

Attracting and retaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and staff

by Julie Peters

We would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land where we are, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. We pay respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and recognise they are the first people of Australia.

One of the many questions services ask when aiming to improve their cultural program is 'how do we do it?' One step you can take is to employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators at your service. This can be of great benefit to the children, other educators at your service and your local community. Services who employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have advised that having Aboriginal educators helps Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children feel more welcome in your service.

The benefits of employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators

Employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and staff can benefit your service by:

- Improving respect for, and knowledge of, Aboriginal culture, history and issues
- Increasing support for your service's cultural program
- Helping to ensure that cultural practices and education are included in your service in a natural, informal and non-tokenistic way
- Introducing your service to different ways of thinking and doing things and providing a strong link to the local community
- Helping to dispel any negative stereotypes among staff and families.

Attracting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and staff

Research the best ways to advertise for the position in your local Aboriginal community. Word of mouth is also a powerful tool, especially if you have connections in your local Aboriginal community.

If you are unsure of how to take the first step in seeking Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, contact the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), Centrelink

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.5, 5.1 and 5.3

OSHCQA Principles: 2.1, 8.2 and 8.4

QIAS Principles: 1.6 and 7.4

or your local council. Useful job board websites include:

- www.careerjet.com.au
- www.indigenousjobsaustralia.com.au
- www.koorimail.com
- www.jobrapido.com.au

Retaining educators and staff

Services may find that it is difficult to retain Aboriginal educators. This can be due to many factors including them feeling displaced if they are the only Aboriginal educator at the service. The following strategies may help you to retain Aboriginal educators and staff:

- Be understanding of cultural differences
- Offer relevant professional development opportunities
- Be open to new ways of doing things
- Actively listen and respond to educators
- Be supportive and ensure non-Aboriginal educators at your service are welcoming and open to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and culture
- Commence staff meetings with an Acknowledgement of Country as a statement of recognition and respect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional owners of the land
- If educators are resigning, ask them why they are leaving, learn from their responses and use this information to improve your strategies for retaining staff.

Conclusion

Employing and retaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and staff is one of the key ways services can genuinely include Aboriginal culture in their environment and programs ■

This article relates to EYLF Learning:

- Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity

Case study: SDN Children's Services

SDN Children's Services was established in 1905 and is one of Australia's most experienced and trusted leaders in children's services, providing early education and care, and family support programs. SDN is a not-for-profit organisation operating 23 Children's Education and Care Centres in NSW and ACT for more than 3,000 children. SDN also operates 16 government-funded programs for children, families and the children's services sector, including early intervention, Aboriginal community programs, and autism and disability support services. Specific Aboriginal programs include:

- Aboriginal preschool scholarships
- Aboriginal playgroups
- Aboriginal early literacy and the Tracks in Learning program which supports Aboriginal people to attain units of competency at TAFE.

In February 2011, SDN launched their Aboriginal Unit. Ngara Nanga Mai (pronounced *ingara nanga my*) is an Eora (Sydney) name meaning 'listen and dream'. The mission of SDN Ngara Nanga Mai is to:

- Provide high quality early childhood education and care for Aboriginal children in consultation with their families
- Manage services and programs
- Develop resources with Aboriginal children, families and communities for use by SDN services and programs and the wider early childhood sector
- Listen to Aboriginal people about the inequalities they face and consider ways to address these.



Samantha Knight, Aboriginal Projects Coordinator, with a child who attends a SDN service

SDN Children's Services currently has eight Aboriginal staff members, including four educators. Deb Mann, Director SDN Ngara Nanga Mai, stated "as we have a diverse workforce at SDN, our aim is to provide employment opportunities for Aboriginal people across our services in roles such as early childhood educators, social workers, case workers, head office staff and management positions". One of the strategies SDN uses to attract and retain Aboriginal staff and educators is giving them the opportunity to grow and move within the organisation.

