



Kakadu West Arnhem

Final Evaluation

Summary of Findings | 2013–2017

**"Children's Ground made the
impossible possible for Bininj"**

Bininj family, 2017



Key Findings

After three years of the CG Approach in Kakadu West Arnhem, Children's Ground evidenced early impact and change for children, families and the community. Children's Ground also evidenced how systems, service and practice reform created the enabling conditions, environments and processes required to achieve the change.

Changes for children			
• A new population of children engaged in learning. • Of the 34 children aged 0-5 years who engaged in 2014 - only one had previously accessed early learning.	• 78 children 0-11 years engaged in formal learning and 114 engaged in extended hours learning. • 100% of children 4-5 years engaged in formal early learning.	• Engaged a critical mass (70+%) of children aged 0-5 years in early learning across the region. • Engaged close to a critical mass of children from each community across the region.	
• 87% of 'regularly attending' children progressed in their Western knowledge. • 86% of families reported children doing better speaking their first language and 79% reported children doing better with cultural learning.	• 100% of children in formal learning engaged in health promotion including nutrition, ear and dental health, skin health, physical and emotional wellbeing. • Of these 79-100% of children 0-3 years were supported in maternal and child health and wellbeing.	• 70% of local service providers reported that Children's Ground had an impact on maternal and child wellbeing. • 100% families interviewed reported their children's health as better since Children's Ground started and 86% reported their children's happiness as 'a lot better'.	
Changes for families			
• 261 family members (18+ years) actively engaged with their children's learning and wellbeing. • 100% of children had family engaged directly in their learning and wellbeing.	• Employment of 87 Bininj people with a retention of 94% from 2013-17. • Of these many had been long-term unemployed and 81% were not working at the time they commenced with Children's Ground.	• 81 of 87 Bininj employees actively managed their income through Children's Grounds financial literacy and money management program. • 72% of families reported that employment enabled people to be role models for children.	
• 91% of community members interviewed reported increased family engagement with their children.	• Improved access to health promotion, planning and early intervention for their children and family.		
• 90% of local service providers reported Children's Ground had an impact on family engagement in their children's learning and wellbeing.	• 170 people engaged in social/emotional wellbeing • Young people and adults supported to engage with the local health clinic on 445 occasions.		
Changes for community			
• Genuine Bininj led decision making and governance. • 162 people involved in approx. 170 community governance meetings. • 20 of 25 community members reported that Children's Ground listened to what Bininj people wanted.	• 332 people of all ages engaged in cultural activities, including on-country learning, Bininj Kunborrk, cultural camps and creative arts. • 100% of children participated in cultural learning alongside their family, from cultural educators and senior cultural teachers.	• Intergenerational community and learning centre was created as a place of safety, culture and wellbeing by families for three years. • 86% of families interviewed reported Children's Ground as a safe place for the community.	
Practice reform: 'How' services are delivered			
• Recognising first language and culture approaches facilitated engagement.	• Empowerment through local governance and workforce.	• Placed-based, strength-based, flexible design and delivery.	• Building and valuing relationships and being part of the community fabric.
Service reform: 'What' services are delivered			
• Effective delivery of five integrated services fundamental to prevention and responding to social, economic and cultural determinants for life opportunity and wellbeing		• Service delivery and practice that reflected cultural values, language and knowledge systems as well as Western/global knowledge and skills	
Systems reform: The conditions for change			
• Each of the five system enablers was influenced by and stimulated reform in other reform areas		• Systems enablers created the conditions required for effective service delivery and practice to achieve short-term impact for community	
• The CG Approach in KWA was cost-effective and efficient in the delivery of a place based, integrated and prevention focused platform of services that were community led.			

Summary of Final Evaluation



“All my years that I been here in Kakadu, I didn’t see changes like Children’s Ground.”
Bininj family, 2017

Children's Ground was designed to redress the devastating entrenched disadvantage experienced by children and families in Australia who live with the greatest hardship and inequity. First Nations children in Australia face a lifetime of serious adversity. Evidence shows that they are more likely than other Australians to face health issues as children and as adults, be born into poverty and overcrowding, be removed from their families, be incarcerated, fail to finish school and experience serious unemployment. They are likely to experience racism and social and economic exclusion and to die ten or more years younger than other Australians.

The National Closing the Gap report of 2018 presented data that showed trajectory of progress over the past 10 years of dedicated policy reform. Australia is not on track in Closing the Gap in key areas of employment, school attendance, life expectancy and numeracy and literacy. The Northern Territory has the greatest gap in life expectancy and the poorest outcomes in early childhood education. The Northern Territory had a decline in school attendance over the three years from 2014-2017. Nationally, over a 10 year period the Indigenous employment rate fell across Australia.

The Children's Ground Approach (CG Approach) was designed with First Nations people to deliver real change over the long term. It is designed for the Australian context. It is a 25-year, whole of community strategy. Kakadu West Arnhem was the first implementation of the CG Approach.

Children's Ground in Kakadu West Arnhem (KWA) (Wurwurd Garriygarrmerren) achieved significant outcomes in three years which were particularly striking in comparison to national trends. Evaluation of operations in KWA evidenced the early stage impact of the CG Approach on engagement in early childhood learning and wellbeing, family engagement in their children's learning and their own wellbeing, employment of long term unemployed people, improved environments of safety, inclusion and community empowerment. The evidence indicates that Children's Ground was able to achieve outcomes in areas historically difficult for the mainstream system.

The outcomes analysis indicates that local decision making and cultural safety were key drivers of change for Bininj (First Nations) children, families and communities over three years. It also identified the layers of influence impacting outcomes for children, families and communities at the individual, family, community and service system level. There were both expected and unexpected outcomes from the three years of operation. A key unexpected outcome was the high level of engagement in employment by people who have lived with long term unemployment.

The systems analysis indicated that change was made possible by changing both 'what' was delivered and 'how' it was delivered. This was achieved through key reforms in practice principles, integrated service delivery and systems enablers such as governance.

The evaluation also highlighted key challenges and learnings for Children's Ground in sustaining operations over time to achieve long term change. It provided critical insights into the enablers and barriers to effective and sustainable change for children, families and communities over the short and long term. This will inform and strengthen the CG Approach.

As a summary of the final evaluation of Children's Ground in Kakadu West Arnhem, this document outlines key findings and analysis from three years of implementation.

Systems and service reform: The Children’s Ground Approach

Extreme disadvantage and economic poverty are preventable. Children’s Ground exists to demonstrate and evidence systems, service and practice reform to end entrenched inequity, social and economic exclusion. First Nations people have been instrumental in the design of the CG Approach.

