

# “EACH ONE TEACH ONE”

## AN EVALUATION OF LEARNING GROUND MT DRUITT



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## Executive Summary

This report provides the results of an evaluation conducted of Learning Ground Mt Druitt. Learning Ground provides community-based development and behaviour change programs to the most culturally diverse and disadvantaged families and youth in the Mt Druitt area of NSW. The chief purpose of this evaluation was to investigate whether Learning Ground was achieving its stated service goals and to identify implications and opportunities for improving Learning Ground's service delivery.

The evaluation approach included a critical and detailed review of the content and materials provided in Learning Ground programs. Onsite observations of the delivery of such material were also carried out. A mixed method approach was used. Statistical analysis of surveys distributed to current, previous participants and referring agencies were augmented with thematic analysis of qualitative data gathered through open ended questions in the surveys and focus groups conducted with participants and mentors.

Overall, the evaluation found that Learning Ground was very highly regarded by participants and stakeholders for the quality of its programs, the outcomes they produce, and its unique community-embedded model of operation and service. Analysis of program content and delivery identified that its effectiveness is based in coherent and appropriate theories of human development, a relational pedagogy of engagement, volunteer training and community empowerment. The programs were found to be particularly suited and effective for supporting the development of the following skills relating to behaviour change:

- Social and Emotional Literacy;
- Metacognitive skills that allow participants to understand and reflect on the influences on their own behaviour (or the behaviour of their children), and in turn the influence of their behaviour on others;
- Skills for cognitive and affective reflexivity in relation to individuals' effects on the world and the world's effects on individuals, thus enabling re-evaluation of self-in-environment and culture; and
- Skills for self-awareness that enable re-evaluation of personal strengths and capacities with the goal of creating a more complete positive self-image.

Participants reported learning life changing skills, improvement in their sense of self-worth and enhanced confidence whilst experiencing a sense of connection and support. The results show that previous and current participants in Learning Ground's core programs believe their participation had facilitated their growth in relation to:

- Self-efficacy and self-esteem;
- Feeling connected and belonging;
- Cooperating and listening to others views;
- Belief that they have the ability to succeed;
- Coping skills such as seeking support; and
- Social skills.

The results clearly indicated that the agencies considered Learning Ground a valuable asset in the community commenting on the uniqueness of Learning Ground. When reflecting on the

usefulness to their clients of the programs they had accessed, the majority agreed on the positive impact of the programs on their clients.

Although there was substantial regard among those surveyed for Learning Ground's work, respondents also identified that there were barriers to the development of effective partnerships with local schools that needed to be addressed. Respondents also highlight the need for the program to receive increased funding to expand its services.

The main recommendations made in this report are:

- *Undertake strategic promotion of Learning Ground programs in school education forums and directly with referring schools.* Greater school awareness of Learning Ground programs and philosophy will enable better understanding of Learning Ground's approach and more effective partnerships to be developed with schools. School-based PBL team meetings offer particularly appropriate opportunities for presenting and discussing Learning Ground's approach.
- *Consider employing a schools liaison officer to undertake promotion and engagement strategies that will build stronger, more effective links with local schools.* A schools liaison officer with experience working with the NSW Department of Education and a sound appreciation of Learning Ground could provide added support and bridge into the schools, particularly through working with school-based PBL and welfare teams. This role will help to ensure that young people with complex needs are assisted through effective partnerships, with the potential to develop a joint case management approach.
- *Work with schools to develop a supportive re-entry program at the school for students who are transitioning between attending Learning Ground and school.* For example, some of the feeder schools have allocated specific teachers to oversee the Learning Ground students, often complementing this with a term visit to the centre. This kind of support for re-entry is consistent with the PBL tiered approach of providing additional support to students to improve the engagement of students with behavioural difficulties and increase their success in meeting behavioural goals.
- *Investigate how the effective mentoring approach used at Learning Ground might be incorporated into schools.* School-based mentoring strategies have been found to be effective supports for students exhibiting behavioural difficulties. Mentors are often teachers with whom the student has a trusting relationship. This kind of approach is recognised within PBL as an example of a tier 2 program. Given the highly effective system of mentoring established by Learning Ground, there is a strong case for investigating the potential of establishing a mentoring program, based on Learning Ground principles, within the schools. This might entail school staff undertaking the Mentor Program at Learning Ground, or it may be that existing Learning Ground mentors could be involved in some way in the schools. These possibilities could be explored with PBL team leaders or coaches within the schools and/or with the state-based PBL and Wellbeing Coordinators.

