all I recall a loyal forthright woman with an engaging personality and persuasive qualities — a woman with great compassion and conviction that was reflected in all aspects of her life and work.

Joan Fry taught the importance of acceptance of where families were in their lives — what their struggles had been and were. In working with families she taught the need to be open to the daily issues and pressures that a parent was living with.

ADRIENNE MILES (*NÉE* FOUNTAIN), NSTC STUDENT 1956–58
AND PRINCIPAL, NSTC 1973. SDN MEMBER

“Everyone was equal in her world. Joan was always able to see value in others that they may not have seen in themselves. I still appreciate to this day, the confidence I received from her. We remained friends throughout her life.

MARION TAYLOR (*NÉE* STEER), NSTC STUDENT 1953–55 AND
DIRECTOR, MELANIE ALEXANDER NURSERY SCHOOL, 1957–61.
SDN MEMBER

“Mildred Muscio and her niece Joan Fry were very familiar names for me as a child growing up in Melbourne. The connection came from the friendship between my grandmother Ada Mary à Beckett and Mildred. Joan would make visits to Melbourne and stay with us. As a child I remember fondly her approach. She was very engaged with myself and my younger brothers and sister and took time with us. We looked forward to her staying with us, we loved her visits.

DR CYNTHIA À BECKETT, SDN BOARD MEMBER AND SENIOR
LECTURER, EARLY CHILDHOOD, THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME
AUSTRALIA

Foreword

Joan Fry OBE stands out as one of the most charismatic and important figures in the history of SDN's Nursery School Teachers' College. A former College graduate, a teacher, Principal of the College and finally a public servant in Canberra, the education and welfare of young children were always foremost in Joan's teaching, and she believed children must be surrounded by 'love and secure care at all times'.



Source: SMH, 29 November 1956

somebody, and a feeling that they are wanted, because of who they are and what they are.

Joan respected that many women with young babies and children were in the workforce. And while contemporary research in the 1960s suggested that babies under the age of 12 months were best placed at home with their mothers, Joan addressed the issue head on, questioning how SDN could ensure the best

Joan's experiences working with preschool children spanned five decades from 1940 to 1990. Asked at the end of her career whether children's needs had changed during this period, Joan was clear that fundamentally nothing was different. She believed that children still needed secure, consistent lives at home, a feeling that they are important to

outcomes for children in their care, for their families and the community in which they live. Joan firmly believed that long day care was not a second-best substitute mother, but when operating successfully, it was a positive and enriching force in the lives of the children and their families.

Joan's understanding of children and their behaviours was built on the strong foundations of established child development theories. But it was her exceptional ability to observe children, understand the drivers of their behaviour, and adapt and modify the ways in which students and teachers interacted with and taught children, that made her a truly remarkable early childhood practitioner.

SDN believes that the first five years of a child's life matters, and last a lifetime. Joan was a firm advocate of this philosophy, recognising that learning begins from birth, it is continuous and takes place in all circumstances. Joan understood the importance of individual attention and continuity of care for young babies, and as reflected in SDN's educational programs today, her practices ensured that secure attachments

with familiar adults were developed, ensuring a child's wellbeing, their learning and development.

Throughout her career, Joan was a strong advocate for the provision of quality early childhood education and care, delivered by qualified teachers. She saw firsthand how poorly the first nursery school (long day care) teachers were treated in comparison with their preschool and primary school teacher counterparts, and it became her goal to fight for parity amongst these professions. Joan successfully fought for recognition of the nursery school teaching profession and with it, award rates and increased salaries. And because Joan believed that learning begins at birth, Joan never stopped advocating for trained teachers to teach children below school age. At SDN today, we still believe in the importance of providing quality early childhood education and care, by staff who have the skills and competencies to do so.

Like many of the women who make up the rich history of SDN over the last 110 years, Joan stands proud amongst them, ensuring that our organisation's foundations for improving the wellbeing of children and families carry on.

We hope this biography provides an insight into the life of Joan Fry, the things that motivated her, her practices, her successes and challenges, and moreover an insight into how and why she was so deeply respected and loved by those who knew her. I commend it to you.

Ginie Udy, CEO, SDN Children's Services

Who was Joan Fry?

A brief biography

Joan Fry was born on 31 December 1920, one of four children and the only girl in the family.

Joan's father, Henry Charles Fry, worked for the Water Conservation and Irrigation Commission as a surveyor and engineer, and the family moved from camp to camp along the Murray River from Wentworth to Euston until Joan was five. They then moved to Deniliquin, where Joan attended St Joseph's Convent, a school with the necessary support to take her brother who had a disability. In later years the family moved to Sydney, where for 18 months Joan attended Hornsby Girls' High School, before leaving school aged 16.

In 1940, Joan enrolled at the Nursery School Training Centre at Woolloomooloo, one of the first training colleges for early childhood teachers in Australia, established by the Sydney Day Nursery Association (the Association) in 1932. The Association, founded in 1905, provided safe and loving care to the children of Sydney's poor working mothers, in a long day care setting. By 1931, the Association had realised their 'long-cherished hope' to establish a nursery school within the premises of their Woolloomooloo Day Nursery, thereby offering more than physical care for these children. The new Nursery School Training



c.1945

Joan (fourth from right) with staff, students and children on an excursion to Taronga Zoo

Centre, opened in 1932, prepared teachers to work in the Association's new nursery schools.

Joan was appointed to the Woolloomooloo Day Nursery and Nursery School after her graduation in 1941, and was promoted to Director in 1944. The award of a scholarship endowed by a long-time benefactor of the Association — the Thyne Reid Scholarship — enabled her to travel to England in 1946, where she studied at the Child Development Department of the Institute of Education at the University of London for 18 months.



1957

Staff and students on holiday, Echo Point, Katoomba, September 1957. Joan Fry, front row, first on left.