The CG Approach is a 25-year strategy to achieve systemic and enduring change by addressing the drivers of disadvantage. It starts by working with children pre-birth to eight years of age, and walking with each child, their family and community for a generation. Education is at the centre of five key integrated areas of operation, which combine health, economy, community and culture as a critical interconnected foundation to a child’s lifelong wellbeing. Children’s Ground exists to evidence change and long-term impact for those children and families who are the most excluded and economically disadvantaged in Australia.

In Australia and globally, there are too many communities in crisis. First Nations communities experience an unacceptable level of inequity and complex disadvantage, while at the same time maintaining deep strength. While there have been some improvements in some areas, there has been an overall lack of progress over the past ten years, which is highlighted in the results of the 2018 Closing the Gap Report. It represents a failing of the mainstream system to

improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. For many communities, the situation continues to deteriorate and is a human rights catastrophe.

The CG Approach empowers First Nations people through a system that demands quality, reflects people’s cultures, histories and their aspirations. It is as simple as it is radical.

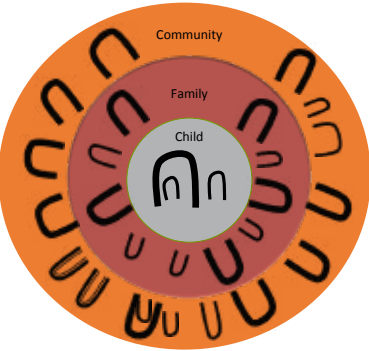
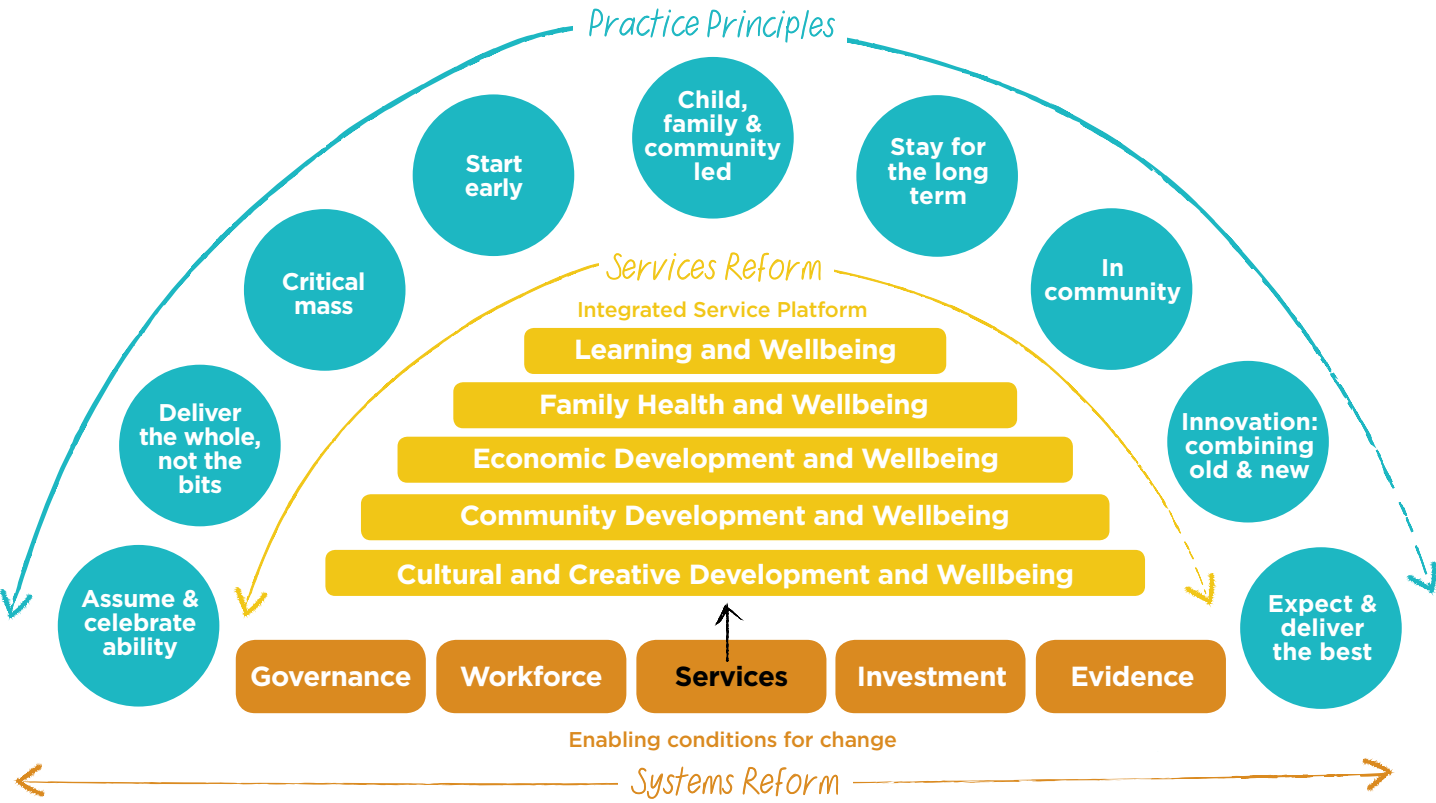
There are three interdependent area to the Children’s Ground Approach; systems, services and practice.

“Our abilities to close the gap in health disparities are being blocked at every turn because we are refusing to address the intrinsic interconnection of all social, economic, cultural and spiritual aspects of our life”¹

June Oscar (AO), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 2018

“It is woefully inadequate that, despite having enjoyed over two decades of economic growth, Australia has not been able to improve the social disadvantage of its indigenous population. The existing measures are clearly insufficient as evidenced by the lack of progress in achieving the ‘Close the Gap’ targets.”³

Ms Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, UN Special Rapporteur, 2017



Children’s Ground is designed to be delivered where people live and to engage and walk with the majority, ‘a critical mass’, of children within a community over 25 years. It delivers a culturally and physically safe environment for children, with opportunities for them and their families that include: high quality and responsive

education, family health and wellbeing, employment and the celebration and strengthening of social and cultural life across the community.

The whole of community approach works with children and their families within their community, responding to their unique context. The assumption is that if a critical mass of children enjoy life opportunities into adulthood, whole communities currently experiencing intergenerational disadvantage can shift to communities that experience wellbeing and opportunity.

“A clear message from the recent past is that policies and programs must be targeted to local needs, in close engagement and active partnership with the people they are designed to assist”²

Strategic Review of Indigenous Expenditure, 2010

Children’s Ground in Kakadu West Arnhem

In 2013, Children’s Ground’s first community led operation was established with the Bininj people of Kakadu West Arnhem (KWA), located approximately 200 kilometres from Darwin in the Northern Territory of Australia. From late 2013 to mid-2017, Children’s Ground worked with the community to implement the CG Approach to respond to families’ aspirations for their children and whole community. This was made possible through a partnership with Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation and funded by the Kakadu West Arnhem Social Trust, Philanthropy and Government.

