



Aboriginal Access to Preschool

What attracts and retains Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in preschools?

A small qualitative and quantitative study of inner Sydney mainstream preschools



Deb Mann, Samantha Knight, Jo Thomson

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Glossary

Throughout this report when referring to Aboriginal people this also includes Torres Strait Islanders.

ARACY Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth

ATSI Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

CALD Culturally and Linguistically Diverse

Community Services part of the NSW Government Department of Human Services

DET NSW Department of Education and Training

FaHCSIA Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

IWACC Inner West Aboriginal Community Company

NAIDOC NAIDOC Week celebrations are held across Australia each July to celebrate the history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. NAIDOC originally stood for 'National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee'

SCAN Supporting Children with Additional Needs (a program funded by the NSW Department of Human Services Community Services, to help children with additional needs get the educational support they need)

'Sorry Week' In Australia, National Reconciliation Week follows National Sorry Day on May 26. It was on this day in 1997 that the report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their families, *Bringing them home*, was tabled in Federal Parliament

Executive Summary

Although this qualitative and quantitative study is relatively small, it provides interesting data into what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) families look for when choosing a preschool: what aspects and characteristics make them feel welcomed and, over time, give a sense of belonging. Data from preschool staff and directors also provide revealing insights into what they believe works and doesn't work in attracting and retaining Aboriginal families in mainstream preschools.

The research was conducted in 2009/10 with eight SCAN-funded preschools and includes the views of 34 non-Aboriginal staff, one Aboriginal trainee, seven directors and 12 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents. Six of the parents were users of preschools, and six were not. Five of the preschools had Aboriginal children enrolled at that time — 16 children in total.

The study used in-depth interview techniques that were culturally adapted for the Aboriginal parents. The interviews gave many of the parents their first opportunity to consider and share their thoughts on preschool and early childhood education. Having Aboriginal researchers to yarn with gave parents a sense of connectedness and understanding and a sense that they could safely share their comments. Some parents began their interviews closed and uptight, relaxed significantly during the 'yarning' and revealed very personal fears and worries that they may have felt less comfortable sharing with a non-Aboriginal researcher. This interviewing technique was both revealing and significant, and we believe it to be an essential part of the success of this study's methodology.

As SCAN-funded centres the participating preschools are likely to have higher than average levels of inclusiveness. Nonetheless this research offers important recommendations which any mainstream preschool or early childhood service could easily implement in order to make it more attractive and welcoming for Aboriginal families. This would be an important step towards developing more affirmative practices and other strategies that will, over time, facilitate learning opportunities and outcomes for Aboriginal people that are on par with those enjoyed by other Australians.

The research affirmed that staff, environment and atmosphere needs to be welcoming in the initial stages of developing culturally inclusive services. It also affirmed that in the long term, much more is required to sustain relationships with Aboriginal families, and provide a curriculum that supports culture and equitable learning opportunities. Ideally Aboriginal children should have specific services, with qualified Aboriginal teachers and staff that develop a teaching program to meet cultural law and practices, and equip children to meet the dominant educational norms.

This study found great consistency between preschool users and non-users in terms of what attracts them to a preschool and the benefits they see for their children from early education. Most of what the parents look for and find attractive in a preschool (eg a safe, high-quality environment, good



quality teaching and friendly welcoming staff) are the same as for any parent. Similarly, the perceived benefits included developing social skills, early learning and language that prepare children for school, lifelong learning and work opportunities.

The Aboriginal parents expressed high levels of trust in their relationships with their children's preschool and staff. Given the significant health, social and economic needs of many Aboriginal families, this has important implications for preschool services to act as referral points for families onto other specialist services.

The parents identified a number of barriers to accessing child care: transport, lack of service flexibility, lack of Aboriginal teachers, the cost of fees, and perceived attitudes and behaviours. These factors have been well documented by others (eg ARACY, 2007; FaHCSIA, 2009; Kronemann, 2007).

Our results indicate that young inner Sydney Aboriginal parents are very keen for their children to receive high-quality early education. Even parents who experience significant barriers to work and educational opportunities themselves appreciated the possibilities of preschool and the value of understanding their children's needs.

The research findings reinforce optimism about both Aboriginal interest in early education, and the willingness of mainstream preschools to adapt in order to attract and retain Aboriginal families. Why then are Aboriginal preschool participation rates still significantly lower than those for other Australians, even in areas where services exist? This research offers several suggestions to assist mainstream preschools and early childhood services more broadly in providing an environment that welcomes Aboriginal families and, over time, fosters a sense of belonging. However this will only be achievable with adequate levels of targeted ongoing funding and commitment.

Suggestions/Recommendations

The preschools in this study that had good levels of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural capacity had at least some of the following features:

- **Attracting Aboriginal children.** This depends on a long-term commitment and investment in building trust with local Aboriginal communities, adapting policies and procedures, and building cultural capacity so that all staff are understanding, welcoming and supportive of difference broadly — not just Aboriginal difference.
- **Making connections with the local Aboriginal community.** This is an important indicator of cultural capacity and enrolments. Such links can provide know-how and experience in how to appropriately interact with Aboriginal people, and how to create physical environments where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families want to come, and where they can learn about Aboriginal culture.
- **Displaying, and providing access to, appropriate resources** — eg books, other literature and language. This indicates an interest in, respect for and familiarity with Aboriginal culture.
- **Affordability.** Fees are a significant barrier to accessing child care for many Aboriginal families. The Department of Human Services, through Community Services, currently contributes \$3 300 per Aboriginal child attending preschool; we propose that preschool fees be waived for all Aboriginal children. In addition, we propose that a dedicated amount per child be allocated for the ongoing development of cultural inclusiveness activities in preschools.
- **The presence of Aboriginal staff.** This is a well-known factor in attracting and retaining Aboriginal families — raising issues about increasing the supply of appropriately trained Aboriginal early childhood staff. Factors that may discourage families from participating in preschools may also

discourage staff: services that are actively engaged with Aboriginal cultural issues are more likely to attract and retain both staff and families. Preschool directors cannot expect that hiring an Aboriginal worker is enough to create an appropriate environment for Aboriginal families. All preschool staff need to be friendly and welcoming of families.