Returning to Sydney in 1947, Joan joined the staff of the College (now called the Nursery School Training College) becoming Vice-Principal and Supervisor of Practical Training in 1949. She was officially given the title of Principal in 1966, despite having actually led the teaching program since 1951. Under her leadership, the College (renamed the Nursery School Teachers' College in the mid-1960s) grew in size and reputation as an institution specialising in the preparation of staff to teach in long day care centres. After Joan's departure in 1973, major national educational reforms heralded a new future

SECTION <u>2nd year</u>		AGE <u>21 years</u>	
SUBJECT	MARK	REMARKS	LECTURER
Professional Subjects			
Nursery School Principles and Practice	75% Credit		
Psychology	Distinction		
Child Development			
History of Education	85% Distinction	1st in group	
Hygiene			
Child Welfare			
Children's Literature	Grade III		
Children's Handwork			
Academic Subjects			
Literature			
Speech Training			
Music: Piano			
Eurythmics			
Theory			
Art	85%		
Handwork	B	Work satisfactory but not all completed.	
Nature Study	Grade IV		
Physical Training	Grade III		
Practical Work			
Nursery School	A		
Infant School	A		
T. C. Teaching Mark	A		
Records & Observations	A		
<p><i>Miss Fry is capable, efficient and thorough in all her work. She has an excellent manner with young children and co-operates well with the adults. After she has had some experience she would be suitable for a position of responsibility.</i></p> <p>Signed <u>Mary Bond</u> Superintendent.</p>			

1941

Nursery School Training College 2nd Year report card for Joan Fry.

for the College, and its management was passed to the Commonwealth Government. In 1981, the College amalgamated with the Sydney Kindergarten Teachers College to become the Institute of Early Childhood Studies (IECS). The renamed Institute of Early Childhood Studies moved to Macquarie University in 1994, and continues to provide early childhood teacher education today.

Joan Fry resigned from the College in 1973 following an opportunity to chair the Australian Pre-schools Committee in Canberra, a Federal Government initiative to report on the state of early childhood education in Australia and future preschool needs of children in Australia. The goal was to recommend a model that

Family ties

Joan's aunt, Mildred Muscio, was no stranger to the Nursery School Training Centre. A noted feminist, and one of the first female graduates from the University of Sydney, Mildred was President of the National Council of Women NSW and Federal President of the Council in the late 1920s/early 30s. She was also a founding member of the Board of Social Study and Training, set up by the University of Sydney in 1928 to train social workers. In 1931, the Board worked with the Sydney Day Nursery Association, providing professional input into their first nursery school training course. Mildred Muscio's signature in fact appears on the certificate issued to the first two students who received practical nursery school training. In the 1930s, Mildred Muscio was involved in a government Commission considering the payment of child endowment, where she put in a minority report recommending the payment of child endowment to mothers. Mildred Muscio was awarded the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 1938.

Interestingly, the fact that Joan's aunt was associated with the early history of the Nursery

School Training Centre appears to have played no part in Joan's decision in 1940 to study there, which instead Joan attributed to her desire to study psychology and learn more about people.

But once enrolled, her aunt Mildred took responsibility for her niece's education and invited Joan to live with her in Potts Point. Joan remained at the house after Mildred's death in 1964, leaving in 1973 to move to Canberra. Her aunt Mildred's commitment to social justice, shown in her work supporting the introduction of child endowment payment, was undoubtedly an inspiration and an example that Joan would follow throughout her professional life.



1882–1964

Mildred Muscio

Source: National Council of Women Western Australia

would provide all children with a year of preschool education. The Committee produced a report which was popularly known as the Fry Report. The recommendations of the report never came to fruition however, as the 1970s saw tumultuous debates and changes around the issue of child care for working parents. Despite this setback, Joan continued to occupy senior government policy roles until her retirement in 1982.

In 1980 Joan Fry was made a member of the Order of the British Empire — the same award that her aunt (Mildred Muscio) had received 42 years earlier — in recognition of her service to early childhood education. She retired in Canberra and lived there until her death in 2006, mourned by many who remembered her as a lifelong advocate for children and for the importance of quality early childhood education and care.

SDN Children's Services



1905 Sydney Day Nursery Association opens the first day nursery for infants and babies in NSW at 126 Dowling Street, Woolloomooloo.
Source: City of Sydney Archives.



1931 Sydney Day Nursery Association opens the Woolloomooloo Nursery School, alongside its day nursery at the Welfare Centre for Mothers and Babies, at 208 Dowling Street, Woolloomooloo



1932 Sydney Day Nursery Association establishes the Nursery School Training Centre within the Woolloomooloo Nursery School



Joan Fry

February 1940 to December 1941

Student at the Nursery School Training College, at Woolloomooloo

January 1942

Joins the teaching staff at SDN's Woolloomooloo Day Nursery and Nursery School

1944

Promoted to Director of the Woolloomooloo Day Nursery and Nursery School

1946 to 1947

Studies at the Child Development Department, Institute of Education, University of London



1945 The Nursery School Training College moves to 'The Retreat' (above) at Burren Street, Newtown. The site is redeveloped and the new building opens in 1972



1975 Nursery School Teachers' College transfers management to the Commonwealth Government and becomes a College of Advanced Education



1994 Institute of Early Childhood moves to Macquarie University. (The College had amalgamated with the Sydney Kindergarten Teachers College to become the Institute of Early Childhood Studies in 1981)

February 1949

Appointed Vice-Principal and Supervisor of Practical Training, Nursery School Training College, Newtown

February 1951

Appointed Director of Pre-school Training, Nursery School Training College

1966

Appointed Principal, Nursery School Teachers' College

1973

Chair of the Australian Pre-schools Committee, Canberra

1980

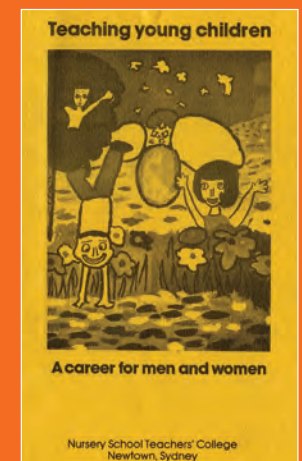
Receives OBE for service to early childhood education

1982

Retires as a public servant in Canberra

1975

Nursery School Teachers' College student brochure



The significance of Joan Fry: her example and her achievements

A teacher who put the care into day care

In 1941 Mary Bird, Principal of the Nursery School Training Centre, wrote the following in a report to the Sydney Day Nursery and Nursery Schools Association Executive Committee about second-year student Joan Fry:

[She] is capable, efficient and thorough in all her work. She has an excellent manner with young children and works well with other adults. After she has had some experience she should be suitable for a position of responsibility.