- *Offer teacher professional development workshops in emotion coaching and descriptive praise.* These approaches to supporting young people are particularly indicated for those who may have experienced trauma, and are effective and nurturing for all students. Workshops offered to teachers around working in this way with students who have complex difficulties may help them become more directly attuned to the socio-emotional behavioural needs of their students and to the importance of the work Learning Ground is undertaking.
- *Investigate the possibility of having teachers from local schools complete the Enablers Program.* Pre-service teachers could also be encouraged to undertake the program. Undertaking the Enablers program would thoroughly familiarise teachers with the approach taken at Learning Ground and help to build a consistency of language, strategies and values between Learning Ground and schools in support of students' successful re-entry into mainstream learning. As a starting point it would be helpful to ask current staff and volunteers who are teachers about the challenges and possibilities for working with teachers in this way.
- *Seek ways to provide Aboriginal youth with opportunities to explore their cultural heritage.* There is strong evidence that cultural identity development is a critical resilience factor for Aboriginal people. This is not something to be imposed, nor is it a straightforward process, particularly for the many Aboriginal people who have experienced historical dispossession and dislocation. How can Learning Ground help young people who wish to explore their heritage to make links with relevant Elders, resources and cultural activities that can support their inquiry? This is something to be considered with Elders and cultural leaders who have a more intimate knowledge of the local community.
- *Consider further opportunities to develop the Aboriginal-specific content of Learning Ground programs in light of recent developments in Aboriginal education.* Recent developments in Aboriginal education have led to the production of many new resources and frameworks for teaching Aboriginal perspectives. Should Learning Ground seek to further develop its work with Aboriginal youth and others in this area, in conjunction with local Elders and community leaders, there are a number of educational and cultural resources and strategies that could be drawn on. It may also be beneficial in this light, and for the purposes of advocacy, to establish a connection with the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group.



# Full Report

## Context

### Mt Druitt Local Area

Mt Druitt occupies a vast region within the precinct of Blacktown City and according to Blacktown City Council (nd) has a population of over 112,000 people. According to the 2011 census 43% of Mt Druitt residents (37% Blacktown City; 25% NSW) were born overseas compared with 28% nationally, and 4.5% identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (3% Australia; 2.5% NSW).

Blacktown City local government area represents one of the most multi-ethnic communities in Australia and also has the largest urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population in NSW, with 8,195 people making up 2.7% of the population (compared to 1.2% in Greater Sydney and 2.5% NSW). The concentration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Mt Druitt precinct is affected by high rates of unemployment (1.5 times the national average) and consequent welfare dependency. Moreover, in the Mt Druitt Precinct, 32.9% of the population aged 15 years and over held educational qualifications compared to 42.8% for the Blacktown Precinct and 51.7% for the North West Precinct, highlighting that there are distinct variations in the levels of advantage and disadvantage within the City. These socio-economic variations are significantly more evident on all demographic measures in the Mt Druitt precinct. Significantly in the 2011 census, 33% of Mt Druitt households with an income fell in the 'medium lowest quartile' compared with 24% overall in Blacktown City. This indicates that Mt Druitt residents are amongst the most financially disadvantaged in NSW.

### Learning Ground

Mt Druitt Learning Ground was established in 2006 as a project of the Chain Reaction Foundation Pty Ltd. The principal focus of Learning Ground is to support community-based learning and social action among residents of the Mt Druitt local area. Based in Bidwill Square, Learning Ground is a place specifically designed for families and disenfranchised youth to experience capacity building through individuation and the acquisition of social and emotional competencies. It is distinctive in that it offers community education programs in behavioural change for adults, youth and children alike. Learning Ground programs seek to re-engage the most vulnerable of the community, especially those young people at risk of school failure or withdrawal, and also adults struggling to maintain engagement with their communities due to various cultural, social, health and economic pressures.

As part of its commitment to growth and development of its participants and the program itself, a grant was obtained from the Ian Potter Foundation to evaluate aspects of the Learning Ground Program. A research team from the School of Education, Western Sydney University, was engaged to undertake an evaluation of the programs being provided at the Bidwill Centre. The purpose of this evaluation research was to analyse what is working effectively at Learning Ground and to highlight implications for improving service delivery and building social capital necessary for effective work in the community.

## Aims and Approach of the Evaluation

### Aims

The focus of this evaluation research was to investigate the extent to which Learning Ground is:

- Achieving its stated service goals;
- Effectively meeting the learning and social needs of those it serves; and
- Contributing a valuable service to schools and other organisations in its local community network.

A further goal of this evaluation study was:

- To identify implications and opportunities for improving Learning Ground's service delivery via its learning programs as well as its community reach and social capital building agenda.

### Research Approach

The evaluation approach focused on two main elements.