About this evaluation

The final evaluation reports on early outcomes of Children’s Ground operations over a three-year period in KWA. Children’s Ground’s evaluation framework has nine long-term outcomes for children, their families and the community.

Using a mixed-methods, participatory action research approach, this evaluation drew on findings from: daily program data, government administrative data, ABS data, interviews with families, staff and local services, and data from an independent evaluation conducted by Murdoch Children’s Research Institute.

Children’s Ground’s longitudinal evaluation has ethics approval from the Top End Human Ethics Research Committee and was overseen by a national independent expert Research Advisory Group.

1. June Oscar (AO). (2018). Apology Breakfast Speech, Reconciliation SA, Adelaide, SA, February 2018. Available at: <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/news/speeches/reconciliation-south-australia-10th-anniversary-apology>,
2. Commonwealth of Australia. (2010). Strategic Review of Indigenous Expenditure,

3. Statement of Ms. Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, at the 17th Session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. (2018). New York.

Key Findings: Change and Impact

Community empowerment and local cultural governance were found to be the key drivers of change during Children’s Ground’s operations in Kakadu. These contributed to significant short-term outcomes over the three years of operation.

The most significant outcomes were:

- engaging a population of children in early learning who had never previously participated,
- high employment of long term unemployed local Bininj people,
- the engagement of families in their children’s learning, health and wellbeing,
- creating and improving environments of safety and wellbeing for children and families, and
- achieving genuine Bininj led decision making and governance.

Short-term change and impact was achieved for children due to the CG Approach; reforming key elements of systems, integrating service delivery and applying key practice principles for how services and support were delivered.



Change and impact for children

Children’s Ground’s longitudinal evaluation framework identified four key outcome areas for children.

- **Children have the knowledge and skills for life and learning and are creative problem solvers**
- **Children know their history and feel confident in their culture**
- **Children are healthy**
- **Children are happy**

These reflect the desire of families for their children to be happy, healthy and knowledgeable in their first culture and language, and in Western and global knowledge.

Children have the knowledge and skills for life and learning and are creative problem solvers

A new population of children engaged in early learning:

In 2014, 34 Bininj children aged 0-5 years engaged in formal early learning with Children’s Ground. Of these 33 children had never previously engaged in early learning. Of the 34 children, 22 lived in communities outside of Jabiru and a further five lived in a Town Camp on the outskirts of Jabiru.

A critical mass of children engaged in western and cultural early childhood learning:

A critical mass of children engaged in western and cultural early childhood learning:

Over 70% of children aged 0-5 years across the region engaged with early childhood learning at Children’s Ground. After initial engagement in Children’s Ground learning, from 2014-16, engagement of children aged 0-5 years increased from 64% to 73% (2014-16).

Table: Children aged 0-5 years engaged with Children’s Ground formal learning

	2014	2015	2016
Babies 0-1 year*	12 of 16 (75%)	9 of 10 (90%)	7 of 7 (100%)
Children 2-3 years	18 of 23 (78%)	17 of 23 (74%)	13 of 17 (76%)
Children 4-5 years	4 of 14 (29%)	11 of 18 (61%)	15 of 24 (63%)

*For babies aged 0-1 year and their families, age-appropriate engagement included participation in any element of the Children’s Ground integrated service platform; learning, health, community and cultural events.

For children aged 4-5 years, engagement of a critical mass was achieved in each year of partnership with the Jabiru Area School preschool. This partnership led to 100% of children aged 4-5 years in Kakadu participating in early years learning.

A cohort of early primary aged children, some previously chronically disengaged, became regular participants and active learners at Children’s Ground. Numbers increased from 16 children aged 6-11 years in 2014 to 21 in 2016.

In 2015 and 2016, Children’s Ground also achieved a critical mass of children aged 6-11 years engaging in extended hours learning (after-school, evenings, school holiday programs).

ABS Census data supports the finding that Children’s Ground has been associated with a large rise in engagement in early childhood education in Kakadu, particularly for children living outside Jabiru. For the Kakadu West Arnhem area, excluding the Jabiru Township, Census data shows that in 2011 there were no four-year-old children attending either preschool or school. By 2016, three quarters of Aboriginal children aged four years were attending either preschool or school (see full report for ABS data notes).

Positive progression in western learning and English:

Educators and families reported that Children engaged in early and primary learning with Children’s Ground made positive progress in both their Western learning and English.

- All (21) families reported children speaking English was ‘better’ or ‘a lot better’ and 20 of 21 reported children Western learning was ‘better’ or ‘a lot better’.
- Early Childhood educators assessed that 87% of children who attended regularly had progressed in their Western knowledge, 94% had progress in English acquisition, 100% progressed in their physical development, 87% in their emotional development and 94% in social development.

At the time of Children’s Ground closure in KWA, when children were transitioned to into Western mainstream education at the local school, the school reported that:

“They came so learning ready...We had kids that were less school ready who hadn’t been part of Children’s Ground... and they’ve been here for three years”.

Jabiru Area School, 2017

Children know their history and feel confident in their culture

Engagement in cultural learning and first language:

- Through the intergenerational learning environment, all (100%) participating children:
- Engaged in cultural learning and knowledge development at the community centre and twice weekly on country
 - Learned in their first language
 - Learned alongside their family and from their family and important cultural leaders and elders

Positive progression in cultural learning and first language:

86% of families reported children were doing better or a lot better speaking their first language (n=22) and 79% reported children were doing better or a lot better in Bininj learning (n=19)

The intergenerational learning that occurred and the importance of this for children was evidenced by Bininj people. Families referred to the importance of children learning from senior cultural people, the importance of children being surrounded by their family and how young people and some adults learned more about their culture.

“Language was declining - English first. Children’s Ground helped Elders very keen for them [children] to learn to Kunwinjku. All the family appreciated it for when they talk to them.”

“They [children] loved it when they walked with elders. They tell them about land and culture and old time stories. Now they do it lots.”

“We learn more stuff now - about our culture. Song, dance, knowledge. How to respect each other and elders. We now teaching the kids about family, and land and stories ...”

Bininj families, 2017



Children are healthy and happy

Access to and engagement in health and wellbeing:

- All (100%) participating children engaged in daily nutrition, health promotion, health check-ins and physical activity. Thirteen of 24 families reported children eating more and eating healthy food/drink.
- Daily child and family health promotion were provided within learning sessions, within community and at home. Families engaged in child and family health promotion including: nutrition; maternal and child health and wellbeing promotion; responding to health issues such as Otitis media, skin infections and anaemia; and environmental health.
- Responding to the level and complex trauma that children and families live with, a dedicated Social and Emotional Wellbeing Counsellor provided support to 66 and 64 children and young people (0-17 years) respectively in 2015 and 2016. Social/Emotional support was also provided to 92 and 106 families respectively (aged 18+ years).