Perceptive as she was, Mary Bird could hardly have foreseen how Joan's career would affirm the soundness of her judgement and exceed the expectations for this student's future expressed in those brief sentences.

When asked in her later years what she had learnt during a lifetime devoted to early childhood education and care, Joan replied:

... the importance of the individual; the respect for people's way of life whether or not it is the same as mine; the respect for different beliefs, cultures, values, because unless

individuals are respected, what we can do with them is very limited...

I still find people interesting and I'm still interested in what people do. I find it sometimes amusing, sometimes extraordinary, sometimes incredible; but I still find it interesting.

The origins of her curiosity and her respect for individuals, whatever their background, can be traced back to her childhood experiences. Though living with strict parents in isolated camps along the Murray River and then in a small country town, Joan and her brothers nevertheless mixed with children of all social classes. Observing these differences, Joan was intrigued by how different people were. Joan's father came from a highly intellectual family; his sisters and his brother were all Sydney University honours graduates or University medallists. However, it seems that he reacted against what he may have viewed as his family's over-emphasis on the importance of academic achievement, choosing to work and earn an independent living rather than remain at home and pursue a career in academia.

Joan's father was a significant influence on Joan's life. Clearly a highly intelligent, independent thinker, he expected high standards of behaviour from his children and spent a great deal of time with them when not at work. He imparted to Joan the values she maintained throughout her life: the importance of persevering at a task once you had chosen to undertake it; that it was wrong to criticise or blame people for being who they are or doing something they can't help; and the need to observe closely what other people did and reflect on what it meant before embarking on a course of behaviour or action. He maintained that ignorance of facts was not a disgrace, but a failure to go on to search for reliable information was. He expected his children to back up what they said in an argument with evidence, and to check the sources of their information. While his own belief was that women should not go out to work, he expressed no opinion regarding Joan's future, allowing her the freedom to follow her own path.

In her reminiscences about her father, there are strong echoes of the plain speaking that was so characteristic of Joan throughout her life. Her father bequeathed to her a keen sense of humour, a great respect for learning and a belief that money should be one's servant and not one's God. This was, as she drily remarked, 'a prerequisite for anyone foolish enough to become a preschool teacher and then to work in child care!'

Joan's propensity for keen observation, reflection on what she was learning through observing, and applying what she learnt in practice had a significant influence on her later teaching and administrative career. She realised that children learn through every experience and interaction, even when it is as simple and routine as being encouraged to go to sleep, learning to wash and dress themselves, being helpful to one another, being polite to teachers and other children. The long day in the child care centre was just as important a learning environment as the more formally structured preschool session.

As a teacher, then Director, at SDN's Woolloomooloo Day Nursery and Nursery School from 1942 to 1946, which involved caring for small children, meeting their families, and working within the local community, Joan experienced one of the most economically deprived neighbourhoods in Australia. This led to her sharp realisation of the negative effects of poverty on children's health, development and life chances, and a search for ways in which an educational program could counterbalance these effects and broaden the children's horizons.

“We can only deal with these problems [families experiencing homelessness, drug addiction and unemployment], by dealing with the parents and supporting them when the children are young.” JOAN FRY, 1990

All the life experiences following her award of the Thyne Reid Scholarship in 1946 — travelling to England by ship, associating in London with students and lecturers of different backgrounds and political ideals — provided Joan with more food for thought. Joan attended an advanced course in child development for teachers of young children at the Child Development Department of the Institute of Education, University



c.1958
Melanie Alexander Nursery School, c.1958, the NSTC's demonstration centre.

of London, a course founded in 1933 by Susan Isaacs, an important early name in the history of early childhood theory and practice. Isaacs was a member of the British Psychoanalytical Society, and the course content was heavily influenced by prominent theorists of a psychoanalytic bent, some of whom lectured at the Institute. Attendance at lectures — which meant listening to guest lecturers such as Donald Winnicott and John Bowlby, two of the most important theorists in the history of child development theory and research — stimulated Joan to appreciate the values of interpreting the behaviour of children from different theoretical points of view. The educational theories of A.S. Neill, which emphasised the concept of freedom in schools and respect for children's capacity to use this freedom constructively, were to influence the practices Joan implemented and later promoted in long day care centres back in Australia. She was also introduced to Jean Piaget's theories on the intellectual development of young children. She would bring to



c.1960
Learning to tie shoelaces, Melanie Alexander Training College.

bear all these theoretical perspectives when analysing possible meanings of children's behaviour and planning activities to further their development, in her subsequent career running the College.

In 1956, the Commonwealth Government invited Joan to go to Singapore as a Colombo Plan¹ consultant on early childhood education and the preparation of early childhood teachers. She later commented that '*working in Singapore broadened my whole view of children, of child-rearing, of the influence of culture on behaviour and expectations*'. Thus her first awareness as a young teacher of cultural differences in the Australian population associated with poverty and class was augmented by later insights gained from working in very different cultural settings.