1. The researchers conducted a detailed review of the content and materials provided in all current Learning Ground programs in relation to the stated goals of being practical, socially relevant, culturally sensitive, ethical and theoretically based. This process was complemented by a series of onsite observations of the teaching pedagogy and a range of discussions involving participants and facilitators around program content and presentation modes; and
2. An investigation of program impacts for service users, including program participants and community agencies that interact with Learning Ground, was undertaken using both quantitative and qualitative methods as follows.
  - i) Focus groups were conducted with participants of three programs who were asked to elaborate on what brought them initially to Learning Ground, their experience of its programs, their experience of the Learning Ground community, their evaluation of its benefits to them, and their suggestions for ways it could be improved. Both current and previous participants were contacted and invited to provide their views in relation to participating in the various programs. A focus group was also conducted with volunteer mentors of the program.

All focus groups were conducted on site at the Learning Ground Bidwill centre by members of the research team on separate days. Focus group initial questions can be found in appendix III. As can be seen from the questions, care was taken to maintain an approach which allowed participants to self-disclose possible challenges present for Learning Ground and/or they were invited to provide their feedback on what could be improved in relation to the program. Focus groups were audio recorded and later transcribed. A theme identification approach was used by the research team whereby text was analysed in the context of the stimulus questions. The guiding principle was to extract emergent themes which accurately reflected the experience of the participants in relation to the key aims of the evaluation.

- ii) In addition, a survey (specifically developed for this evaluation) was conducted with service users which focused on perceived life effectiveness and their assessment of the



degree to which Learning Ground had assisted them in these areas. Focus group participants and past attendees were invited to participate in this anonymous survey (see appendix I). Life effectiveness refers to the extent to which a person's actions/behaviour/feelings are perceived to be effective in managing and succeeding at life. It can also be referred to as generic life skills.

Hardcopy surveys were provided to the focus group participants on the day of the focus groups. Other previous or current participants were sent an email to invite them to undertake the same survey in online format. Some of these participants undertook the survey by phone with a member of the research team at their request.

- iii) A survey was separately designed and conducted with stakeholder agencies that make referrals to Learning Ground. The focus of this survey was on the agency representative's understanding, usage and evaluation of the services available at Learning Ground. This brief online survey (see appendix II) was distributed via email to key referral agencies, including schools, with an invitation to participate voluntarily and anonymously in the Learning Ground evaluation study. Agencies were provided with the option of a soft copy attached survey to be returned to the research team or to undertake the survey via a direct online link.

The mixed method approach taken to the evaluation enabled both quantitative analysis of outcomes, and qualitative analysis of the particular experiences of participants, in their own voices. Accordingly, both surveys had Likert type questions which lent themselves to statistical analysis, as well as questions requiring brief open ended responses (see appendices I & II). Likert scales are the most widely used attitude scale type in social science. Respondents are given statements and asked to respond by saying whether they strongly agree to strongly disagree with a statement. The survey results were aggregated and summarised in relation to the key research aims.

The research design and procedures were approved by the Western Sydney University Ethics Committee. All participants in this study were provided with information about the research aims and requirements, and voluntarily consented to take part. Parental consent was sought for young people less than 18 years. Within this report all names of schools and individuals have been de-identified so as to preserve privacy and confidentiality.



## Findings: Review of Learning Ground Programs and Delivery

### Program Development

The Mt Druitt Learning Ground Centre had its genesis in a series of public forums in 2004, called “The People’s Voices,” that sought to address broad community needs. The catalyst for these forums was social research into community adversity and resilience (Vinson, 2004; 2007), which highlighted the web of social and economic disadvantage that placed Mt Druitt amongst the most disadvantaged communities in Australia. These forums identified a need for an educational “safe haven” that could provide “peaceful contexts” of positive behavioural interventions and modelling that would facilitate the development of self, including the re-imagining of the self by children and young people who are at very high risk of economic and social hardship. For a significant proportion of Mt Druitt youth, exposure to multiple risk factors at home and school was recognised as contributing to school disengagement, behavioural problems, chronic school absenteeism, refusal, and/or exclusions by means of school sanctions (e.g. suspensions). These kinds of difficulties have a cumulative impact in exacerbating problem behaviours and increasing social alienation (Dobia & O’Rourke, 2011; Hemphill et al., 2010). Learning Ground was established with the specific aim of building individual and community capacity to cope with these challenges.

Learning Ground commenced with the Enablers Program, offered for the first time in 2004 to men and women 18-70 years who wanted to strengthen their leadership capacity in their own families, or in paid or volunteer work. This program sought to empower participants as both individuals and community facilitators who could lead others towards a more powerful self-efficacy (see Train-the-Trainer: Enablers Program, p.50). The initial Enablers program commenced with some 30 participants and was conducted over a 30-week period. The following year a further 12 week program was developed. This second program was initiated by graduates of the initial Enablers program, who sought the support of Learning Ground to help re-engage disengaged families and disenfranchised youth. It was from this platform that Learning Ground grew to incorporate a wider scope that currently includes a suite of youth and family programs.