- **Training and supporting staff** so that they are comfortable and confident in their capacities to develop appropriate relationships with families who may want to access their service. The following initiatives will help lessen staff fears about 'doing the wrong thing':
 - **Visual cues in the preschool.** Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal users of preschools need to be able to see materials, picture books, handouts/pamphlets, other literature and visual images that indicate an interest in, respect for, and familiarity with Aboriginal cultures. Preschools should seek assistance and advice to ensure that the cultural materials they have are appropriately chosen, displayed and used (this type of support, training and advice can be provided through SDN's Aboriginal unit, Ngara Nanga Mai).
 - **Experiential learning.** Staff should be given opportunities to participate in intentional and supported learning experiences outside of the preschool with local Aboriginal community organisations and, where appropriate, to connect with local community members/elders and culture.
 - **Aboriginal ways of learning.** Preschool staff should be supported in developing an understanding of the different ways of knowing and ways of seeing that may be appropriate to children from a range of cultural backgrounds and languages. The learning environment of the preschool, including the curriculum, should reflect multicultural ways of understanding.
- **Setting goals** around the inclusion of Aboriginal and other cultural perspectives into the curriculum and daily practices, supported by sound strategies for increasing the cultural capacity of staff. Also setting management and financial targets for Aboriginal enrolments and internal capacity building.
- **Inclusive programs and curriculum.** Preschools with good cultural capacity offer explicit cultural and linguistic learning opportunities for children; identify and make appropriate links to Aboriginal and other cultures in day-to-day programming; and incorporate culturally appropriate materials and resources into routine programs. Preschool staff expressed a need for advice and support in selecting and incorporating culturally appropriate materials and resources into teaching practices. We therefore suggest a funded advisory service for preschool staff to access for assistance in acquiring materials and programming.
- **Flexible operational practices** — eg a willingness to accommodate irregular attendances and absences and variable drop off/pick-up times, to negotiate alternative fee payments, and to manage record keeping requirements.
- **Retaining Aboriginal families and children.** This can be facilitated by an understanding and capacity to adapt to the often complex familial, social and economic needs of many Aboriginal families and the general difficulties they face. However, building trust and mutual respect is critical. Trust helps families to identify culturally and discuss their unique circumstances and needs, thereby allowing staff to respond appropriately. Staff should be encouraged to ask questions about cultural needs, both during enrolment and in follow-up discussions with parents.

Part One

Background

SDN SCAN has been advocating for access to high-quality early childhood education and care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children since 2002. Our advocacy efforts have centred on working with preschools across the Inner West and South East Sydney metropolitan region. We have encouraged these preschools to reach out to local communities, to promote the inclusion of Aboriginal culture in mainstream preschool curriculums, and to support capacity development among staff. However, statistics continue to show that, on the whole, Aboriginal children are still not accessing mainstream preschools.

In conducting this research project we sought to work with the preschools and families in a collaborative way. Previous research, *Footprints in Time* (FaHCSIA) with Aboriginal families emphasises the need for researchers to take time to engage with and be accepted by Aboriginal communities. Strategies recommended in this area include:

- having locally respected Aboriginal people as partners, staff and committee members, involved together with mainstream services
- listening to other ways and changing own beliefs and ways of working
- taking the lead from communities, stopping or waiting for them to manage community responsibilities instead of pushing them into finishing in given time frames
- recording data in different ways.

Anecdotes, records and reports from participating SCAN preschools in the Inner West and South East Sydney region over the past five years also reflect these views.

The present project focuses on what works and what doesn't work in attracting and retaining Aboriginal families and their children in preschools. The aim is to capture and reflect the views of families using services, and formalise some of our learning to ensure that growing numbers of Aboriginal children access preschool in the future.

Part Two

Doing the Research

Research methodology

We used qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the opinions and experiences of preschool directors and staff and Aboriginal parents using preschools, as well as the hopes and ideas of some parents without children currently enrolled.

Nine SCAN-funded preschools were invited to participate; eight agreed. Of these eight preschools, five had between one and seven Aboriginal children currently enrolled. The participating preschools represented a small cross-section of mainstream inner Sydney services.

Various preschool records were collected including Aboriginal children's enrolments, parent enquiries, staff numbers, and relevant policies and learning programs. The table below summarises the total responses from the eight participating preschools.

Aboriginal enrolments	16
Aboriginal children who left in last 2 years	0
Aboriginal enquiries in last 2 years	5
Aboriginal staff	1
Aboriginal policy statements	3
Specific Aboriginal learning experiences	3

Data collection

The research included the following types of data collection:

- Face-to-face yarning sessions with parents of Aboriginal children currently enrolled at the preschools, as well as one Aboriginal trainee early childhood worker
- A survey completed by preschool staff and directors
- Focus groups with staff
- Direct observation of the preschools by a researcher
- Interviews with preschool directors
- Review of existing preschool documents and records (regarding enrolments, policies, curricula, etc).

