

# **HEEDING THE VOICES – THROUGH LEARNING TO HEALING**

An Application of Single and Double Loop Learning in a  
Case Study of Past Practice

Submitted by

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## Statement of Sources

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified or been awarded another degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

All research procedures reported in the thesis received the approval of the relevant Ethics Committee as required.

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## *A b s t r a c t*

This thesis responds to the current climate of inquiry and complaint around past practice in the work of religious, charitable and service based organisations. It does not attempt to deal with issues of abuse or of illegal or unlawful practice but rather proposes an alternative approach to inquiry into past practice. In focussing on the learnings for one organisation whose practice was under inquiry the study presents a response that is life giving, growth promoting and the first step to healing and reconciliation.

In June 1998 the Honourable Faye Lo Po', MP instructed that the Standing Committee on Social Issues inquire into *Adoption Practices in NSW 1950 -1998* (the Inquiry). The Sisters of St Joseph, a religious Congregation in NSW chose to participate in the Inquiry. They had been entrusted with the care of single pregnant women since 1937 at St Margaret's Hospital in Sydney and St Anthony's Home in Croydon. Recommendation 17 of *Releasing the Past*, the final report of the Inquiry suggests that an apology from organisations involved in adoption services be forthcoming. This recommendation proved to be the catalyst for this study.

No real apology exists without reconciliation. Reconciliation is possible only when both sides of the story are told and understood. This thesis seeks to understand not just both sides of the story but the changes and the learnings that have taken place in the provision of care to single mothers over the eventful fifty years embraced by the Inquiry.

Using the metaphor of voice as discourse, dialogue and response the study examines the discourses that informed attitudes to the single mother in the fifty years leading up to the Inquiry; listens to the events of the Inquiry and identifies the research question which focuses on inquiry into past practice and the consequent understanding of organisational and individual learnings.

The evolutionary nature of organisational learning provides a framework for understanding the learnings that have taken place. Using case study methodology the study situates the ministry in the changing social, religious and professional culture of the time. It examines the evidence of the mothers who told their stories to the Inquiry and sets up a dialogue between this evidence and the recollections of the Sisters involved in the ministry.

While the discourses and the voices of the mothers have been explored in other publications the author was unable to access any other studies that examined issues through the eyes of those who were deemed to have been perpetrators of the actions under inquiry.

It is hoped that the study may serve as the first step towards understanding the stories of both groups of women – for this is the first step towards reconciliation. It is further hoped that it provides a model of learning that enables organisations to understand and appreciate the richness of their learning history – especially when the catalyst for that understanding is complaint and inquiry.