The need to develop a behavioural management program for young disenfranchised adolescents was identified by the community Enablers, and resulted in the Young Adolescent Program which commenced in 2006. In 2009 the Young People’s Program for primary school aged children was offered for the first time. The Mentor Program began in 2012, with the inception of a formal volunteer training course. Participants had to be 18 years or over and were required to complete both the Enablers and Family Skills Programs along with 5 in-service days per year and weekly on-the-job training, before being eligible for selection as a mentor. More recently, Learning Ground has identified a need for families involved in the centre to develop parenting skills and has instigated a well-subscribed Family Skills program.

During Learning Ground’s formative period, the Enablers appointed an Elders Council which included six Elders, three of whom were drawn from local community and three of whom are Aboriginal Elders from the community. Aunty Gloria Matthews, Uncle Wes Marne, Uncle Greg Simms were, and are still, members of the Council. The founding local community members were Coral McLean, local community leader (now deceased), Anne McPherson, Uniting Church Minister Bidwill (now deceased), Joan Modder, Adult Educator Chain Reaction Foundation, (now retired), and Margaret Bell. Over a period of twelve months this group developed the educational framework for the Mt Druitt Learning Ground programs. Specific program design

was undertaken jointly by Winsome Matthews, a respected Aboriginal community leader, and Chain Reaction CEO Margaret Bell, AM, who holds a Masters degree in Educational Psychology. Winsome Matthews is currently the local community leader appointed to the Council.

All programs are framed and developed by Margaret Bell and a team of qualified support staff including Melissa Hood, an adult educator with a post graduate certificate in Family Therapy, as well as Charmaine Milsom, a literacy and numeracy consultant, who conducts differentiated individualised intervention sessions three days a week.

Though most of its programs are by now well established, Learning Ground retains the role of a Council of Advice, made up of three Aboriginal Elders, one Aboriginal community leader and two others, who meet annually to review the programs being offered.

## Program Philosophy

Emerging as an initiative to redress social disadvantage in the Mt Druitt community, the Learning Ground philosophy derives from its brief to provide community-based learning to the most culturally diverse and disadvantaged families in the Mt Druitt area. To this end it seeks not only to empower individuals but also to promote inter-cultural understanding and celebration of difference. Recognising the particular burden of colonisation and racism for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who make up a large proportion of its clientele, Learning Ground places particular emphasis on respect for Aboriginal culture and worldviews.

### “Each one teach one”

The foundational principle ‘each-one-teach-one’ is displayed prominently both in English and in the Darug language as *BandanamiDuralang /WogalWaWogal*. The notion that ‘I have a skill to offer you just as you have to offer me’ denotes a sense of mutuality and reciprocity, in reflection of Aboriginal worldviews that emphasise community and a collective sense of self (see Gee, Dudgeon, Schultz, Hart, & Kelly, 2014). These principles uphold respectful relationships and seek to build a sense of community based on an attitude of openness to learning at all times. A holistic approach to learning further validates each individual’s unique contribution to the community. Every session commences with a shared invocation: “I/We greet you all with great respect and with great affection.”

Learning Ground can thus be seen to promote a philosophy through which children and adults are able to identify their strengths and develop their potential to contribute to the common good. The goal is for each participant to be appreciated for what they can offer and encouraged to come to an empowering sense of who they are by enhancing their self-esteem, self-efficacy and motivation to succeed, without being stereotyped on the basis of race, culture or gender. This humanistic philosophy underpins all Learning Ground’s programs and methodologies. Such a philosophy views experience through a predominantly phenomenological lens that listens deeply to how individuals perceive and interpret events in order to provide non-judgmental support for their development (Cornelius-White, 2007). Emotion coaching and descriptive praise are key pedagogical tenets of Learning Ground’s humanistic ‘language of the heart’. Emotion coaching validates participants’ feelings and descriptive praise very specifically focuses on behaviour that needs to be managed in a positive way. The focus is on what participants are getting right, rather than on what is going wrong.

In emphasising a self-in-community approach to education, the Learning Ground approach also aligns with an ecological systems model of youth development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This model recognises the roles of multiple nested interacting social systems, including family, school, community and larger socio-political systems, in influencing young people's life chances and trajectories.

In summary, the philosophy and praxis adopted by Learning Ground may be seen to redirect educational psychology and behavioural change management towards the development of the self in context, and is deeply human-centred in its delivery. It valorises the positives through a didactic repetition of core values and sequenced experiential exercises. Importantly, the programs make an attempt to incorporate concepts of community which are consistent with traditional and contemporary Indigenous thought that advocates an ecological interconnection where, "All people matter. All of us belong" (Ungunmerr, cited in Atkinson, 2002, p.19). Learning Ground is careful to pay particular attention to what it understands to be traditional and contemporary Aboriginal values, but does not purport to be an Aboriginal service. In its practice it attempts to embrace all cultural faiths and ethnic diversity and learning through the celebration of difference in community.