Participants

This research included the views of 12 Aboriginal families. Of these, six families were users of preschools and six were not. Five out of the six preschool users attended a SCAN-funded preschool.

The views of the six non preschool users were collected during a short focus group and individual interviews/yarning sessions to better understand their thoughts on preschool and their hopes for their children’s early childhood education – what they would look for, and what may or may not attract them to a preschool.

The survey for preschool staff and directors comprised eight questions. Issues addressed included quality of the induction process, staff ability to work well together, work-life balance and how comfortable they felt asking questions and discussing problems at work. Past research has suggested that these factors might relate to cultural openness and adaptability of service delivery. Thirty-four staff and director surveys were completed and returned. Most staff were English-speaking and had been permanently employed at their current preschool for an average of five years.

Research staff

Aboriginal researchers Sam Knight and Deb Mann conducted most of the yarning sessions with the Aboriginal participants. This was necessary to ensure that the participants were comfortable in providing comments about the preschool services. All other fieldwork, including three interviews with Aboriginal mothers not currently accessing a preschool, was conducted by Jo Thomson, the other member of the research team.



Part Three

The Results

This section presents the results of our discussions with:

- Families enrolled at preschool
- Families not currently enrolled at preschool
- Preschool staff and directors.

Families enrolled at preschool — who were they?

Although no formal demographic data were collected, we know something of the families' circumstances. The six families represented a range of socio economic backgrounds: some were relatively financially secure and others were more marginal, financially and socially. The families included one father with a child with a disability.

Preschool user survey data

The Aboriginal parent surveys asked a range of questions about the families' preschool experiences. Parents had found out about the preschool via the Internet, through family/friends, or from a teacher living nearby. They enrolled their children at the preschool by calling and then visiting the centre and going on a waiting list for a place. They all thought the enrolment process was easy and the dad noted that the staff were friendly, which suggests this made it easier for him.

No parent recalled being told about any Aboriginal programs or cultural education offered by the preschool, and none received any cultural support when enrolling.

Parents were asked to identify the types of information they received during enrolment from a list of 14 items about the preschool's rules, services and operations — eg types of sickness not allowed at preschool, sun safety, how to make a complaint, and expectations about children's behaviour. On average, parents reported being told 10 of the 14 items. All except the father said that they knew they needed to have a birth certificate for a child to start school.

Three of the parents were paying full fees; one parent was paying reduced fees of \$27 per day; and the father and one other mother were not paying fees.

Findings from yarning sessions with preschool users

We explored with parents the reasons why they chose their current preschool. As in any group, there was a range of reasons including good reputation, living nearby, family connections, reasonable fees, and specialist early intervention services. When asked what they looked for in a preschool, the parents repeatedly stated that they wanted it to be welcoming and friendly (a wish echoed by those not currently accessing a preschool — see below). Their view of the benefits of early childhood education included learning, language development and social skills.

All reported feeling very happy with their preschools and the staff: they felt very welcomed and comfortable. One mother said of her preschool:

The teachers are lovely — very caring and loving towards the kids — never put the child down and they feel comfortable and they don't feel like they're being left alone.

Another mother spoke of the importance of feeling comfortable and knowing the staff:

When he started at SDN I'd met the teachers, started to talk to the teachers and the boss, making myself out there in the workplace, I started to feel good about him going there.

All the parents said they felt comfortable about speaking with the staff about their child and even those parents attending preschools with Aboriginal staff said they would speak with any staff member, not just the Aboriginal staff member. None of the parents had ever had any issues with their preschools that required staff to speak with them about their children.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff

The parents saw many benefits in having Aboriginal teachers teach their culture and ways. For example, one mother said:

The non-Aboriginal teachers probably don't have an understanding and it wouldn't be the same if they were teaching the Aboriginal [ways]. If something happens in the playground she might tell a story about when she was in the country when she was their age and she might tell stories to the children of where she came from and that is good here. If those two workers were not here it would be different.

The father said:

It would be good to see more of them. Seein' a face — seein' Jane makes it more comforting.

One mother said she mainly spoke with the Aboriginal workers because:

They have an understanding of your background and where you're coming from as a person. I'm very happy that the [preschool] has two Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers and is linked to the Primary School that has an Aboriginal unit which is providing a lot of Aboriginal education and understanding for the kids. They do a pretty good job of involving the kids in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. I think it makes it easier with the two aide workers because teachers can be very straight and many of the Aboriginal kids that come here refer to the aide workers as aunty — out of respect the kids will call them aunty — the informal relationship the kids can have with them is really good.

But this mother also had praise for her son's non-Aboriginal teacher:

She never looks at their culture like it was something to be ashamed of and I know that 20 years ago you probably wouldn't mention that you were an Aboriginal person. She makes them very proud of where they come from and that's probably all I could ask her to do.

Language and culture

None of the Aboriginal parents had been asked by their preschools if they wanted any Aboriginal

language or culture taught to their children, and what they would like taught. Two parents in the study said language and other cultural knowledge were being encouraged. However, all of the parents wanted language taught, although one mother only wanted her family language taught. She remembered being taught an Aboriginal language at high school that wasn't her own and that she did not think was appropriate. Another mother, whose children attended a preschool with high numbers of Aboriginal children, said:

Some teachers try to teach a few words from the main NSW languages but it would be better coming from an elder. That's probably the only tiffy I have with the school. To come from someone who's lived in that environment and speaks that language on a daily basis. Teachers try but it doesn't sound quite the same coming from them – but they try so that's good.