¹ The Colombo Plan commenced in 1951. It was a cooperative venture by Commonwealth governments providing economic and social aid to countries in South and South East Asia. Through the scheme, Australia supported around 20,000 students from regional countries such as Vietnam, Singapore and Indonesia between 1952 and 1985.



1974

Photograph taken at the Melanie Alexander Nursery School for Health Commission of NSW brochure. Source: State Library NSW, GPO 2-47958

Marion Taylor (*née* Steer), a College graduate and the first Director of 'Melanie' (as students called the centre), had spent months beforehand carefully planning the program, selecting, and sometimes making, furniture and equipment. The Melanie Alexander Nursery School was to be a 'centre of excellence', long before that term came into common use.

When Joan was a young teacher at the Woolloomooloo Day Nursery and Nursery School, classes were large (she had 25 four-year-olds). Routines and timetables were strictly followed, with activities timetabled so that younger children were outside when the older ones were inside, and vice versa.

Such practices were modified when Joan took charge of the teaching program. She observed that during periods of illness (measles epidemics, for example) when many children were away, and therefore the classes smaller and the teaching staff less stretched, the behaviour of the remaining children was much calmer. Based on this observation, Joan set the maximum class sizes for Melanie at 20 four-year-olds, 15 three-year-olds, and 10 two-year-olds. Children were able to move between rooms, going inside and outside as they liked, choosing activities that appealed to them, but in turn participating in group activities such as music and storytelling. Children were encouraged from an early age to be independent, for Joan had found that 'once they became independent you had more time to spend doing interesting things with them — they not only did it for themselves but they then helped other people'.

Children also chose from a varied and nutritious menu what they wanted to eat and how much at

Establishing a demonstration nursery school

Learning begins at birth, it is continuous and takes place in all circumstances not only within a few hours of the day.

JOAN FRY

By the time she became Director of Pre-School Training at the Nursery School Training College in 1951, Joan wanted to create a model nursery school that would develop and demonstrate 'best practice' in early

childhood education and care. This vision became a reality with the purchase of a property adjoining the College in Burren Street, Newtown made possible by long-time benefactors Mr and Mrs Thyne Reid. Funded and operated by the Sydney Day Nursery and Nursery Schools Association, the Melanie Alexander Nursery School opened in 1957. Its name reflected the woman who had been instrumental in raising funds to purchase the original Burren Street property. Joan, along with



c.1962

Above: Students observing a class at Melanie Alexander Nursery School

c.1975

Right: The observation room at the Nursery School Teachers' College



mealtimes. Joan was conscious of the importance of nutrition after working with impoverished families, for whom food was often so scarce that the Association had a policy of supplying two-thirds of a child's daily food requirement in their centres. She initiated collaboration with the Health Commission of NSW which led to the 1976 publication of *A guide to meal planning in preschool centres*. Written with support and input from the then Director of Melanie Alexander Nursery School, Maria Byron, this publication was adopted in all centres run by the Sydney Day Nursery and Nursery Schools Association, as well as local council child care facilities. Children also learnt to be well-mannered in the rituals of serving, eating, conversing quietly, and clearing away at tables.

The link between the Nursery School Teachers' College and the Melanie Alexander Nursery School became a vital element in the teacher training program. There was an observation room at the college with a viewing window where College students could go at any time to observe the children at play. Student tutorial groups might also observe a group activity, then discuss what had occurred. Observing children, recording observations, discussing them with Joan in classes and tutorials, applying what had been learned in planning and preparing lessons during practice teaching — the integration of learning with teaching across the Melanie Alexander Nursery School and the College program was complete.

Every morning, unless she had an early meeting, Joan would go into Melanie to keep in touch with the

staff and observe the children; for she realised that you could always learn about children and enrich your understanding of them through careful observation. She loved and valued the centre, hoping it would be a prototype for future centres. Certainly the significance of the innovative teaching program at Melanie was widely recognised; Marion Taylor remembered that 'visitors were constantly coming in', from all over Australia and from the Asia Pacific region.

Joan always taught the child development course. Many of Joan's stories were based on her observations of her niece and nephew, whom she visited frequently. Through her continuing contact with them, and the children at Melanie, Joan kept in touch with the realities of children's personalities and behaviour, in effect testing,

validating and deepening the understanding of children that she had gained through teaching, observation, theory and reading.

... her lectures consisted of the most wonderful stories of children she had known and worked with. She was a gifted storyteller and had insights into children's behaviour that have stayed with me all my life.

HEATHER McCALMAN (NÉE MINTY), NSTC STUDENT, 1974

In her valedictory speech after working for 50 years in child care, Joan lamented that early childhood education and care in Australia still ranked low on the list of priorities for Australians. She considered there were two main reasons for this: money — a reluctance on the part of both parents and governments to commit the funding needed for quality child care; and, more fundamentally, that 'children don't really count much in Australian society... there are a great many other things which are [considered] more important.' Joan summed up changes during her lifetime:

The care and education of young children as a community responsibility developed in what was called the century of the Child. It has now passed through the decade of Woman, the supremacy of the Social Scientist and the social workers and is now influenced primarily by the Era of the Economists.

From the successes at Melanie Alexander Nursery School, to the challenges she faced in her later career in Canberra, throughout her life Joan remained an effective, tireless and passionate advocate for children.

Respect for students

When she began teaching at the Nursery School Training College in 1947, Joan applied the same principles and practices that had shaped her work with children, when dealing with her students. She believed that if you expect teachers to treat children as individuals and respect their individual differences, you have to do the same with students. So, just as she had introduced greater freedom for children in the Association's nursery schools, Joan sought to introduce similar freedoms — along with responsibility — for students in the teaching program. She thought of doing away with exams, but soon found that students wouldn't study if there was no exam on which to be assessed. She then introduced untimed exams for the subjects she taught — at various times she taught children's literature, history of education, handwork, education and child development — because 'I was interested in what students knew, not what they could write within three hours'. Others lecturers did not follow her example, but Joan stood firm with her belief that 'we have too many restrictions on the way in which we expect people to present information to us'.