The subsequent section reviews the materials collected and observations made in relation to the Enablers Program, Adolescent and Young People's Program, Mentor Program, and Family Skills Program. There is no financial cost to any of the participants and their families once they commit to each of the programs.

## **The Enablers Program**

The Enablers Program is open to all participants over 18 years of age from all walks of community life. The program content is framed around exploring five dimensions of self that comprise 'the WHOLE ME'. The program is experiential, in a modality that personalises being able to listen to each other in contemplative reciprocal relationships. Each participant is encouraged to explore a new found belief in themselves and a deeper more personal sense of identity through 'reflection on doing' via a sequence of open-ended exercises. These exercises each draw on different aspects of a humanist model, the goal being to help manifest a more integrated sense of personal identity within each participant.

The weekly program of 30 x 2hr sessions begins with reflections on what constitutes 'the whole me' and an exploration in a non-threatening context of where individual perceptions of selfhood originate. Journaling is introduced as ongoing reflective medium before the course moves into a deeper exploration of the self and its reciprocal relationship to others. These themes are explored through the five rhetorically integrated domains of the PHYSICAL ME (Am I good looking?); the INTELLECTUAL ME (Clever?); The EMOTIONAL ME (How do I react to external stimuli?); the SOCIAL ME (Do I have friends?); & the SPIRITUAL ME (Where do I really come from?). Together these elements make up the 'the whole me' within the predominantly humanist paradigm that informs Learning Ground's worldview of the self and psychosocial wellbeing. The experiential process of listening, doing and learning builds an understanding that learning and human growth comes from listening and witnessing, without judgement or prejudice, and knowing and being responsible for the self, in relationship to others.

## Adolescent and Young People's Programs

The Adolescent and Young People's programs are offered one day a week as differentiated curricula, away from the demands of the normal school day. These programs aim to strengthen and develop each student's social and emotional capacities, both as general life skills and for the specific ends of enhancing emotion regulation and social skills within formal learning environments. Rather than being an alternative to formal schooling, Learning Ground's programs provide a sequenced experiential curriculum that enables students to build an understanding of their individual worth and to develop skills for positive behavioural change.

Spread over four terms, students are encouraged through a set of integrated experiential exercises to develop reflective skills that equip them to learn from all kinds of experiences, whether positive or negative. To aid their learning each participant keeps a working journal where they recall, record and reflect upon the weekly exercises. A holistic approach is taken throughout each of the activities, with each subsequent exercise designed to support behavioural change and personal management. During first semester learning experiences address the "Five Mes" and learning focus is on re-cognition of physical, intellectual spiritual and social growth. All the participants address the same themes using age appropriate tools and skills training. Second semester develops the understanding of the "Whole Me", with focus on becoming a good listener, developing skills to communicate clearly and considerately with family, friends, teachers, students, and others. Priority is given to positive communication skills, learning how to speak with confidence in both personal and public arenas without reactivity, and taking the role of an enabler, regardless of age.

Traditional and contemporary knowledge from linguistically diverse communities is also evident in the program content and exercises. For example the notion of totems borrows from Aboriginal perspectives on human-nature connectedness in order to help participants construct narrative representations of identity. This exercise is an offer that needs to be accepted by the participants and has been approved by the Elders who oversee Learning Ground as a way of deepening the culture of young disenfranchised Aboriginal people while inviting non-Aboriginal participants to share in reciprocal cultural exchanges. This focus on validation of Aboriginal culture and emphasis on spiritual 'healing' (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation, 2013) seeks to build a sense of worth and pride, supporting the development of resilience and self-esteem, with benefits reported for both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous youth.

Through realisation and celebration of personal and cultural strengths, the Learning Ground pedagogical approach successfully promotes culturally safe and peaceful environments. Consistency around behaviour management is maintained in each program through linguistic markers of respect such as "please", "may I" & "thank you" which are rewarded via the acquisition of group 'gems' whenever they appear in a student's vocabulary. Individualised support is provided to each participant through a personal connection to his or her allocated 'mentor' (trained and over the age of 18). This forms a seminal part of the program's gentle self-reflective approach to behaviour management, which uses instances of 'misbehaviour', seen as challenges or mistakes, as opportunities for the young person to reflect on their actions and learn, using the structures and tools discussed in the program (i.e. listening, respect, etc). Reflection is carried out with the supervision of one of the trained mentors. During observations it was noted that the use of tokens, called gems here, is predominantly to encourage internalisation of the displayed goals such as respect for the self and other. Awarding of gems to the working group intends to reinforce team work and each one's contribution to the group

effort. The exercises and interactions are delivered in a context of safety and trust which defines all the other factors of wellbeing that the programs attempt to manifest in each of its voluntary participants.