One young mother who had been denied her cultural heritage, initially said in her interview:

I haven't seen if they have cultural education and not that I'd mind because I didn't get it when I was growing up.

However, after pausing, she replied more assertively:

It is important to have cultural education at school. I went to a private school and didn't get any as a child ... Having elders come and teach things like respect and listening is very important.

Another mother agreed that all children should get exposure to all cultures:

It would be nice to have culture recognised a bit more but I'm sure I'm not alone and a lot of cultures would feel the same.

And another mother offered the following personal reflection:

I'm interested in learning more about my own culture. We never learnt anything about our culture — it was so frowned upon that our elders haven't passed down stories and culture. I'm starting to investigate and learn more and especially since I became a parent and because my elders were discouraged from sharing culture.

The next mother said:

It is important to know where the nation has come from, its background and the past is the past but it's good to recognise the past so we can move on. It's important that people of all cultures learn. I think this preschool and the school try really hard to work with Aboriginal community and making sure they are together as one unit and they really are a community-based school. At the primary school there are two Aboriginal aide workers so the kids get one-on-one but I think it's important for the parents to step up and get involved and let the school know what they want and that it's important for their kids to learn their culture.

Whilst all were happy to recommend their preschool to other Aboriginal families, one mother said she would like to see a few more Aboriginal kids here and she knew some of the Aboriginal parents get a bit concerned because their child is the only Aboriginal kid in the class.

Finally, a couple of mothers spoke about the closure of the Aboriginal preschool, Murawina. One said:

It's really disappointing for the community.

Another mother said that some mothers preferred to send their kids to Aboriginal long day care because they do culture all year round, but she said:

It's good to send them to preschool the year before they go to school.

Fees, Community Services funding and subsidies

Only some of the parents currently accessing preschool knew that Community Services provides \$3 300 per Aboriginal child in preschool, paid to the preschool. None of the parents had been asked how they would like that money spent. The more economically secure parents, whilst saying they could certainly use the money for fee relief, were also interested in the money benefiting others:

going towards something that benefits all the kids — not just on NAIDOC Week — resources relating to Aboriginal culture that the kids can access all year, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and resources for all the children including visits from elders.

Fees are a significant barrier for Aboriginal families wishing to access preschool or other early childhood education and care — as they are for many non-Aboriginal families. The preschool in the study with the most Aboriginal children enrolled offered free fees for Aboriginal families; the director was certain that this was a large part of their success in attracting and retaining the families. Another preschool had a large debt owed to them by one family and was going to simply write it off, knowing the family was unable to pay. A number of mothers said that more Aboriginal children would enrol if they knew about the funding and that would take some of the pressure off financially.

Discussion of preschool user attitudes

The parents' positive relationships with their preschools suggests that mainstream services are able to build effective and trusting relationships and are thus well placed to act as a referral point for Aboriginal families to other specialist support services. Current research shows a holistic service model is most effective in meeting the complex needs of many Aboriginal people. We therefore suggest that the mainstream preschools in this study could do more to help families access services to meet their complex needs.

It is around this issue of support services that the study became a piece of action research. The Aboriginal researchers offered assistance in linking these parents to local support services for training and work opportunities, and for much-needed community connectivity with other Aboriginal people.

Families not currently enrolled at preschool — who were they?

The Aboriginal parents (all mothers) who didn't have their children in preschool were known to SDN through the SDN Tracks in Learning Program. This program provides formal and informal learning opportunities for Aboriginal people with family responsibilities who have been excluded from mainstream educational opportunities. The parents did not have their children enrolled in preschool because they believed their children were too young; they planned to enrol them when they were a little older. Most of the parents in this group had faced significant barriers to educational and work opportunities. The majority, including a couple of single mothers, also experienced financial pressures. Nevertheless they were very articulate about the benefits of early childhood education and what would attract them to a preschool.



Findings from yarning sessions with non preschool users

There was little if any difference between the views of these parents and those with children enrolled in preschool, both in terms of the benefits of early childhood education or the characteristics that would attract them to a preschool. However, we did observe a subtle difference between the two groups: when the non users of preschools were asked about the potential benefits of early education for their children, their responses were more emotive; this is perhaps connected to the educational and other barriers this group of young Aboriginal mothers had faced themselves. They spoke passionately of their hope for a better life for their children, which they perceived to be possible through access to high-quality early childhood education. A young, single mother who had left high school when she became pregnant said the following when she was told by the researchers about the NSW Government funding of \$3 300 per child:

I didn't know about that money. So many more kids could get to go to preschool because the parents could afford it. It's great for the kids, instead of them staying at home, doing nothing, they can be at preschool learning something new every day. Having the skills and when they grow up they can get a good job and make a goal out of life. Achieve everything. Be good people. Well behaved.

When asked what they would look for in choosing a preschool, the mothers mentioned the same characteristics that were identified by the preschool users, and further characteristics including: safety; how the staff treat you; friendly staff; how you see the kids and how they interact with the kids; knowing people and that the environment is good for their children; having good quality teachers that teach their children well and are supportive; being involved and invited to participate;

Aboriginal teachers; and tidy, well organised preschools with lots of activities including Aboriginal learning opportunities through song and story telling and excursions.