You must be physically strong, tolerant, patient and cheerful. A sense of humour helps too if you want to spend your life with young children.

JOAN FRY, *ANNUAL REPORT OF THE SYDNEY DAY NURSERY AND NURSERY SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION*, 1967

Joan also introduced selection procedures for entry into the College program which she believed resulted in a student body that was open to, and accepting of, differences related to social class and background —



c.1975

Music and movement class, new Nursery School Teachers' College building

attitudes which were at the heart of her philosophy of early childhood education and care. Certainly comments by students suggest that they absorbed and reflected the attitudes and values she expressed and exemplified:

Joan was always fair and firm, students were treated with respect and sensitivity, and respect was always expected from them to all staff members.

CHRIS SMITH (NÉE TOWNER), NSTC STUDENT 1953–55

A passionate advocate for the early childhood sector

Joan became aware early on that the status of those who worked in child care was generally held in low esteem. Having first encountered this view while studying in England, Joan recognised it in Australia too. She deplored the fact that the early Nursery School Training Centre Diploma was deemed inferior and likewise nursery school teachers viewed less favourably than their preschool and kindergarten counterparts.

Being ever the practical person whose duty it was, if she saw a wrong, to try to right it, Joan decided it was up to her to spread the message about the importance of early childhood education and care.

I felt it was important to get to the wider community to be a spokesman for child care. There seemed to be a widespread notion that somehow children of working mothers were different from other people's children and didn't need such high quality care and education... I couldn't understand why anybody who had studied education or child development or psychology could really believe that the needs of these children were any different from the needs of other children, except that they were greater, and they needed more, not less, in terms of quality... There [also] seemed to be an unspoken, even unconscious belief that anyone who worked so-called factory hours (as day care teachers did) must be inferior to those who kept more conventional office hours.

JOAN FRY

1956
Joan Fry at the Nursery School Training College, Burren Street, Newtown. 1956. Source: National Archives of Australia: A1501, A467/1



Joan was an excellent communicator, both as a speaker and in print. The plainness and clarity of her language, the complete absence of any academic jargon on the one hand, or 'talking down' to her audience or readership on the other, meant that she was in high demand as a speaker and was frequently interviewed for articles in newspapers and magazines. Joan was modest about this: 'If people wanted to know anything about child care they came to me because I was the only professional person working in the field and all the kindergarten people just said [is] it shouldn't be done'.

A list of Joan's speaking engagements during the 1960s and 1970s shows how widely she travelled and the diversity of her audience — business and professional women, graduates, preschool parents — at whose meetings and conferences she was the guest speaker. Especially notable is the number of occasions on which she went to country towns all over New South Wales, from Wodonga to Broken Hill, addressing the New South Wales Country Preschool Association annual conventions and seminars. No doubt, having lived in the country for so much of her early life, she had a special appreciation of the difficulties and needs of families and children who lived far from the large centres of population. She was also on the ABC Kindergarten of the Air Advisory Council.²

In all these presentations, Joan clearly articulated two main messages:

- ▶ that the nurturing of young children's intellectual, social and emotional development through high quality early childhood education was of the utmost importance
- ▶ that women were entering the paid workforce in increasing numbers, and their children are entitled to the highest quality of care and preschool education, no less than children of mothers who are free to care for their own children.

From the time when she was studying at the Child Development Department at the University of London, opportunities to encounter a still wider world began

² An extremely popular morning radio program designed expressly for preschool aged children. Heather Gell, the NSTC eurhythmics teacher, with whom Joan worked closely, was also instrumental in establishing the program. Dalcroze Eurhythmics was a method of teaching music. It taught musical expression through movement.



1956

Joan Fry at the Nursery School Training College, Burren Street, Newtown. Source: *National Archives of Australia: A1501, A467/2*

to present themselves to Joan. At various times in her career she represented Australia, acted as a consultant or liaised with overseas government and non-government organisations working in the field of early childhood education and care.

During 1946, and again in 1964, Joan was asked at the last minute to represent Australia at OMEP ³

conferences in Paris and Stockholm. In 1958 she prepared a report for the Commonwealth Department of External Affairs on her work the previous year as a Colombo Plan consultant to the Singapore Government on early childhood education and care.

In the 1970s, during her time working for the Australian government as a policy advisor on early childhood education, Joan attended UNESCO and OECD meetings in Europe, Bangkok and Sri Lanka. During this period she also visited Aboriginal early childhood services in the Northern Territory, and engaged with local communities there.

REPORT ON TRIP TO THE NORTHERN TERRITORY - 9 JUNE - 1 JULY 1977

Itinerary was as follows:

June 9	8.00 p.m.	Arrive in Darwin - TAA Flight 24 ETA 14.50. A.A.E.C.E. Public Meeting. Rapid Creek Pre-school. Topic: The Role of the Parent in the Development of Children's Services.
June 10	8.30 a.m. 9.00 a.m. 10.30 a.m.	Discussion with Dr. Eadie. Discussion with Head Office personnel - P.E.A.'s, Bilingual Advisers, Pre-school Advisers. Travel to Batchelor - ATEC students and staff.
June 11		Trip to Mandorah.
June 13	10.00 a.m.	Discussion re ECE Courses, Darwin Community College. Travel to Groote Eylandt with L. Wills - MWA Flight 484 ETD 15.15 ETA 17.20.
June 14	a.m. p.m. 8.00 p.m.	Visit to Angurugu Pre-school. Inservice meeting with staffs from Angurugu, Alyangula and Umbakumba pre-schools/schools. Address a Parents Meeting on the Role of Early Education.