SDN advertises all of their positions on Aboriginal message boards, such as Indigenous Jobs Australia, but finds word of mouth to be a very successful tool in attracting Aboriginal staff. The Ngara Nanga Mai staff have close relationships with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and have a wide network so are able to get the word out about vacancies. SDN also receives referrals from other services that know about their programs.

SDN is committed to making their long day care centres, preschools and programs more accessible to Aboriginal children and their families by creating welcoming and culturally responsive environments and programs. One of the ways to help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children feel welcome is by having Aboriginal staff available for families to speak to. Deb agrees that having Aboriginal educators and staff is comforting for Aboriginal families and gives them the opportunity to develop relationships with staff. This makes it easier for families to ask questions and to have their voices heard – not only about child care but about anything and everything in service provision that families may want to change or get further information about.

Deb finds that some of the challenges facing an organisation in attracting and retaining Aboriginal educators and staff include:

- Achieving a long term commitment by the non-Aboriginal staff to develop relationships with Aboriginal people
- Isolation: if a service can only employ one Aboriginal worker in a mainstream organisation the person may feel less able to speak up or develop a sense of belonging
- Insufficient numbers of graduates that are available to work in the city



Deb Mann (right), Director of SDN Ngara Nanga Mai, at an Aboriginal playgroup

- Opportunities to move within the workforce and to gain access to professional development that will increase promotional opportunities.

To support Aboriginal educators and staff once they are placed in their organisation, SDN has a mentoring program, as well as providing learning and development opportunities. They do all they can to make people feel welcome and have all cultures embedded in their child care programming as well as visual representation of diverse cultures throughout their services.

When an Aboriginal staff member is the only Aboriginal person working in that space it can be quite difficult for them not having anyone else there who understands their culture. "Deb has started a mentoring or gathering group, where all the Aboriginal staff come together once a month to every six weeks or so, so that they are having that connection even if they don't have that connection at their own work site," says Joanna Mallon, SDN's Director of People and Culture. This is a strategy to ensure all Aboriginal staff feel a sense of belonging. SDN also believes it is important to give non-Aboriginal staff the opportunity to learn everything they can about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. They have commenced a program for all staff to provide opportunities to attend cultural training to get them thinking about Aboriginal people, history and culture.

As part of the organisation's learning and development program, the Ngara Nanga Mai sent a blank canvas along with a series of questions to all of their long day care centres, preschools, program areas and corporate services. They asked the teams to make their own visual interpretation of how they work with Aboriginal people and what it means to them. The exercise was aimed at getting the staff to start a dialogue and think about what they do and don't know. It was also an opportunity to express their message visually. The result is a collection of canvases that now hang in the Ngara Nanga Mai office, all very different, each with their own messages.

SDN has been successful in their programs so far, but they know they are still learning. Joanna says that the important thing is that they are having a real go. When asked if they had a message for other services, Deb and Joanna stressed the importance of asking questions and acting on the responses you receive from the Aboriginal community. SDN has found they are successful in many ways because they have support throughout the organisation. "You have to have support right from the very top. That is one thing we have here at SDN with our CEO's and Board's commitment," said Joanna.

Getting it right is about two-way learning. SDN aims to ensure that all staff are aware that they need to work with Aboriginal people as they develop and provide services for Aboriginal children and families. SDN is committed to working collectively and to providing experiential ways for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff to learn and work together. Although there can often be obstacles to seeking and retaining Aboriginal staff and educators, SDN believes that the benefits are countless – it is the Aboriginal staff and their knowledge that will provide the leadership in cultural learning for the wider SDN community ■

Further reading

- Knight, S., Mann, D., & Thomson, J. (2011). *Aboriginal access to preschool: What attracts and retains Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in preschools?* Retrieved March 28, 2011, from http://www.sdn.org.au/do/targeted_support/aboriginalunit/Aboriginal%20Access%20to%20Preschool%20study.pdf