As with the preschool users, all the mothers in this group were very keen to have Aboriginal teachers. One mother said it makes the Aboriginal kids feel more comfortable and they all can learn about Aboriginal ways. Another said:

They can teach young kids more about their culture and their family history and tell them about their life and experiences.

Another mum was very keen for her daughter to be taught Aboriginal language and culture:

Because you don't see that happen very much. Especially in the city life where everything is English and the English way.

As with the preschool users, some mothers did not mind so much being the only Aboriginal family at a preschool, whilst others were very keen to have 'a little family of Aboriginal children' attend together. This view suggests the need for a range of high-quality accessible preschool services, both mainstream and Aboriginal-specific:

I'm very interested in him going for the learning and socialising. I would like to see him go to a centre with other Aboriginal kids but I wouldn't be bothered if there weren't any others, maybe it would be better. I'm very interested in him growing up in a multicultural environment because when I grew up it was just me and my cousins at the one school. I'd like my son to get involved with all cultures and start mixing with them.

All the parents who were non preschool users were very keen for their children to receive Aboriginal education. One parent believed that cultural education had the capacity to help stop racism:

An Aboriginal education would stop some of the racism that paints all the black fellas as bad, especially in the TV news.

The issue of racism was another difference between the two parent groups, only being raised by the non preschool users. Perhaps being more marginalised and excluded from mainstream opportunities, this group had been exposed to more racial discrimination. A couple of the mothers recalled racist experiences when they had been singled out and picked on and shamed for being Aboriginal. One recalled a recent experience involving a TAFE teacher who told her:

'No wonder all yous are not employed.' I was shamed in front of our class. We already think that we can't reach our goals so it's very important that we don't have bias against us.

These mothers were naturally very vocal about not wanting their children to ever experience bias and racism, including at a preschool or school.

Preschool staff and directors

The following results reflect the views of 34 staff and directors who agreed to participate in the study. Overall, most participants felt their preschool was a good place to work. For example, around three-quarters of the respondents gave the highest positive rating for six aspects of the workplace. Just over half of the respondents believed they worked well together as a team, and around two-thirds felt that the needs of children and families were considered first.

Another very positive indicator of the preschools being good workplaces was that all but four participants were happy to recommend friends to work at the preschool. The four that wouldn't make the recommendation stated that it could sometimes be a difficult place to work: some staff were lacking leadership qualities and had difficulties around decision-making; and some directors expected too much of staff, including having staff come in one day of every holiday for policies and cleaning.

Attracting and enrolling families

Preschool staff identified a range of reasons why Aboriginal families may not use their mainstream service, including that theirs would be the only Aboriginal child enrolled; preschools have a reputation for being quite 'schoolish' with a tight structure and rules; lower income families preferring long day care; transport difficulties; and fees being unaffordable.

The preschools with the least number of Aboriginal children tended to emphasise the importance of well-known barriers as an explanation for their low enrolments. In some instances the acceptance of these barriers seemed itself a barrier to more useful reflections about other helpful behaviours and strategies that could be used to increase enrolments.

Most preschools did not include any material pertinent to Aboriginal children in the process of enrolling at their preschool, as they were confident that their standard induction procedures were sufficient. However, one director did say:

When I know an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family is coming, I'll do more face-to-face talking rather than paperwork. I'll ask if you want to show anything of your culture you can. Should I acknowledge you are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander? I did ask where is your family from and what is your language?

Staff from the preschool with the strongest cultural capacity said that if they had a family enrol, they would ask where the family is from and what their language is, what barriers might make it harder for them to get here and what links they might have with other people in the community. While this may be appropriate for family that has already identified as Aboriginal, it could create tensions if a family does not feel comfortable at this early stage.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff (ASTI)

Staff working with the one Aboriginal childcare worker in this study believed that her presence at the preschool was very important to Aboriginal families. As with any culture, having an Aboriginal worker means that this culture can be included in a more natural, informal and spontaneous way. Yet however valuable their inputs, Aboriginal staff cannot be expected to carry the primary responsibility for cultural inclusion in their workplaces, or they will burn out.

The Aboriginal worker interviewed for this study had observed that the Aboriginal families attending her preschool didn't stay as long as other parents at drop-off and pick-up times. She thought they may be a bit shy and felt a bit uncomfortable staying to interact in the larger parent group. One of the parents we interviewed confirmed this, saying:

I just come and go quick. I don't hang around. But there is always a hello/goodbye and staff are very encouraging.

Whilst staff generally believed having Aboriginal workers was an important factor in attracting and retaining Aboriginal families, some saw it as all-important:

If you have an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worker then all the kids come.

However, the study found that employing Aboriginal staff was just one aspect of what made a mainstream preschool attractive to Aboriginal families, and that other aspects were equally important.

Cultural inclusiveness

Regardless of whether Aboriginal children are enrolling at a preschool, all mainstream preschools have a responsibility to teach Aboriginal culture to their children, staff and parent community. This should be reflected in all written information and descriptions of the service and enrolment material.

Not having Aboriginal enrolments is not an opportunity, as one childcare worker believed was common in the sector, to say:

We don't have any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids so we don't have to do more than put up a poster — phew what a relief.

The preschool with the highest level of embedded Aboriginal capacity had the strongest links with the local Aboriginal community and elders. Much of the preschool's inclusiveness hinged on environmental sustainability, and also actively seeking links into Aboriginal culture in their day-to-day programming, making it authentically embedded.

Staff from this preschool said:

Everything is aimed at educating ourselves first and then the children and families. Everything we do is linked with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural learning. We are very excited when we can find a link. What I was studying as best practice is here — connections with TAFE and the Aboriginal community.

The director said:

Some people are surprised that we do as much as we do when we don't even have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families here. It's probably more important to do it if you don't have diversity — to present a culture of respect for difference and different families — we have to do it here because we want to and because we don't have diversity in our families.

This preschool also had links across a range of institutions, including TAFE and National Parks, which provided opportunities for joint projects and access to funding. One exciting project was a book the preschool director was co-authoring with local Aboriginal people. She said:

The book highlights a lot of things you can do in your service — how to do it practically.

Another preschool was developing good links via the local Department of Education and Training (DET) ATSI outreach office. Again, these interactions were providing experience and knowledge and giving them the confidence to build the Aboriginal cultural capacity of their preschool. Preschools with good cultural capacity used regular staff meetings to encourage staff to make their own community links and to investigate for themselves.

Various staff reported also receiving helpful advice from elders, such as: less is more — don't talk about Aboriginal culture in inappropriate ways; approach from safe aspects such as caring for the land and local environment issues; do anything — it's better than nothing and don't be afraid of getting it wrong because if your intentions are good then it's OK to make mistakes as you learn; and

most importantly, be genuine in relationships, build trust and understanding slowly as knowledge of each other and your confidence grows.

Preschools without strong community links cited a range of barriers to changing this — including not having the money to replace staff off the floor, no strategy, becoming disheartened and giving up despite repeated efforts, and simply just not knowing what to do.

Visual cues of cultural inclusiveness

Whilst all preschool staff, including directors, expressed goodwill and spoke about being welcoming of Aboriginal families, there were significant differences between the preschools in terms of 'obvious', non-verbal signs of cultural inclusion. The preschools variously displayed an Aboriginal flag, and Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) resource materials including toys, books, music, posters, puzzles and games. The depth and diversity of resource materials varied considerably, with two preschools at either end of the spectrum offering a lot and very little, and most other preschools in the middle. These simple visual signs can say to an Aboriginal family 'come in, you are welcome'.

Appropriate Aboriginal resources help to make families feel welcome:

We have some tapping sticks and a little Aboriginal boy came straight in and picked them up. He had obviously seen them before. The staff reflected on how much that experience must have meant for the boy and his family on his first day at the centre when he was just settling in. They remember his Nan remarked that some of those books are quite good and that you don't get that everywhere.

Not surprisingly, the preschool with the highest level of embedded Aboriginal cultural capacity also had the most visual culturally inclusive practices, with nearly every wall and shelf of their very small preschool lined with a range of resources and posters and, more importantly, works by the children. These materials suggested a real depth in the preschools' authentic links to Aboriginal culture in day-to-day programming.

At the other end of the spectrum were preschools with far fewer external resources such as story books and posters, some outdated posters that needed replacing with contemporary images, and very few examples of programs incorporating Aboriginal culture.

Importantly, most preschool staff and directors spoke of educational programming having moved beyond 'tick a box for cultural inclusion'. Again, however, there was great variation across



the preschools in the depth of appropriate connections made to Aboriginal cultures and histories in their day-to-day programming.

The responses of staff and directors revealed that many preschools were not providing a genuinely inclusive cultural environment because they were not sure of what to do. In order for all services to be appropriately culturally inclusive, much help and support is needed.

Relationships with other parents

Staff noted that Aboriginal parents often seemed uncomfortable interacting with the other parents. Even at preschools with more than one Aboriginal family, the parents interviewed did not know each other. The parents were very keen on our suggestion of a morning tea, organised by their preschool, as a way of getting to know the other Aboriginal families and breaking down their isolation.

However, the director of one preschool also spoke of one family whose initial feelings of being an outsider to the larger parent group had been overcome over time. The family now had comfortable relationships with several parents, including their children going to the other children's homes for birthday parties. However, the director also spoke of her concern that the non-Aboriginal parents were slow to initiate friendships and to welcome Aboriginal families into the larger parent group.

Anxieties about 'doing it right'

Generally, staff reported limited knowledge of Aboriginal early learning styles and conceptions of early childhood, even at the preschools with good cultural capacity and enrolments; all staff were keen to learn more. Staff who had had access to the SDN SCAN resource kit spoke highly of it. One staff member felt she had learnt a lot from her TAFE program about Aboriginal family and family expectations and the role of the extended family, with other relatives taking on some parenting responsibility.

Most preschool staff were very conscious of not being superficial in their relationships with and inclusion of Aboriginal culture, with many asking 'how can we include more culture without it appearing tokenistic?'. For some staff, this fear around not knowing how to do it and making mistakes and upsetting the Aboriginal community had become their biggest barrier to appropriate inclusion and enrolments:

We do a lot on other cultures but I don't think we do enough (on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture) because we are frightened to be tokenistic, scared to make mistakes, we don't know enough.

Staff from another preschool made similar comments:

I think it stopped me from doing things for a long time because I didn't want to do the wrong thing, and when I went to that workshop this year it helped me to get over that barrier and I needed someone to tell me that it doesn't matter what you do.

For one preschool, recently established connections with the local Aboriginal community was boosting the staff's confidence, which had been shaken by prior enrolled Aboriginal children not having stayed long:

Having elders' advice makes me feel safer so that I don't overstep the mark. It's a risk — teaching someone else's culture.

At the same time, fears are often unfounded, as this story of one preschool's planning for their first NAIDOC celebration shows:

Uncle came from next door and he said what are you thinking of doing and we were trying really, really hard not to be tokenistic and he said maybe you could get some boomerangs and the kids could paint them and we went ohhhhhhhhhh! This is from a local elder!

One staff member said:

If you don't ask for help, if you don't know what you are doing, then it will be tokenistic because you are doing what you think is right — we'll just put a couple of posters up and books out and look, hey we are being tokenistic. Seek Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advice, have a go — learn from your mistakes and keep persisting. Have resources around all the time, not just for special days like NAIDOC or Sorry Week.

Separate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander program

No staff or parent thought that having a separate program was a good idea. This quote from one respondent sums up the responses:

I don't think separate is a good idea. It just makes things exclusive — if we are here learning about difference then we need to be here learning together.

Some preschools with well-developed cultural capacity were, however, conscious about meeting the particular needs of Aboriginal children. One respondent said:

I think the one area that is really important is literacy and how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids have particular problems because the family's spoken language is very different to their language of literature and from the expectations of school. Our goal would be to immerse them more in literacy when they are here rather than trying to change their spoken language. Also perhaps starting a library system of sending books home with the kids — make that a family thing — we do have a library and they can borrow any book — but they have to fill in the form, and the drop-off and pick-up time rush may be a barrier. Maybe the parents can't read and write and maybe they're embarrassed.

Another director offered that she had parents of children with additional needs meet fortnightly to share with and support each other and that this might be something that could happen with any group, including Aboriginal families, if there were enough at a preschool.

Understanding and flexibility

The preschools with high levels of Aboriginal inclusion understood that the process of inclusion involves understanding possible differences and the need to be flexible. The director of the preschool with the most enrolments summed up the degree to which she is prepared to be flexible to attract and retain Aboriginal families:

We are reserving spots for Aboriginal children, we do offer free scholarships, we don't enforce continuity of service so if an Aboriginal family doesn't attend for two months they don't lose their spot. For Aboriginal families it is important to engage extended

family and we will work with whoever has responsibility or guardianship. Our philosophy around Aboriginal enrolments is to be flexible and to do whatever it takes to get the families coming and to keep them coming.

Another preschool director said:

It is important for us to have a change in our minds about how that all works — what matters is that the child comes and we build a relationship with the family — who cares if q3.1 isn't filled in and I don't have an immunisation form — we have changed the way we think — that's been so important. They are going to school and at least they are going to have some learning experiences in an environment that will start the learning better before they go to school — that is what drives it more than anything.

It's all about building relationships with families, understanding that there are some differences in the way families operate: absences, coming and going, fee payments — it happens but it may not happen when it's supposed to. One of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids hasn't been here for three weeks so I just gave them a call to see if everything is ok. You know, just keeping in touch.

Another preschool that had some difficulties retaining families in the past identified their fee and attendance structure as rigid and based on attendance:

Families have to travel up north for long periods sometimes and it becomes a horrible cycle.

Some preschools were better able to respond to individual Aboriginal family's needs, with one director saying:

I'd like to be able to reduce their fees because they owe so much money that they'll never be able to pay it back so I'm going to just write it off.

Another family, who was referred to the preschool through Community Services, took a long time to start and settle into a routine of coming regularly. The director said:

We tried and tried to get in contact with the family and couldn't. They have a boy at the primary school and I would go there to try to catch the mum and now they are here and it's great. Sometimes they come and sometimes they don't. Staff say the changes in that family since they started are phenomenal — the mum — how she walks in now — she used to walk in with her head down and no interaction, and now they chat and her kids go to birthday parties.

Interestingly, there weren't many references from preschool staff or directors that would suggest an understanding of, and support for, shared care arrangements common amongst some Aboriginal families — eg older siblings or other relative picking up younger children. At the same time, some preschool staff had tried to be supportive. One preschool reported:

A mother once sent an older sibling to pick up their younger sibling, and the staff member couldn't let that happen, so I just walked them both home. Maybe people would say 'you wouldn't do that for another family' and the point is that I probably wouldn't have to, but if I had to, I would.



Anxieties about equality

One of the consequences of past discrimination is ambivalence amongst some of the parents. Staff repeatedly told researchers that Aboriginal parents enrolled at their preschool often say:

... they just want to blend in, and be treated the same. In some instances they don't want it to be known to others that they're Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. They say: 'We don't want any special treatment.'

Fear of discrimination, or of stigmatisation because of special treatment that may seem as though they are taking advantage of the system, are all factors behind such comments. This explains why some families may not initially acknowledge their Aboriginality to preschool staff, but may do so later when they feel safe. This is important: a sense of belonging takes time and is built through trusting and trustworthy relationships.

Some staff interpreted these comments and behaviours as meaning that certain parents may not want any Aboriginal culture taught to their children, so they were justified in not acknowledging or teaching Aboriginal culture. Certainly, some of the parents interviewed were unaware that learning about cultures could be integrated into programming or confident enough to believe in their right to ask for positive acknowledgement of culture.

But, as discussed above, most parents, when asked, were interested in cultural inclusivity. Repeated interest from parents for their children to be taught their culture and language attest to the defensiveness of statements such as 'I don't want to be treated differently and I don't want people to know I'm Aboriginal'. Therefore this perception, or even experience, does not excuse preschools from being culturally inclusive and incorporating aspects of Aboriginal culture in their day-to-day programming, at a minimum.