In addition to the use of journals, the methodology of the youth programs includes considerable group discussion, shared learning via role-play, story-telling, debate, and arts activities. These interactive pedagogies are complemented with age appropriate excursions and games that allow each age group to perceive across different contexts the learning world of the other while focusing on the seminal outcome of delivering recognition of values associated with developing self-respect. Students who need development in literacy and numeracy skills are given support by the professional literacy and numeracy consultant who oversees individualised literacy coaching in a safe and caring context. What drives the methodology is the overriding philosophy of “each-one, teach-one” and the reciprocal relationship it sets up between participant and facilitator.

### **Mentor Program**

As has been stated, Learning Ground differs from school in that every participant is allocated a ‘mentor; a trained senior support person. Mentors form an important component of the Learning Ground program. They not only provide support for individual participants but are vital for the development of individuals in communities where learning institutions and families have been found wanting. They represent, within the pedagogical structure of the Learning Ground Youth programs, social and emotional coaches for each of the participants. Mentors had to be 18 years or over and were required to complete both the Enablers and Family Skills Programs along with 5 in-service days per year, and weekly on-the-job training before being eligible for selection as a mentor.

Within the Learning Ground framework mentors engage in monitoring group activities within their assigned cohort, and serve as points of reference for each of their individual mentees. They provide social and emotional touchstones, helping to unlock trends of school and learning disengagement for each of the participants. While their training protocols reinforce professional distance rather than friendship, the role of the mentors is nonetheless predominantly relational and self-reflexive. They are not only required to make observational connections with the differentiated needs of each participant, but also to remain self-reflexively connected to the learning taking place about life and to their own emotions and reactions.

The promotion of cross-cultural understanding, individual self-knowledge and the acceptance of others in community wellbeing are the foundational pillars of the Mentoring program. Each is viewed through the same humanist lens of the “whole me” that informs every aspect of the socio-emotional model of self-knowledge and resilience building that Learning Ground promotes. A mentoring program that attempts to support the emergence of stable self-confidence in its participants aims to enable participants to engage with life’s circumstances without reactive conflict, fear, fight or flight. Mentors are taught to understand that emotions such as anger and behaviours such as aggression are human responses to loss and rejection. As nearly all of the mentors are drawn from the local area, they represent a consistent presence in the lives of these young people. The virtues they attempt to strengthen in their participants are self-esteem, self-respect, self-efficacy and a stable self-confidence that helps each participant more directly understand themselves in relation to their environment. Simply the core understanding for the mentors is that they cannot grow in self-respect unless they first respect others: *each one, teach one*.



The Mentor program functions as a co-operative. While each participant is allocated an individual mentor, they nonetheless remain under the supervision of all the mentors. Issues that arise around individual students are collectively discussed, and differentiated approaches are tailored to help each participant. When a potentially destructive behaviour is observed, personal mentors are encouraged to take time-out with a participant, to listen to their story and guide them to observe the consequences upon themselves and others. Each mentor through their training is made aware that violence and emotional disjunctions occur when a person cannot live out their need for 'power' in ways that enhance the wellbeing of the self and the collective community. Such behaviour is understood but not condoned. Young people are encouraged to engage in reflexivity and directed with care to a new set of behaviours and beliefs which are more personally and socially productive, whilst allowing them to be listened to and understood. Mentors help participants to understand and respond thoughtfully to their own emotions. Mentors are trained and encouraged not to be judgemental, to be open-hearted, and to display a patient understanding of contexts. They provide the social acceptance and emotional support needed to create an environment that is safe and peaceful for each of its participants to grow in self-knowledge. Consistency is the key ingredient and as such each specifically nominated mentor at Learning Ground is required to make a weekly commitment for at least a single term.

### **Family Skills Program**

The Family Skills program's pedagogical goal is the cultivation of a disposition that allows parents (and/or carers) to respond to the children they care for in ways that are patient, temperate and developmentally informed. The course advocates the tenets of unconditional love and adult responsibility as keys to healthy parenting. A key component is an understanding that "our children are our greatest teachers", because children impulsively live in the moment, sometimes forgetting our best laid plans and rules. It aims to guide parents towards an understanding that parenting is less about teaching children what not to do, and more about showing them what to do. Further, the program asserts that we always have a choice in the way we respond to our children, their different temperaments and learned responses.