Daily health check-ins:

Deliberate regularity of health check-ins and health promotion sessions in the learning programs built agency for children and their families to engage in and manage their health. With sores and boils identified as a key health concern, the learning and health teams developed age-appropriate play-based activities called ‘going to the clinic’. Dressing up to play doctors, children were taught how to identify and clean any sores they had. Age-related conversations were held about what happens to their body and health when sores are left untreated, including the potential impact on their kidneys later in life. Groups of children demonstrated an understanding of and agency over their own health, including being able to identify the need to attend the clinic with certain health presentations.

“The only way a Bininj kid is going to learn is to make them a strong Bininj person.”
Bininj family, 2017

Reported improvements in child health and wellbeing:

- While health concerns remain prevalent for many children:
- All (24) families felt their children’s health is ‘better’ (14) or ‘a lot better’ (10) since Children’s Ground started.
 - 18 of 21 families felt their children’s happiness was ‘a lot better’ since Children’s Ground started, and three families felt there had been no change.
- “They are healthy now that Children’s Ground is running. They look so healthy. They get good food everyday not like before. All junk or sometimes starving...Families and kids getting stronger and happier and more learning.”**
Bininj family, 2017

- From the independent evaluation survey (n=10):
- 90% of local service providers reported that Children’s Ground had an impact on children’s social/emotional wellbeing; 50% reported a significant impact and 40% reported a slight impact.
 - 70% of local service providers reported that Children’s Ground had an impact on child health and wellbeing; 40% reported a significant impact and 30% reported a slight impact.



Summary of change and impact for children

Children’s Ground operations over the three years evidenced change in child learning and wellbeing. A new cohort of children aged 0-5 years, who were previously not accessing early years learning, became engaged learners. Children’s Ground’s reach across the region was evidenced through a critical mass of children aged 0-5 years participating in learning and wellbeing. Children in their early years of primary school, for whom mainstream education was not meeting their needs, became active learners in learning environments that met their individual needs and in which they remained engaged.

Participating children improved in first language and English and in both Bininj and Western skills and knowledge. Through learning and within community, children engaged in health promotion with observed improvements in health, health behaviours and agency over their own health and wellbeing. A cohort of children engaged with Children’s Ground from birth (some pre-birth), meaning that their lived experience was a culturally responsive early learning and wellbeing environment as a norm, enabling them to experience the strong and positive foundations of life-long wellbeing.

Change and impact for families

The evaluation framework identified two key outcome areas for children's families.

- Families are involved in their child's learning, wellbeing and development
- Families are socially and economically strong

Significant change and impact for these long-term family outcomes was not expected to be evidenced within the first 10-15 years. Change is expected in family outcomes when the generation of children born during Children's Ground grow up and start raising their families. Despite this, early stage changes were evidenced and impacted child learning and wellbeing.

Families are involved in their child's learning, wellbeing and development

Family engagement, or 'family walking alongside their children', was the headline indicator identified by the community from the outset; which is consistent with the evidence that the home environment is the biggest influencer on early childhood wellbeing and learning.

Families walking alongside their children in culture, learning, health and wellbeing:

100% of participating children had family engaged directly in their learning and wellbeing each day.

An average from 2014-16, 140 family members (18+ years) actively engaged with their children's learning and wellbeing.

Table: Number of young people and adults (families) engaged across the CG Approach

	2014	2015	2016
12-17 years	34	40	36
18-24 years	44	38	44
25+ years	97	98	100
TOTAL	175	176	180

The engagement of young people at risk was an important outcome.

Almost all parents (21 of 23) reported that Children's Ground led to more activities which brought children, young people and families together.

“More parents caring for their children and spending time together... they [Children's Ground] helping all families and teaching them to be strong.”

“Lots of changes. Before there was nothing for them. Childrens Ground make a lot of changes. Children's Ground go to the families...got them out of the woodworks.”

“They are good for Yawkyawk [young women] and Yawurrinj [young men]. It's good for them to get them out and doing stuff. Getting ready for the workplace. Teaching them different skills. The elders and Yawkyawk and Yawurrinj taking the wurdurd on learning on country... Now Children's Ground offering the programs, it wasn't here for them when they were younger. They didn't have support. No programs, that meant anything to anyone.”

Bininj families, 2017

From the independent evaluation survey, 90% of local service providers (n=10) reported that Children's Ground had an impact on family engagement and involvement in their children's learning and wellbeing - 50% reported a significant impact and 40% reported a slight impact. One local service provider reported:

“While CG focused on kids they were able to engage young people in employment and learning alongside the kids and families - without this they would have missed another whole generation of parents...I think it's the power of families being actively involved in their [children's] learning and development. Everyone's job had a role in the teaching and learning of the kids at Children's Ground...When young people see [Bininj] staff working with their young siblings and family it reinforces it [employment] can be for them too”.

Local service provider, 2017



Families are socially and economically strong

At a community level, the high Bininj employment changed the status quo. Children's daily experience was adults working – a new norm.

Family and community employment:

A total of 87 local Bininj staff were employed at Children's Ground throughout operations. In 2016, 81% of employees surveyed (44 of 83) were not working at the time they commenced with Children's Ground. There was a 94% retention rate (2013-17).

ABS Census data shows an increase in the share of Aboriginal people who were employed in the region between 2011 and 2016 that was not part of a broader trend in the NT. Employment in KWA increased by 4.7 percentage points, with the NT seeing only a 0.8 increase (see full report for ABS data notes).

Children's Ground's flexible 'no barriers' approach to employment model led to employment of people who were previously long-term unemployed or under-employed.

Bininj employment and the benefits of it for individuals, children, families and the community were reoccurring themes in all interviews with Bininj families.

"Help me change my habits."

"Changed my life, feeling more confident, working with balanda [non-Aboriginal], not scared to work beside balanda anymore."

"...because I don't want to stay home and drink and smoke. I want to work with the wurdurd."

"Shows kids growing up...he sees father and grandfather... He sees his family working."

"It encourages them [Bininj families]. Makes them be role models. Set a good example."

"Was just staying home, bored, nothing to do. I feel good my son is learning. I am learning. Opened my mind and make me feel I can do anything now."

"Make my life more better. No boredom, feel comfortable. Before I wasn't doing nothing, just sitting home bored waiting for my daughter to come home from Children's Ground early years. Working as my first job".

Bininj employees and families, 2017

Summary of change and impact for families

Children's Ground evidenced improved and high engagement of families in their children's learning and wellbeing. Related to this was a key change in employment with a high level of local Bininj employment - people who had previously been unemployed. Evidence shows that families and the home environment are the key influencers on a child's learning and wellbeing; employment within families has a direct impact on the wellbeing of children. The changes evidenced for child and family health and wellbeing during Children's Ground operations are critical to child long term learning and wellbeing.