Building trust

Many Aboriginal families have low levels of trust of institutions, professionals and other people unfamiliar to them. Low levels of trust can be reflective of limited 'bridging social capital'. Simply put, bridging social capital refers to the levels of trust, connections and networks between individuals and communities outside intimate family connections. The higher the levels of trust and capacities to reach out to make positive connections, the more families can make and offer effective use of formal and informal supports to produce happier, healthier individuals and communities.

Researcher observations of the preschools during pick-up and drop-off times provided insights into the nature of interactions between staff and families. Some preschools encouraged parents to stay for up to 15 minutes to chat with staff or the director when dropping off or picking up their child. Generally, all interactions amongst staff and between staff, parents and children appeared respectful, friendly and welcoming.

One teacher noted a general wariness among Aboriginal families she works with, and that the families seem unsure of what to expect. The negative experiences of many Aboriginal families with welfare services may explain some fear that the authorities may use information against them. This is clearly illustrated in the instance of a child at one preschool accidentally falling out of bed, and the family saying how protective they were of whom they shared such information with because of fears of Community Services and other authorities removing their children.

Building relationships of trust and mutual respect takes time. All preschools identified this as extremely important. The director of the preschool with multiple Aboriginal enrolments said that many years of slow, persistent work at a strategy developed through trial and error was a key to their success. This approach requires patience and preschools should not become disheartened if the children don't come flooding through the gates because both trust and cultural awareness are built slowly. She said:

The beginning of this process for us was when the SCAN evaluation took place and there were zero enrolments, and then four years ago we had one, and now we have seven. None of this could have been done without Deb Mann who has guided, resourced, mentored and supported us. She has been instrumental and was the catalyst for us taking on our Aboriginal trainee. It has been a conscious and slow effort. There is more effort, more time and more relationship building required, more reaching out to Aboriginal families — more ensuring that you are welcoming and being very careful about how those first initial visits go. This is all slow work — this year's action plan was to get more Aboriginal families and we've done it but it's due to the work in the first two years, which was very hard with little result and only now the enrolments are coming. The trust is where the work has to happen. More time spent developing goodwill. We spent a lot of time with the staff to understand and to work on the little things that were creating goodwill.

Another preschool director said of her interactions with Aboriginal families:

It's just building the relationship — we know a lot about their whole family and that one of the dads is in and out of jail — I always ask after him and ask the kids and if he comes, there is no shame — how's it going — oh he's back in jail — oh that must be really hard. We praise the mum lots because she has three kids with behavioural issues and no money. Now they've been here a long time — we know all the kids and they come to pick up their younger siblings.

With a growing sense of trust and safety, issues about being openly Aboriginal fade. One staff member recalled:

an Aboriginal boy who started the year not wanting to be Aboriginal, and I had all these resources and he hid in the corner and didn't want to be Aboriginal — and then by the end of the year at the slightest reference to Aboriginal he would jump up and say, I'm Aboriginal!

Part Four

Conclusions

Our research results suggest a willingness among preschools to begin asking Aboriginal families about the inclusion of culture and language, and to make efforts to build cultural education and cultural capacity within their unit. We also identified a growing exploration and embracing of Aboriginality among several of the parents, out of which will likely grow greater assertiveness around asking for and expecting cultural education and understanding for their children in mainstream education.

The relatively high levels of welcoming of Aboriginal families by preschool staff in this project are likely the result of an intentional advocacy campaign and strategy implemented by SDN SCAN since 2003/2004, when significant gaps in the attendance of this SCAN target group at mainstream preschools was first recognised. SDN SCAN developed a strategy to help SCAN-funded centres be more attractive to Aboriginal people. An action research project — conducted in partnership with the local Aboriginal organisation, Inner West Aboriginal Community Company (IWACC) and run by Aboriginal workers — began investigating service gaps in early education for Aboriginal families, and identified possible future options including a mobile service. Investigations also found that early educators had never been exposed to Aboriginal education and never had a forum in which to discuss the issues and challenges in developing a curriculum that could address Aboriginal learning disadvantage.

From 2005, SCAN-funded centre staff and directors participated in experiential learning through in-centre training, and excursions exploring Aboriginal culture and education. These provided hands-on learning experiences of working with Aboriginal programming and with families, how to address different ways of thinking around Aboriginal education and ways for non Aboriginal people to recognise and overcome their own biases. Newsletters and articles were written and workshops conducted. A conference focused on Aboriginal education featured nationally respected expert Aboriginal speakers and was hugely successful. Aboriginal resource kits were developed and distributed to preschools.

From June 2007, an additional Aboriginal worker was employed by SCAN to work with families to help them transition to preschool. It was a very long intentional process involving three core aspects: Aboriginal education and cultural training for mainstream centre staff; Aboriginal outreach workers in the community talking to families and supporting them transition to preschool; and the provision of spaces in SCAN-funded centres to ensure the availability of spots when Aboriginal people wanted to enrol.

Whilst this research is testament to seven years of hard work and commitment by the SDN SCAN team and in particular, Deb Mann's innovation and passionate commitment to Aboriginal families with young children in inner Sydney, there is much more work to do. As FaHCSIA's *Footprints in Time* report states, affirmative action for Aboriginal people is slow and arduous and always threatened by funding cuts and political whims.



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