The program runs every semester once weekly for 2.5 hours during five consecutive weeks. In addition, Learning Ground offers sessional weekday workshops each term for families and young people around such topics as 'Screens and Social Media'. These programs and workshops are co-ordinated and facilitated by Melissa Hood, parenting professional and author of *Real Parenting for Real Kids: Enabling Parents to bring out the Best in their Children*, a text that serves as a valuable resource. The course aims to clarify confusion for parents around learned behaviours, popular culture parenting ideas, and values when parenting. For example a popular behaviour management adage is the belief running through many of our educational institutions that punishment for bad behaviour teaches children how to behave. The Family Skills Program attempts to deconstruct such misconceptions through the lens of recent neurobiological research and parenting strategies that help to gently build self-esteem and personal responsibility in children.

The pedagogy used in the Family Skills program relies primarily on direct explicit instruction and group discussions led by a facilitator. The program usually caters for 8-10 parents or couples and encourages parents to complete weekly experiential tasks that encapsulate strategies and values they wish to pass onto their children. The material over a 5-week period is presented via a range of modalities and weekly experiential tasks that families undertake and



report back to the group. Everything is predicated on monitoring and strengthening a child's social and emotional development. The key tenets that underscore each stage of the program are 'Knowing your Child'; 'Listening and Connecting'; 'Setting up for Success'; 'Family Values'; 'Positive Discipline'; & 'Their World of Responsibility'.

There is a recognition that young children connect with adults very deliberately and developmentally in the here and now whereas adults have a proclivity to always be looking forward in time. Emotional coaching is about recognising and acknowledging, as well as respecting and responding constructively to children's emotions and feelings. Positive parenting requires some planning around, and understanding of, what constitutes an individual child's unique behavioural proclivities. At the core of the Family Skills pedagogy is an 'unlearning' of conditioned reactivity in parenting towards a recalibration of communications so that behaviour is positively modelled in ways which are no longer controlling but emotionally empowering for children. An important adjunct to the emotional coaching pedagogy is the development of the language of "descriptive praise" as opposed to evaluative praise. Evaluative praise focuses on general outcomes (e.g. "Well done"; "Great!") and tends to be general without markers of which actions undertaken by the child are being encouraged whilst focusing on the child's attributes in an evaluative manner instead (e.g. "You are great!"). Descriptive praise describes what the child has done (e.g., mixed red and yellow to make orange), is very specific and comes from thoughtful observation (e.g. "You hung up your jacket all by yourself, and last month you couldn't reach the hook. You look really pleased with yourself") and lets the child evaluate his or her own actions. Descriptive praise is a tool, explicitly introduced to all participating parents, that encourages children to cooperate and gradually functions to build self-confidence when used with felicity and integrity. Quality and effort are identified and acknowledged, leading to changes in attitude and improvement in behaviour. Since all mentors undertake the Family Skills program as part of their training, these skills are also available to mentors to use with participants in Learning Ground programs.

The Family Skills program also attempts to draw upon the wisdom and experiences of traditional indigenous cultures and practices as they apply to parenting. The use of "Talking Sticks", adapted from indigenous peoples of the Northwest Coast of North America is a cross-cultural strategy introduced to help develop better active listening between individual family members. The process involves a talking stick which is passed around from member to member of the family allowing only the person holding the stick to speak. Other themes covered include purposeful family parenting which needs to be clear and consistent.

The program acknowledges that caring about someone is equated to having rules for certain explicit behaviours that need to be developed during a young person's social and emotional development. For each family to pass on the values they support will at times require explicit rules that are followed through with clarity and consistency. They are seminal in helping children develop an understanding that we are social beings and if there are no clear boundaries it can violate our sense of self and others. Family values need to be modelled, encouraged and positively identified and praised when they are manifested in children's behaviour. The program encourages rules that are positively stated (that is what to do rather than what not to be doing) and specific. For example, participants are asked in pairs to rephrase rules found in many family interactions such as "don't be rude!"; "don't get into trouble at school today"; into age-appropriate positive behavioural expectations, such as "Please be respectful."; "what are you going to do when the teacher is talking today?"; and "You can watch TV when you have finished your homework." This practice when absorbed makes rules easier for children to know how to behave. The program encourages families to explore involving children in developing values and rules so that they are not imposed on them but mutually developed within the family. Finally, at the end of each session a task is set that emerges from

the different modalities of the weekly presentation on a specific skill such as the development of 'Five rules for a happy family' (which each participant develops for their own family) as well as possible non-material rewards. Families are encouraged to involve children in making their rules and to photographically record them. In this way children come to know and own the rules and to 'see themselves' carrying them out. Participants are encouraged to discuss their reflections on tasks assigned at the next weekly session.