An analysis of employment and learning participation data for family groups/units also demonstrated a link (numbers too small to analyse for statistical significance) between children's attendance in learning and their family's attendance in employment at Children's Ground. Data and observations indicated that when adults in a family engaged in employment, their children engaged in early learning.

Family health and wellbeing:

All engaged families were involved in family health and wellbeing. Health promotion occurred daily with families and included the nutrition program, health promotion activities alongside children, family health planning and access to local clinical health services (445 occasions between 2015 and 2016). 158 adults in 2015 and 170 engaged with the therapeutic counsellor to support their social/emotional wellbeing.

Jabiru health clinic data demonstrated a substantial increase in people participating in adult health checks from 2012 to 2016. The largest increase was for people aged 55+ years (65% increase) and those aged 25-54 years (61%).

All families reported it was 'better' or 'a lot better' in relation to 'places you get help when you have worries about health for children or family (n=19) and children's behaviour or sadness (n=20).

Jabiru health clinic data demonstrates there was a substantial increase in people participating in adult health checks from 2012 to 2016. The largest increase was for people aged 55+ years (65% increase) and those aged 25-54 years (61% increase).



Change and impact for community

Children's Ground is a 25 year approach recognising that whole of community change will take a generation. Families wanted to create a different future for their children in the long term. To achieve this, Children's Ground worked with a critical mass of children and families across the Kakadu community to address the key social, cultural and economic determinants for wellbeing. Children's Ground's longitudinal evaluation framework identified three key outcome areas at a community level to evidence long term change:

- **The community values its place and heritage and continues to grow**
- **The community enjoys employment and economic opportunity**
- **The community is safe, inclusive and respects diversity**

The following presents targeted strategies and changes over the period of operations only. They do not assume long term impact of these changes. The focus in the first few years of operation was building upon local cultural and social capital through local leadership, celebrating first culture and promoting safety and wellbeing.

The community values its place and heritage and continues to grow

During the three years of operations community governance meetings occurred weekly for the first two years and fortnightly for the last year and a half. 162 people were involved in approximately 170 community governance meetings throughout operations in KWA.

Increased Bininj voice and decision making:

20 of 25 community members reported that Children's Ground listened to Bininj people:

"Bininj make decisions. They just let us go for it with ideas and decisions. They put Bininj first. Bininj ideas count. Bininj make the rules. Bininj rules are for all of Children's Ground [the organisational code of conduct]."

Bininj families, 2017

All ten Children's Ground staff reported that empowering Bininj people through hearing and responding to their voice as the biggest change and a driver of other change.

All six local service providers reported that Children's Ground was visibly Bininj-led.

Strengthened cultural engagement:

Over 200 Bininj people of all ages participated in cultural activities and celebrations supported by Children's Ground. Families were asked about activities in the community and how it compared to before Children's Ground started:

- 23 of 24 reported 'more/a lot more' activities for children,
- 22 of 24 reported 'more/a lot more' for young people, and
- 20 of 23 reported 'more/a lot more' activities for families.

Families and the communities reported increased engagement in cultural practices for people of all ages.

"Children's Ground supported culture and activities and family and ceremony and funerals. We got lots of support for culture. Good support. We didn't get that kind of support growing up. We love seeing our kids getting what we didn't."

"Gamak [good]. They like learning about culture... Bininj Kunborrk...support Bininj to go to ceremony and camping and funerals... [Children's Ground] helped make it happen more. Gamak."

"We feel proud that we now know our culture better and can teach our kids. We see them learning what we teach them. They are learning quickly."

Bininj families, 2017



The community enjoys employment and economic opportunity

Increased independent economic wellbeing:

Children's Ground successfully engaged people who lived in all communities across the region in employment. Most employees lived in the surrounding outstations, not Jabiru (see family outcomes section). Bininj employees and families reported:

"It's important for Bininj to work. It gives them something to look forward to. You feel good about yourself and more confident. Some people see you as a role model. It's important for Bininj to work. And they have been put down for many years. They feel strong and proud now."

"I seen adults change. Because they got job. Working. Before it was centrelink pay going to pub and drinking."

Bininj employees and families

Two local enterprises were established – the arts enterprise, 'Bininj Gunwaral' and music enterprise, the Black Rock Band. From July 2014 to June 2017, a total of 112 people formally engaged within the enterprises.

Children's Ground found that employment of adults made a significant contribution to the engagement of children in learning as well as building the social and cultural capital within the community. At a community level, the high engagement of adults participating in employment changed the status quo – for children seeing adults working as the norm and active family and community engagement and connections.

The community is safe, inclusive and respects diversity

Community empowerment:

Community governance, empowerment and the valuing of first language and culture enabled the Bininj community to lead the creation of places of physical safety, of emotional safety and environments that were culturally safe and responsive.

"We make the list of rules, and talked about lots of things."

"The rules, no argument, no drinking, no drunks, and other things."

"Because we know when we walk into the Children's Ground we are all the same and we come as one big family. No one is different. Everything is equal."

"I feel proud of what I have been able to do for my community"

Bininj families, 2017

Environments of safety:

19 of 22 people referred to Children's Ground being a safe place for the community.

Safety was reported for children as well as for young people who were considered at risk in the community. Two key themes emerged: Children's Ground being 'a safe place for wurdurd (children)' and a place of 'no argument/violence/drinking/drugs'.

"A safe place where we listen to each other. We are talking about good thigs, and not come up with bad things".

"For wurdurd and Bininj it was safe place - everywhere it was safe".

Bininj families, 2017

In interviews, all families (25), all Children's Ground balanda staff (10), and two local service providers referred to Children's Ground as a place of safety, promoting places of safety for children, families and the community.

Improved individual and community safety and social conditions (Bininj reported):

Families identified social changes that are contributors to places of safety for children, as well as families and the community more broadly:

"They gave us jobs for me gave me something to do. I'm isolated living out in the bush. Children's Ground is important because we're isolated....now I have independence."

"There was nothing just sitting down and doing nothing, no school for little ones...smoking gunja, drinking. When Children's Ground started people have things to do and there is less smoking, drinking, ganja. They get work and get more responsible."

"Petrol sniffing, cards and kids drinking, when Children's Ground starts they help."

"A lot of things changed. Happy, no sadness. Helping other Bininj. Balanda helping Bininj. Bininj helping Balanda. Working together with love. It's gamuk [good]."

Bininj community members, 2017

Safe and inclusive communities are underpinned by strength in social, economic and cultural capital of individuals and collectively as a community. Over the three years of operation, improved safety and inclusion were experienced by children, families and communities.