1977

Itinerary of Joan Fry's Northern Territory visit to Aboriginal early childhood services, as Assistant Secretary, Education Planning Group (Commonwealth Government)

“Aboriginal children, like any other children, must be seen as individuals with a past, a present and a future, individuals with whom education began at birth and for whom education has been continuous.

JOAN FRY, 1971

The frequency with which Joan was asked to represent Australia on these international bodies is testimony to her competence, passion and ability to work in a global context.

³ OMEP, *Organisation Mondiale Pour L'Education Prescolaire* (World Organization for Early Childhood Education), is an international, non-governmental and non-profit organisation concerned with all aspects of early childhood education and care, formed in 1948 and still in operation today. Joan attended their preliminary meeting in Paris in 1946, which led to the establishment of the organisation.

Political effectiveness



It's no use asking (too little), you may as well ask for a lot.

PRIME MINISTER GORTON TO JOAN FRY, 1970

If we take the meaning of 'political' in its most general sense — of influencing people to adopt a particular course of action — then Joan's first political success came about when she was just a 'mere paid member of staff', as she herself described it, at the Woolloomooloo Day Nursery and Nursery School in the early 1940s. At this point in her career her political effectiveness was undoubtedly thanks to her father's connections to many politicians via his work. Through her father's contacts, Joan met with the NSW Minister for Labour and Industry and Social Welfare, Hamilton Knight, whereupon the government's subsidy to the Sydney Day Nursery and Nursery Schools Association was increased on condition that the extra money was paid to staff (low staff wages being the issue of concern). While thereafter distancing herself from party politics, Joan used charm, persistence and the shrewd use of professional and political encounters and connections to advance the causes to which she was so intensely committed.

These qualities were evident when she succeeded in convincing the Association's Nursery School Committees to introduce a more balanced diet and change staffing arrangements so that teachers worked overlapping shifts; both against enormous resistance from those who wanted to keep doing what they had always done. Joan approached the President of each Centre Committee, asking them to have a trial period of this new system. It took years in some cases, but eventually she was able to get these policies



c.1972

New building, Nursery School Teachers' College

implemented across the services, resulting in enormous improvements in terms of satisfaction of parents, better management, and the behaviour of children in centres. Sometimes she worked behind the scenes and indirectly to get policy improvements implemented; patience and persistence were the key requirements.

Professionally, Joan was active from the 1950s onwards as a participant and guest speaker at conferences on early childhood education, health and development held in various states of the Commonwealth; her ambition to gain respect and

recognition for child care as integral to and equal in value to the early childhood education provided in preschools and kindergartens. Representing the College at meetings of the Australian Pre-school Association⁴ (APA) and organising the APA's triennial conference at the NSTC, Joan gradually reduced prejudice and raised the status of the College and its graduates within the early childhood teaching profession. She continued to represent the College and the APA throughout the 1960s.

⁴ The Australian Pre-School Association, previously named the Australian Association for Pre-School Child Development, was established in 1938. A national association, it lobbies for the advancement of pre-school development. It operates today as Early Childhood Australia, advocating for young children, their families and those in the early childhood field.

In 1965, APA representatives from all the States agreed that there was a need for more facilities for training preschool teachers. The APA applied for assistance from the Federal Government for funding to enable this. At this time Joan was pressing home the message that more women were going into paid work, more child care was needed, and therefore more teachers needed to be trained. Child care was becoming more prominent as a political issue, and articles about the need for preschool and day care services appeared in the media almost every week, due in no small measure to Joan's advocacy.

Joan happened to encounter John Gorton, then the Federal Government Minister for Education (and later Prime Minister) at a function where, as guest speaker, he spoke about the funding of tertiary institutions. She asked him why, since the Commonwealth employed more preschool teachers per head of population than any other state or territory, his government did not fund preschool colleges, instead relying on private institutions, inadequately funded, to provide their teachers. Intrigued by her questioning, Minister Gorton approached Joan at supper and asked her to write to him with more information about this issue.

Joan then let the other States and preschool colleges know about this conversation, and Gorton was invited to the next meeting of the APA, where he told members to write to him and let him know what they wanted. After some more political manoeuvring, the Commonwealth Government in 1968 approved capital grants for preschool colleges to double their intake of trainees. This was the first time the Commonwealth funded independent colleges and took an interest in preschool education.

With funds from this capital grant, the old stone building known as The Retreat, that had housed the College at Burren Street since 1945, was demolished to make way for a new building. Joan Fry worked with the architect to design a campus purpose-built for

the delivery of a first-rate preschool teacher education program. The new building was opened in 1972 by the then Minister for Education, Malcolm Fraser.

In the same year, 1972, the *Child Care Act*, proposing the first large-scale Commonwealth investment in child care, was introduced into Parliament. Joan was invited by the recently-elected Whitlam Labor government to chair a new committee whose purpose was to report on the education and care of young children in Australia. The final report would set out the steps necessary to implement the government's then policy of providing preschool education for all children in Australia at the same level as was provided in Canberra, as well as child care for children in need.


Joan consequently resigned as Principal of the College and moved to Canberra, where she would spend the rest of her working life and her retirement. As Chair of the new Australian Pre-schools Committee, she worked well with the then Education Minister, Kim Beazley Senior, for whom she had a high regard (which seems to have been mutual). She also had a good working relationship with John Carrick, the Minister for Education in the Fraser government which succeeded Labor in 1975. She described Beazley and Carrick as both 'magnificent men'; her regard for them was inspired by their personal qualities and their power to change things for the better, not party political allegiance.

Care and education of young children: report of the Australian Pre-schools Committee was published in November 1973 and became popularly known as the Fry Report. But the political landscape had changed. Advocates of child care funding for working parents now had the ear of the Labor government and condemned the Fry Report for its focus on preschool education, when they saw the provision of universal child care as a more urgent and important goal. Joan protested that the Committee had only been following the terms of reference given to it by the government

in framing its recommendations; but ultimately the Fry Report was shelved and the Australian Pre-schools Committee was dissolved.

Joan continued to work in the Commonwealth public service as Assistant Secretary to the Education Planning Group, which was responsible for policy development, and met regularly with heads of all sections of the Department of Education.

She was also consultant to the government on early childhood education and acted as the Ethnic Liaison Officer within the Commonwealth Education Department. She sat on all committees associated with Aboriginal preschool programs, visiting the Northern Territory.

 **I was able to look at preschool education from a European point of view but also from a cultural point of view of the Aborigines and to recommend that they [governments] do something which was more culturally applicable...** JOAN FRY

She was also responsible for the Women's Unit, where she was required to vet programs related to women. Similarly, as the Ethnic Liaison Officer she was required to look at policies associated with migrants, preparing a number of reports on their educational needs. Though these were not her primary areas of expertise, Joan tackled these new tasks with her usual thoroughness and common sense until government cutbacks led to her retirement in 1982.

It is testimony to Joan's attributes and skills — her humour and charm, her capacity for hard work and her practical intelligence, her understanding of people and her easy rapport with them — that she worked so well with so many people from many diverse backgrounds, nationalities and cultures, over such a long period.

A position of responsibility

‘Never start anything you don’t mean to finish because nobody will take any notice of you.’

HENRY CHARLES FRY, TO HIS DAUGHTER JOAN.

On the face of it, Joan’s early formative years had done little to prepare her for her future career. Despite the apparent freedom of life along the riverbank and later in a small country town, Joan had in fact, lived a sheltered and protected family life. Brought up according to strict standards of Presbyterian morality, she knew nothing of the city before she came and started school there at the age of 15. After school she stayed home for three years because ‘both my mother and father believed I should learn to be useful’. She wasn’t allowed to go swimming without a chaperone, and when she went for the selection interview at the Nursery School Training Centre in Woolloomooloo in 1940 at the age of 19, her younger brother accompanied her because she had never travelled to Sydney by herself or by public transport. Her parents were unaware of her intention until notice of acceptance was received, and then ‘all hell broke loose’. Nevertheless, her father did not prevent her enrolling, only requiring that she should finish what she started: an injunction which remained with her through all the twists and turns of her later career.

So it is not surprising that this young woman with quite limited experience of the wider world had no ambition to move from her subsequent teaching position at the Woolloomooloo Nursery School and was ‘appalled’ when the President of the Sydney

Day Nursery and Nursery Schools Association, Mrs McElhone, urged her to apply for the Thyne Reid Scholarship to study in London. ‘I was so scared of her I put in an application hoping I wouldn’t get it.’ Of course Joan was awarded the Scholarship and was greatly enriched by the opportunities she encountered as a result. Even when she was a student in London, she was invited to represent Australia at a preliminary meeting of OMEP in 1946, indicating that her capacity to step up at short notice into an unfamiliar role was recognised.

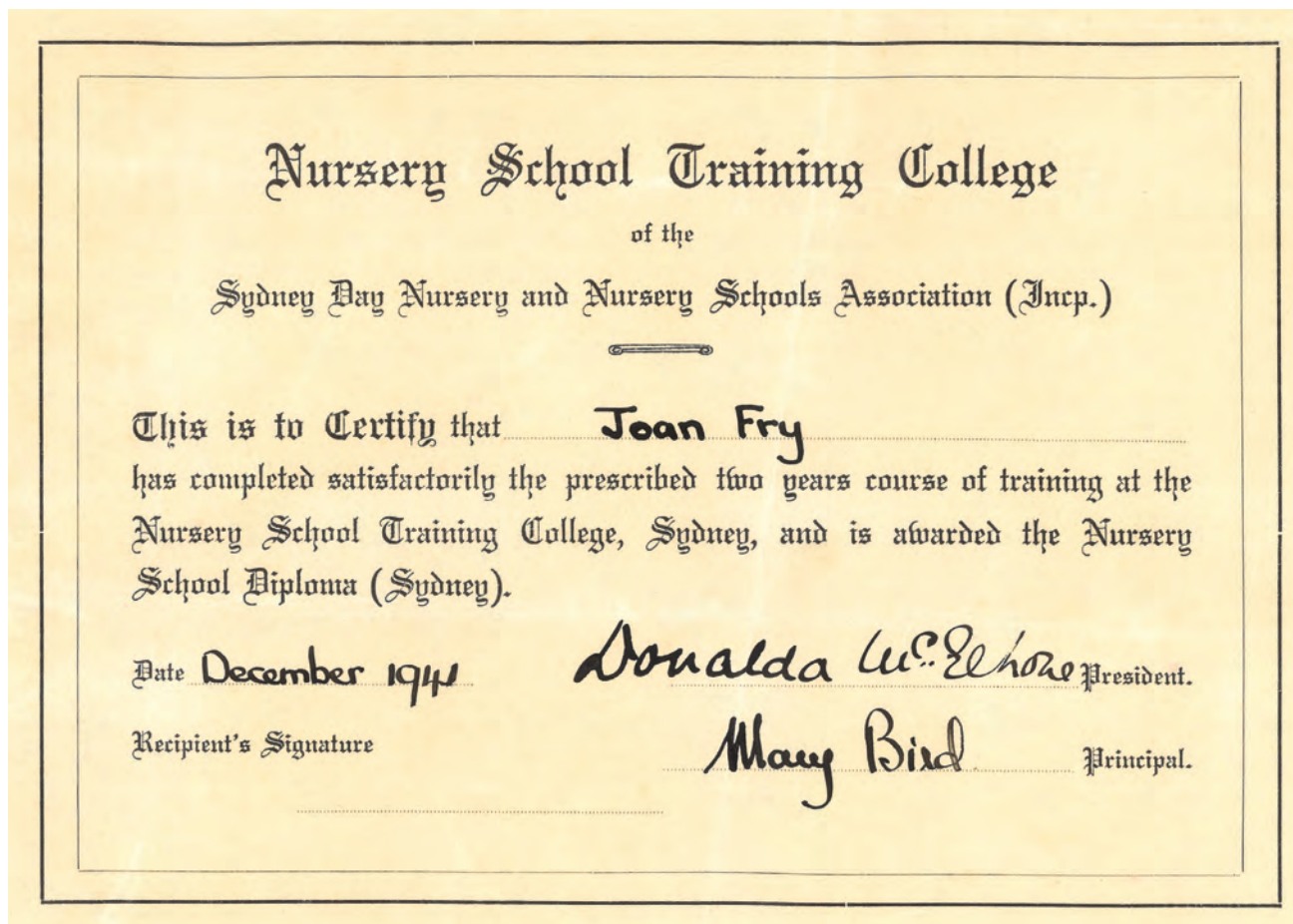
Joan’s reaction to each of the roles she was invited or urged to accept — first, as a member of staff, then as the Director of the Teaching Program and Principal of the College, right through to her appointment to the senior Commonwealth public service — seems to have initially been the same: she recalled being ‘appalled’ or ‘terrified’ at the thought of accepting each new responsibility.

