

Special Teaching and Research (STaR) Twenty Years of Special Education Support for Children with Disabilities and their Families

At the end of 2001, a group of parents and special educators/academics from Macquarie University Special Education Centre established the STaR (Special Teaching and Research) Inclusive Early Childhood Association. The impetus for establishing this organisation was the identified need to provide quality early education services for infants and young children with a range of disabilities and delays in childcare and to support their families. The children of the parents involved in establishing this organisation were part of the Macquarie University Special Education Centre (MUSEC) Early Years Programs, which provided for a range of children including those with severe intellectual disabilities and those who were potentially intellectually gifted. The families of the children attending the MUSEC preschool programs in the final two years of operation raised enough money to establish an organisation supporting children with disabilities and their families in a privately owned childcare centre in Sydney's North West.



STaR Program Children and Staff 2002

What was, perhaps, unique about the way in which the STaR Association was established was that parents supporting the initiative included those whose children did not have disabilities as well as those who did. All parents acknowledged the value of a program that catered for the full range of ability with quality early childhood programs, including individualised support for those who needed it. The first STaR early childhood program was established in a private childcare centre owned by the parent of a child who had attended an Early Years Program as one of the regular preschoolers. The program was funded in 2002 partly by Macquarie University, as an off-shoot of the Early Years Program with support from the Intervention Support Program (ISP), and partly by the owner of the childcare centre who funded an additional member of staff. The ongoing operation of the program 2003-4 was funded by the STaR Association, again with support from the owner of the centre and ISP funding. Although the STaR program had its own dedicated staff, for most of the day the children joined in play and group time with other children in the centre.

Why Childcare?

In the early part of this century, the provision of appropriate support for children with additional needs in childcare was thought to be problematic (Commonwealth Childcare Advisory Council, 2001; Llewellyn, Thompson, & Fante, 2002) and many fewer children with disabilities accessed childcare than other early childhood services (Llewellyn et al.) Further, given that preschool services are not generally available to children under three years of age and preschool days are shorter than those available in childcare, it seemed unfair that the parents of children who had disabilities did not have

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the same options for returning to work or accessing respite as did other parents. For those families who were able to access childcare, the concern was that there may not be the necessary level of expertise supporting their children with disabilities/delays.

The Move to a Capacity Building Model of Support

The need to provide for a greater number of families, and the acknowledgment that a more inclusive model was needed, led to a successful application in 2004 for a federal government grant (through Invest to Grow) to establish capacity building programs in up to ten childcare centres, with a focus on disadvantaged areas of Sydney. Programs were established in ten childcare centres over the initial period of funding with the majority established in two Western Sydney local government areas. Childcare centres committed to enrolling 4-6 children with disabilities each day and to supporting one qualified early childhood educator on staff (the special needs manager) to complete a postgraduate certificate in early intervention. In addition, the following was provided by STaR:

- In-centre coaching in:
 - assessing children with disabilities in the typical routines and activities of the centre
 - planning individual programs that could be implemented within the regular setting
 - implementing systems for on-going progress monitoring within the routines and activities of the centre
 - planning and implementing Individual Education Planning meetings with families and other relevant stakeholders
- Professional development sessions after hours in childcare centres
- Provision of release staff to enable educators to engage with STaR special educators and other professionals
- Support for the families of the children with disabilities attending centres

This program was funded for three years from 2005-2008, externally evaluated and in 2008 approved by the Australian Institute of Family Studies as a promising practice, something that was not achieved by all programs funded under this initiative.

2009 and Beyond

The initial program involved a partnership between Macquarie University and the STaR Association, with Macquarie University managing the financial and administrative side of the program. Federal funding continued under this arrangement until 2012 when the management of the program was taken over in full by the STaR Association. STaR has continued to receive federal funding for the childcare program and has also been supported by a number of philanthropic organisations and individuals. After the initial funding period, the Postgraduate Certificate in Early Intervention was no longer offered by Macquarie University, but the coaching and professional development provided by STaR did continue.

Over 600 children with disabilities and their families have been supported through the STaR program, including indigenous children in Western Sydney. STaR has provided services to children and families in 30 childcare centres and trained many educators in assessment and intervention procedures acknowledged to be best practice in the field. More recently STaR has provided outreach services to children and families in early childhood services outside the centres directly supported by STaR.

STaR has been endorsed by the New South Wales Educational Standards Authority (NESA) as a provider of professional learning in the field of early childhood special education. In 2017 STaR became a registered National Disability Insurance

Scheme (NDIS) provider and in 2018 became part of the NSW Department of Education Disability and Inclusion Program Sector Capacity Building Project, offering a coaching and professional learning program to preschool staff supporting children with disabilities in 20 centres in Western Sydney. In 2021 STaR won the NSW Department of Education tender to deliver webinars to early educators in preschools, long day care and family day care services under its Sector Development Program.

New Initiatives in Capacity Building

Contact has been maintained with many of the families whose children have been supported by members of the STaR team. Although the focus has been early childhood intervention prior to school enrolment, where requested, members of the STaR team have also provided support to mainstream schools enrolling their graduates. This has sometimes gone beyond the 'transition to school' phase in the first year of school enrolment. Many STaR graduates are now young adults and accessing post-school support programs. This has prompted the STaR team to move towards supporting organisations providing services to young people with intellectual disabilities following their graduation from secondary school. The support planned is focussed on capacity building, using a similar model to that used in STaR early childhood programs; that is professional learning and on-site coaching.

The Link with Research

There are many early childhood intervention programs established within not-for-profit organisations, with a number of those initiated with parent support and some developing as off-shoots of university research programs. What sets STaR apart from most of these programs is its ongoing focus on applied research through a continuing relationship with universities. STaR programs have supported university practicum placements and internships, and staff from the centres and STaR team members (special educators and childcare staff) have also worked in partnership with academics to implement research within centres. Conference presentations and peer reviewed publications have resulted from this partnership with members of the STaR team co-authoring some of these publications. This close link with research ensures that STaR program staff keep up to date with the research in the field and that findings from the research implemented in their programs are embedded into their professional learning and support programs.

Ongoing Support for the Role of Special Education

At a time when administrators and policy makers appear to be discounting the contribution of the special education profession to the field of disability and learning difficulties, STaR has continued to provide services to people with disabilities, their families and carers with a focus on special education and the role that special educators have in ensuring that practice supported by research continues to drive the programs offered to these populations. In 2021 STaR moved from an association to a company limited by guarantee with a view to expanding its operations outside of its Sydney base. Its new constitution recognises the integral role that research must play in developing practice by ensuring that the Board continues to include researchers in the field.

Well done STaR!

References

- Commonwealth Child Care Advisory Council. (2001). Child care beyond 2001. A report to the Minister for Family and Community Services September 2001. Canberra, ACT: Commonwealth Australia.
- Llewellyn, G., Thompson, K., & Fante, M. (2002). Inclusion in early childhood services: Ongoing challenges. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 27(3), 18–23.