Community development also supported outstations to identify and respond to local priorities. The key priority identified by multiple outstations was housing and water security. Large, community led housing and environmental health initiatives improved community housing and water security in the largest outstation and animal management across the region.

Summary of change and impact for community

Over the period of Children's Ground operations, there was a strengthening in the social, cultural and economic capital and wellbeing across the community. This was driven by local governance and decision making. In turn, this led to increased safety for children and families. Cultural safety and empowerment appeared to be a key driver of community level change.

“Not having to send kids and families off to another service - provided counselling in house - supported with health clinic visits - supported the whole family so strategies to support kids were also supporting adults and their family - other services just send kids from the counsellor back into a home with adults not able to support them and experiencing issues themselves - without support”.

Local service provider, 2017

Key Findings: Systems Analysis

Children’s Ground was designed to change the status quo with communities experiencing entrenched and broad disadvantage by radically reforming what and how service systems are implemented. For First Nations and all communities, the best theoretically evidence-based approaches are unlikely to be effective if they are not implemented in a way that empowers generationally disempowered communities.

The CG Approach reforms both ‘what’ is delivered and ‘how’ it is delivered – seeking to create the systemic conditions for change. Evaluation findings indicate that Children’s Ground delivered an interconnected approach including system, service and practice reform. Each area was found to stimulate and be stimulated by reform in other areas, together delivering change for children and families.

The most significant systems, service and practice changes that were found to influence outcomes were:

- Effective delivery of an integrated service system focused on prevention and responding to the social and cultural determinants of health, wellbeing and life.
- Systems and service delivery that empowered families and the community through local governance, design, workforce and flexibility in delivery
- The relational, cultural and strengths-based approach which facilitated initial and ongoing engagement
- Service delivery and practice that reflected cultural values, language and knowledge systems

Through evaluation interviews, families, staff and services each identified key influential drivers of short-term impact and change for children, families and the community – demonstrating the interconnectedness of the reform areas.

Bininj families (n=25)	Local service providers (n=6)	Staff (n=10)
Bininj culture and knowledge respected, valued and enacted	Relationships between Bininj families and CG staff	Bininj ownership of Children’s Ground – Bininj decision-making and voice
Families together - involved in and supporting children’s learning and health	Community-led – Bininj culture and leadership	Relationships and trust between Bininj families and CG staff
Bininj employment	Bininj employment	Bininj employment
Bininj decision-making and leadership	Access to services through transport	Agency of children and families
Child and family agency - Bininj doing it themselves and for each other	Children’s Ground flexibility and responsiveness to community	Seamless integrated service delivery within Children’s Ground

Practice principles – The ‘How’

A process and implementation analysis was an important element of evaluating if and what systems change occurred in KWA.

In terms of ‘how’ services were delivered, Children’s Ground sought to; ensure consumer control and agency; focus on children in an intergenerational environment; value and integrate Bininj education, health and social knowledge systems and practices; deliver a place-based, inclusive flexible, responsive, timely and genuinely integrated manner; value and amplify people’s strengths and provide children with a quality and rich early years experience.

These were articulated as eight practice principles, considered critical to the implementation effectiveness of the CG Approach and hypothesised to make an important contribution to achieving short and long-term change and impact. Below is a brief summary of how the CG Approach was implemented in line with each principle – as reported collectively by families, staff and local services.





Service delivery – The ‘What’

Children’s Ground service reform sought to integrate services and supports that responded to all social and cultural determinants of health and provided a platform of prevention and empowerment for children, families and the whole community.

Referred to as the ‘Learning Wellbeing & Development platform’ (LWD), it directly related to one of the key practice reform principles (‘Deliver the whole not the bits’) and to one of the systemic reform areas (‘Integrated Services’).

Reform in what services were delivered was the most visible part of the CG Approach in communities. See Figure one: Children’s Ground Learning Wellbeing & Development platform.

The aim of the integrated LWD service platform was to:

- Deliver a place-based, community-led, integrated platform of prevention where children were at the centre of all delivery and that privileged Bininj culture, knowledge and practices - whilst also enfranchising people in western systems and learning.
- Integrate services and supports that can respond to all parts of families lives; education, health and wellbeing (physical and social/emotional) and cultural, economic and social life.
- Provide individual and responsive support to a critical mass of children and their families.
- Collaborate with other services to promote seamless service delivery and support for children and families between all core local service providers.

A critical systemic enabler was reportedly the integration of services and supports that focused on all the social, cultural and economic determinants for lifelong wellbeing, including early childhood education, housing, health, cultural, social and economic wellbeing, community development and empowerment over one’s life.

Five key service areas made up the service platform: Learning and Wellbeing; Family Health and Wellbeing; Community Development and Wellbeing; Economic Development and Wellbeing; and Cultural and Creative Development and Wellbeing (embedded across the service platform).

The service platform sought to integrate these service areas internally and collaborate with other services externally to promote seamless service delivery and support for children and families between all core local service providers.

- Evaluation evidence found that:
- There were frequent interactions internally between staff across the service platform.
 - The majority of staff reported connecting with other service areas daily or weekly.
 - All (100%) staff agreed that Children’s Ground supported families in all parts of their life that impacted children’s learning, health and wellbeing (n=17). 70% of local services agreed (n=10).
 - All (100%) staff agreed that whatever part of Children’s Ground a child/family connected with first, they were supported to access services they want/need (n=14).
 - All (100%) staff agreed that when a child/family connected with Children’s Ground, they were supported to access other local services and supports they wanted/ needed (n=15). 50% of local serviced agreed (n=10).
 - Staff reported connecting more frequently with local services than services reported connecting with Children’s Ground.
 - Four of six local services reported that it took approximately 12 months to learn about what Children’s Ground was and seeking to achieve. One local service reported expressed frustration at a lack of communication by and regular meetings with Children’s Ground staff.
 - All six local services referred to Children’s Ground increasing their service’s capacity to locate, engage, share information with and support Bininj families.

Data presented throughout the full report demonstrates that the conditions for integration were in place and extensive integrated service delivery was achieved internally. In relation to collaboration with external services, data indicates that it was achieved, in part, with effective collaboration and service delivery partnerships developed with some, but not all, core local services. The enabling feature identified by all services and staff was the relationships that existed between staff in each service; positive working relationships enabled stronger collaboration.

The implementation of holistic support was reported as one of the greatest contributions Children’s Ground made to reported changes and impact. For Bininj families, service integration reportedly increased engagement within Children’s Ground as well as with external organisations.

Children’s Ground Learning, Wellbeing and Development Platform

Our 25 year approach		Stage 1 Early childhood 0-8 year olds	Stage 2 Childhood 6-11 year olds	Stage 3 Young People 12-16 year olds	Stage 4 Emerging Adults 17-24 year olds
Learning & Wellbeing 	• Structured play groups • Early childhood education • Integrating learning, child health, culture and family		• CG 21C Learning Centre/ School • Language, numeracy, literacy, creative, culture Opportunity, fun, strong skills platform		• CG 21C Learning Centre • Knowledge • Learning for adulthood – Responsibility & Respect • Enterprise and Creativity • Workforce ready
	• physical, emotional, social, cognitive, creative, academic, cultural • individual learning and wellbeing plans • out of hours education & extra curricular programs				• Provide individual support and mentoring plans to assist transitions to work and further education
Family Health & Wellbeing 	• Health promotion – Promotion outreach and social determinants focus (integrated into programs as well as outreach) • Social and emotional wellbeing – Counselling, learning integration (addressing trauma and stress) • Child and Maternal Health – Support and education focused on maternal and child health, sexual health, nutrition, childhood emotional and cognitive development, parenting • Nutrition – Daily breakfast, morning, lunch and afternoon tea for children, preparation and cooking • Environmental Health – Supporting healthier and safer environments in which children live				
Community 	• Governance, Children’s Ground Intergenerational Community Centre, Community Development • Promoting safety, inclusion, wellbeing, care and responsibility, culture and celebration. Strengths based.				
Culture 	• Culture and Creative – knowledge and lore as foundations to learning, identity, skills and economy				
Economy 	• Employment, training – long term mentoring and leadership, enterprise, curriculum and skills development that leads to employment within local economic context as well as broader opportunity				
Coordination 	• Internal and external service coordination – MOU’s, partner delivery, collective impact, facilitate access to other services				

Integration and Delivery

System enablers

The evaluation included and analysis of how the Children’s Ground Approach operated as a whole system. Five system enablers underpin the CG Approach and each has been reformed from existing system structures and conditions. Key areas of reform included:

- Governance (dual corporate and local community governance)
- Investment (collective, outcomes-based and at scale)
- Workforce (local and long-term)
- Service integration (five integrated areas)
- Evaluation (25-year outcomes based)

	Current System	Children’s Ground	Description
1. Governance	Top down	Bottom up	We blend robust corporate governance with strong community ownership
2. Service Delivery	Crisis response and delivered in silos	Preventative and integrated	We deliver place-based, integrated services promoting excellence, and leading practice
3. Evidence	Outputs based (what and how many)	Outcomes based (impact)	We conduct ongoing monitoring and evaluation over 25 years
4. Workforce	Short-term; outsiders	Local and long-term	We employ and build a local workforce of community, cultural and sector experts
5. Investment	Short-term, project based	Long-term, collective and at scale	We use a collective, outcomes-based investment model

Children’s Ground analysis found that each was critical in achieving outcomes while at the same time, all were developed and matured throughout initial operations. **Dual governance** structures (local and organisational) ensured local authority and decision making for Bininj people in relation to operations and implementation, coupled with robust organisational level governance in relation to financial, strategic and legislative requirements.

Collective outcomes-based investment allowed for innovation and implementing full operations with integrity. The collective investment funding model in KWA included a significant proportion of community funding. This proved to be a significant risk for Children’s Ground that led to operations ceasing after implementing three years of the 25 year approach. Internal analysis has identified the need for Children’s Ground to secure more diverse funding and a separation between funding and operational authorisation, leading to improved authorising environments where whole-of-community decision making can secure long term operations.

As reported, **local workforce** outcomes were achieved. The engagement of local Bininj people exceeded expectations within the first three years. Attracting high quality, non-Bininj staff was achieved but was at times difficult due to remoteness, limited housing and ensuring a balance between Bininj and non-Aboriginal staff.

Service integration within Children’s Ground and **collaboration with other key services** was an enabling feature over the three years. Integration internally was achieved across Children’s Ground operations. A strong relationship with the school enabled universal access for children in early years learning across the region. The relationship with the clinic was less collaborative and experienced both strengths and weaknesses.

The **longitudinal evaluation** provided a strategic focus on outcomes for long term change. The evaluation framework related to operational strategy and provided a clear and shared focus for staff and management. Data collection and monitoring was challenged by the complex, integrated nature of Children’s Ground operations and a lack of an available data base purpose-fit for operations.

Collectively, families, staff and services observed and reported on how key parts of the CG Approach worked together to create short-term impact. Some of these are presented here as a summary:

Community Governance and Employment enabled Bininj culture and first language to be valued, respected and privileged across the **Integrated Service** platform and in all Children’s Ground environments. It also enabled cultural safety with services reflecting Bininj values and culture. Bininj **Employment** strengthened **Community Governance** and vice-versa. The **Collective Investment** funding model enabled a comprehensive approach to complex disadvantage. It allowed **innovation** and time for staff to build relationships with Bininj families, to be flexible and responsive to family’s needs and Bininj ideas and decision-making, to provide holistic wrap-around support, and to take the time required to implement and embed the processes for engagement in **Governance, Employment, Services** and evaluation (**Evidence**).

Change in these systemic conditions were reportedly enabled by: Bininj led service design which embedded first language and culture; an intergenerational whole of family approach; resourcing and prioritising relationship development and safe environments, building trusted engagement in service and supports; and Bininj employment which created cultural safety and the capacity that privileged cultural learning and practices.

Cost Analysis: Efficiency and effectiveness

The Children’s Ground Approach aims to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the current systems of education, health, economic and social services - in respect to both delivery and cost.

Children’s Ground aims to achieve economies of scale through effective implementation of a holistic and integrated platform of prevention, early intervention, employment and empowerment – seeking implementation that is cost effective and efficient in the present and cost saving in the future.

This cost analysis takes into account that from 2014 to 2016 implementation of the Children’s Ground Approach grew to become established as full operations by 2016. Therefore, the cost of implementation increased each year, with the per-person cost from 2016 expected to remain stable for the remainder of stage one operations.

Per-person cost of delivery

In total, excluding infrequent visitors, the cost of Children’s Ground was **\$9,825 per person in 2014** increasing to **\$13,114 in 2016**. When taking into account all participants of Children’s Ground (including visitors), the cost was \$8,965 in 2014 and \$10,427 in 2016.

Early years learning and education are key determinants of lifelong wellbeing. An analysis of the costs for the delivery of Children’s Ground’s Learning and Wellbeing platform (55% of total budget), found the average per-child cost (for children aged 0-11 years, excluding infrequent visitors) over the three years was \$21,290. In 2016 this was the cost was \$23,440. When taking into account all participants (including visitors) of learning and wellbeing, the average per-child cost over the three years was \$16,099 and \$16,449 in 2016.

In KWA, the full Children’s Ground Approach costs approximately \$11,000 per person to deliver each year. To put this in context (see Figure 13), total direct government expenditure on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in the Northern Territory in 2015-16 was approximately \$68,000 per person¹ and across Australia was \$45,000².

Many of the areas of government investment – early childhood development, education, healthy lives, economic participation, and safe and supportive communities – align directly with Children’s Ground’s integrated service platforms. This is not intended to present Children’s Ground as a substitute for all of these services, but rather to put the cost of Children’s Ground in perspective and balance its cost relative to impact – evidenced by engagement and outcome evidence presented throughout this report.



Economies of scale

When considering the full cost, Children’s Ground was able to create economies of scale, achieving cost efficiency through the integration of placed based, holistic, intergenerational services of early years, targeted primary aged learning, after hours learning, family wellbeing, employment, local governance, health, culture and community safety.

The cost benefit relates not only to the relative cost of service delivery but the potential future cost savings through prevention of harm. The communities that lead Children’s Ground would be at the upper end of government expenditure and costs per person due to ill-health (physical and emotional), incarceration, poor housing, welfare, child protection services and lower educational engagement and completion. These communities do not fare well within the current service system due to complex and overlapping disadvantage, cultural barriers and intergenerational trauma.

The cost analysis indicates that Children’s Ground can provide a prevention-focused service offering for children, their families and the broader community that is economically efficient and potentially cost-saving. It can be seen as an efficient and cost-effective way to achieve real change for children and families who currently face extreme and complex inequity, disadvantage and disempowerment.

¹ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision. 2017. Indigenous Expenditure Report, Productivity Commission, Canberra. <https://www.pc.gov.au/news-media/pc-news/pc-news-december-2017/indigenousexpenditure-report-2017>
² Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision. 2017. Indigenous Expenditure Report, Productivity Commission, Canberra. <https://www.pc.gov.au/news-media/pc-news/pc-news-december-2017/indigenousexpenditure-report-2017>

Summary of Children’s Ground’s contribution to change

This evaluation has evidenced changes for children and families across the Kakadu community during the period of Children’s Ground operations. While attribution of change from whole of community approaches is difficult to determine, the reported findings suggest that Children’s Ground had a direct impact on the lives, learning and wellbeing of Bininj children and families in the short-term.

Families, local services and staff attributed many changes identified for children, families and community directly to the CG Approach, including: Early childhood engagement; Children as engaged and successful learners in both Bininj and balanda learning; Engagement of families in their children’s learning; Cultural wellbeing for children and families; Local Bininj governance; Employment of Bininj people in the region; Child and family health and wellbeing; and safety.

The engagement of a critical mass of children and their families in early learning demonstrates the reach of Children’s Ground and the potential to create whole of community change over time.

Whereas the extent of some changes were difficult to measure, particularly changes in child and family health and wellbeing and safety, these were largely attributed to Children’s Ground by families, staff and some local services.

In relation to impact, each stakeholder group interviewed identified the CG Approach as the primary contributor to changes observed for children, families and the KWA community over the three years of implementation. Reference was made to collaborations between Children’s Ground and local service providers as contributing



factors in some circumstances, particularly in learning and wellbeing, however, each group overwhelmingly noted the CG Approach in KWA was the driver for change.

This evaluation demonstrates that the impact of Children’s Ground was due to the CG Approach – the what, how and system enablers – and that reform in one area of the system alone would not have created change. Empowerment and respect of local Bininj people through governance, employment and privileging of culture was arguably the most important driver of change, along with the dedicated focus on children. These were found to be important systemic enablers and reportedly led to increased engagement across the integrated platform in employment, services and supports.

Subsequently, the engagement of children and families was found to be a key contributing factor to building social, cultural and economic capital across KWA during Children’s Ground operations.

Conclusion

Evaluation data from three years of operations in KWA has evidenced that short term change and impact is possible through systems, service and practice reform that empowers First Nations people and privileges first language and culture.

The evaluation has evidenced that process and implementation matters – that how the CG Approach was implemented significantly influenced and contributed to achieving short-term change for children, families and the community. It has also evidenced that front-loaded resources into integrated prevention, relationship development and flexible service delivery also contributed to short-term change. Families and staff could respond to core social, economic and cultural determinants to improve education, health and wellbeing.

The conditions for change were created by the Children’s Ground systems reform; Bininj leadership, robust corporate governance, collective investment and local employment all contributed to change. One systemic element was unlikely to create the change achieved alone. Together with the principles for delivery, reform generated environments of cultural and physical safety that empowered local voice and decision making.

Delivery of the CG Approach in KWA was economically effective and efficient. Cost-effectiveness was evidenced by the short-term impact and change achieved for children,

families and the community and cost-efficiency was achieved through high quality and effective delivery of a place based, integrated and prevention focused platform of services that were community led.

While operations over the three years evidenced the impact of the approach, the ceasing of operations after three and a half years highlighted a major challenge. It highlighted the inability of Children’s Ground to achieve operational sustainability required for long term change in KWA. Analysis and learnings indicated two factors for Children’s Ground to consider: the long term and inclusive authorising environment for operations and economic dependence ensuring that funding is not too heavily weighted on one key funding partner.

The short-term change and impact evidenced can only be acknowledged as the beginning and foundation for long-term change. After implementing three years of a 25-year approach, the changes cannot predict impact over the long-term. There was however a short-term dramatic change. In the three years of operation Children’s Ground had an impact on key areas that have been difficult to achieve nationally for First Nation peoples. Short-term change and impact was achieved in early year learning and wellbeing, early years schooling, employment and community and cultural wellbeing. There were improvements in the social, cultural and economic wellbeing for local Bininj people engaged with Children’s Ground.



“The concept of Children’s Ground and the ideology behind it is basically how we should all be working” (Local service)

“Enabled Bininj to shape the model, and not the model to shape Bininj” (Staff)

“It just puts the community front and centre, so, that we can just walk beside them. It means we can really be community led because the power is at that level, it’s at the community level and that’s where it should be” (Staff)

“It seemed like everything was coming from the community. Community based and community owned. They’ve had a direct communication with the community about what they really truly see as important, and what they would actually see adds value to their life as a community” (Local service)

“They do it well [listen to Bininj]. We would tell them, where we would go [Learning on Country], Bininj organise what we need... they don’t have to” (Family)

“I think a sense of pride, a sense of ownership motivated them to be a part of something that was really good, and that was for them. I think it empowered Bininj to speak their own language and to be employed to teach their kids in language” (Local service)

“I seen family. I didn’t know about Children’s Ground. I asked other family what’s that there. I got engaged because other family telling me that Children’s Ground is for us mob” (Family)

"Since we began some people have been born, some people have passed away and some have gone down the wrong track. A lot of people are doing really great things. Through all this we have stood together as one family. We have celebrated the joy, shared the pain and helped the people in trouble. Children's Ground has brought us together and strengthened our community. We have shown that we can make big changes. Bininj are ready to take on the challenges that the future will bring us"

Bininj family, 2015

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