Yet a pattern of events, and characteristic responses from Joan to every new challenge, were evident from early on in her career. Her attitude throughout life was that, ‘I did what I had always done and that was to say what I thought and take the consequences’. Her apparent initial lack of confidence does not seem to have been evident to those who worked with her, and she was never intimidated by precedent or felt she had to follow what was done before. In 1951, Joan was appointed Director of Training rather than Principal because, unlike former Principals, she chose not to reside at the College hostel. ‘I didn’t mind working with students, in fact I enjoyed working with them, but I didn’t want to live with them.’ This led to some



c.1980 Joan Fry

conflict with the staff member who was prepared to live in the hostel, until Joan asked the College Council in 1966 to clarify the situation because she had been under the impression that she was in charge, and that



1941

Joan Fry's Nursery School Training College diploma

if she was mistaken, she would need to reconsider her position. The College Council then endorsed her position as Principal.

As she became active in professional forums, it is notable how often and how quickly Joan was invited or appointed to be Chair of various committees. Thus

she chaired the NSW Committee for Mental Health in Young Children, whose members represented a wide range of medical professionals, from 1960 to 1964. The establishment of the Australian Association for the Welfare of Children in Hospitals, which worked effectively to reform practices relating to the care of children in hospitals, including 'rooming in' and visiting hours, was an eventual outcome of the work begun by this Committee. She was also a member of the NSW Health Education Advisory Committee appointed

by the NSW Minister for Health, and President of the NSW Institute for Educational Research. Her work as Chair of the Australian Pre-schools Committee and the preparation of the Fry Report has already been noted. She often chaired committees set up for various purposes during her time with the Commonwealth Public Service where she frequently had to deal with Commonwealth-State conflicts and rivalries.

It is particularly striking that, during a period where 'credentialism' — an emphasis on the acquisition, and the importance, of academic qualifications — was steadily increasing, Joan achieved — or was thrust into — these positions of leadership when her own academic qualifications might have appeared limited. She could feel this acutely at times:

I have no more educational qualifications than a preschool teachers' college diploma, one of five students; [I was] appalled having to face all these professorial people [when asked to chair the Australian Pre-schools Committee in 1973]. There was some feeling a person of my calibre shouldn't be chairing that committee. [I overcame that] by ignoring it as far as possible and trying to be as objective as possible.

JOAN FRY

She often noted that academics were somewhat bemused when they inquired about her academic background, but clearly her competence in 'getting the job done' meant that they had to set aside their initial reaction to her lack of academic status.

The significance of the life and work of Joan Fry for students of early childhood education and care today



Joan Fry's beliefs and practices, her qualities and attributes are as relevant to those working in early childhood services today as they were during her working life. Her curiosity about people no matter what their age and background, and her respect for their individual differences, fostered a capacity to observe behaviour, to reflect on its meaning, and to apply understandings gained in this way to her teaching.

Above all, she had an unwavering conviction that nurturing children's health and development through high quality early childhood education was of the utmost importance, irrespective of whether society



at large agreed with her. Through her advocacy on behalf of children and families, most particularly those suffering disadvantage and with special needs, she tried to change what she perceived to be indifference to and disregard for the great benefit for society at large as well as families and children of early childhood education, care and support for parents. Her frustration can be clearly seen in one of her final interviews:

‘... it is the poor who are likely to get services of less quality and I think they are the people who need it. We talk about women's refuges, we talk about rape crisis centres,



we talk about sexual abuse of children; but we are doing nothing to overcome those problems by helping the parents of those children to understand their children and to understand the need for proper child-rearing practices. It is important that all people working with children consider the needs of mothers and babies from the time they are born.

It is to be hoped that the example of her life and work will inspire today's students of early childhood education, and that they will take up the challenge she laid down in those words.

SDN Children's Services is a not-for-profit organisation which supports children and families through 25 Children's Education and Care centres in NSW and ACT, and 28 family support and disability services, including several which build the inclusive practice capacity of early childhood practitioners in non-SDN services.

Dr Leone Huntsman (right) is a historian and author of SDN's 2005 centenary publication, *For the Little ones, the Best: SDN Children's Services 1905–2005*, and *The Nursery School Teachers' College: a life history*, launched in 2013. Working as a tutor in Education at Macquarie University, Leone became increasingly interested in the development of young children. After majoring in Child Development for her Master of Arts, Leone became a lecturer at the NSTC in 1974. Since her retirement in 1992, Leone has worked as a consultant undertaking research on the education and wellbeing of young children.



Information for this publication was sourced from the SDN Archive, unless otherwise stated. The SDN Archive was established in 2002 to collect, maintain, research and promote the valuable and extensive collection of historical records amassed by SDN since its establishment in 1905.

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