## Conclusion

The community-based philosophy of Learning Ground seeks to ensure that young people not only learn skills but develop relationships and community connections with mentors who support their progress and provide valuable guidance to help with managing the significant life challenges facing them. Through its intent to not only enhance support for the young people involved in the program, but to also build local support networks within the community, Learning Ground seeks to cultivate community capacity and connections. In these respects Learning Ground's methods extend beyond those of alternative education for youth to also incorporate a broader emphasis on community education and social capital development (Choy & Haukka, 2007; Ling & Dale, 2014).

It is clear from the research team's review of materials and visits to the centre that Learning Ground does not conceive of itself as an alternative to formal schooling, or as a clinical setting. Rather it is a transitional space that aims to build the capacity of its students to return to formal schooling environments with greater social, emotional and spiritual resilience, self-management skills and insight around their identity and place in the world. It is a place where children learn to 'walk the talk' by constantly practising to meet the other respectfully and affectionately, not through some abstract set of rules, but in close physical proximity with guiding and supportive mentors. In this way what drives its ethos is not a content driven curriculum but a sequence of weekly experiential exercises that reinforce and strengthen the social and emotional regulation of behaviour of its participants across different contexts. The aim is to help manifest a gradual pragmatic sense of self-respect and self-efficacy that strengthens individual identity through acknowledging not only their rights, but the rights of others.

All the pedagogical practices of Learning Ground revolve around clarification and experience of the "whole me" which can lead each participant on a path towards raised self-awareness. As such, lessons are structured around the shifting modalities of experiential instruction that encompass the 3R's: Reading (writing, artwork and story-telling); Rhythm (music, dance & drama); & Respect (I am one, you are one we exist in mutual consideration of each other). The Learning Ground pedagogy ensures that it is a safe place for everyone to learn by encouraging a spiritual understanding and sense of purpose, exemplified in the metaphor of a journey "...this is the beginning of a wonderful journey called the journey to the heart, where each of us truly belongs, and where the truth is held" (LG Operations Manual, p.5).

Young people are encouraged through experiential group exercises and the support of personal mentors to engage in social, behavioural and emotional change. This change is developed through activities (both group and individual) which encourage behavioural, affective and cognitive appraisal of self and context. Due to the varied background of the participants, the program purposely does not have a set of skills to be memorised or learned. The individualised needs of each student are prioritised by trained mentors who regularly model in a non-intrusive manner values around: self-respect; taking responsibility for our own behaviour and reactions; acknowledgement and validation of emotions as a natural part of being human beyond simplistic dichotomies of good and bad; and acknowledgement of

individual ability to change by monitoring responses across different contexts and situations through an incremented understanding of where behaviour stems from and stepping back in the face of conflict.

Together, these experiential and pedagogical practices are consistent with developing metacognitive skills. Metacognition refers to the degree to which one understands one's own thinking and learning processes. Examples of metacognitive strategies include defining personal learning goals, applying previously learned strategies to new tasks (transfer of learning), asking self-reflective questions, self-assessment, identifying points of confusion ('muddiest point') and using reflective journals (Redish, 2003; Girash, 2014; Tanner, 2012). Metacognitive skills are consistently linked with academic success (Tanner, 2012); where academic success is high, strong metacognitive processes are present (Tanner, 2012; Girash, 2014). Levels of metacognition have also been linked to student retention (Larmar & Lodge, 2014) which, along with attendance, are two other factors related to academic success. These approaches are highly consistent with current views and research on the prevention of school failure. Whitted (2011), for example, has outlined how "children's skill deficits are related to a number of family and community risk factors that inhibit their social and emotional development. Lacking interpersonal skills, children have difficulty establishing positive relationships with both adults and peers in the school setting." (p15). This in turn contributes to increased school failure. Programs developed to focus on these metacognitive, social and emotional skills rather than purely remedial academic tutoring, can significantly contribute to reducing school failure. This is particularly so for disadvantage youth for whom focusing on social emotional and wellbeing skills has also been linked to increased academic achievement independent of academic tutoring (see Becker & Luthar, 2002).

During site visits the research team observed that the mentors available to the young people (who work in small groups led by a mentor) use this approach in relation to managing students' work process. Reinforcement of small steps towards desired goals was used for each student. Tangible reinforcers, such as gems, and also verbal reinforcers in the form of specific feedback, such as descriptive praise, are used to help guide behaviour in the group and setting as a whole. Diversions from expected behaviours which are inconsistent with task goals are treated as learning opportunities, with students being invited to reflect on their actions in terms of the program and their goals. The responsibility for enacting this process was shared seamlessly by staff, mentors and participants, involving the whole organisation. In this respect Learning Ground was seen to provide an exemplary model of a learning community, in which the actions of all are seen to contribute to the learning and development of all.

Current research evidence for effectuating positive change in academic, behavioural and socioemotional outcomes points to the need to engage in whole school approaches, where everyone is committed to a positive culture of learning and care (Weare, 2000; Wyn, