

Children's Ground: A model that could end intergenerational poverty in Australia

By Claerwen O'Hara

Children's Ground is an innovative program that works with children in communities that are devastated by intergenerational poverty and inequity. While the model has been inspired and reinforced by the wisdom and teaching of Indigenous people, it has application in any community experiencing disadvantage. The first of its kind in Australia, it aims to tackle entrenched disadvantage through a long-term, holistic and community-based model that is supported by a robust global evidence base. The first Children's Ground community is being established with the Mirarr people in West Arnhem, where the organisation has been working with the community to develop a platform for well-being, learning and development, promoting local agency through community involvement.

On 19 March 2013, the unique model underpinning the work of Children's Ground was presented to an enthusiastic crowd at the Monash University Law Chambers by both Rosemary Addis, Social Innovation Strategist from the Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), and Jane Vadeloo, CEO of Children's Ground.

Addis set the scene with a discussion of the novel partnership between the Federal Government and Children's Ground, in which the government incubated the development and now provides funding and support, but doesn't control the project. With all parties understanding that the initiative needed to have a measure of independence from government, the approach has instead been to "create space" for such a model to develop. Children's Ground is based on a collective investment model in which funding comes from a range of sources. For example, the West Arnhem Children's Ground is to be half-funded by the community itself through the Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation. This investment model serves to both expand the organisation's support network and ensure its independence and flexibility.

Jane Vadeloo gave a comprehensive explanation of Children's Ground's operations. Vadeloo is clearly a perfect fit for her role as CEO, as evidenced by her twenty years of experience working with communities experiencing disadvantage and trauma. In particular, she has spent many years working closely with Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory.

Vadeloo began by discussing the need for a new approach to intergenerational poverty. Despite significant economic growth, the gap between the welfare of the majority of Australian children and those 20% of children who are experiencing the greatest disadvantage is growing. Moreover, current government and non-government programs and services have proven to be largely ineffective in creating any long-term change, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children whose families are caught in an entrenched cycle of poverty.

Vadeloo suggested that dispersed funding is the cause of this ineffectiveness, with funding going to a range of different initiatives rather than a single comprehensive intervention, coupled with a tendency for policies and programs to only have a short-term focus. It can also be attributed to a lack of respect for and understanding of local culture, a lack of services in local language and a failure to adequately involve communities in the planning and delivery of these programs.



Centre Deputy Director Paula Gerber introduces the speakers for the Children's Ground event.

Children's Ground intends to overcome these issues through eight key principles: start early; stay for the long haul; work with enough families to achieve a critical mass; often all year round; deliver the whole, not the bits; innovation/use new ways; expect and deliver the best; and be led by child, family and community.

Children's Ground embeds feedback from this local engagement that the community want an education system that provides skills to access the global world, but that also allows their children to understand their land, language and culture, to be 'strong both ways'. Accordingly, Children's Ground has developed such an integrated learning model.

Children's Ground puts these principles into practice through a suite of services for children and young people from 0–24 years, their families and their communities. These services focus on learning, well being and development and range from health-care and development to education. Many of these can be accessed in the multigenerational community centre that sits at the core of the program, along with other social and cultural events. The project includes out-reach programs and services as well so as to ensure accessibility for all.

Children's Ground is both long-term in its vision, with a minimum 25 year program, and culturally sensitive, for example, by providing many of its services in the local language. Its approach is based on a range of research that draws on both global evidence and discussions with the local community about what they want from Children's Ground. Furthermore, to prevent this research-based method from becoming stale, Children's Ground's model provides for a research director to frequently re-evaluate the program, engaging directly with the community.

To further promote the agency of the community and promote economic development and sustainability, members of the local community are employed by Children's Ground as designers, researchers and users.

Although there is still a long way to go and undoubtedly many challenges to be faced, Vadeloo's presentation provided the audience with optimism about the future of disadvantaged children in this country. Children's Ground represents a powerful practical example of an innovative and potentially very successful approach to eradicating intergenerational poverty.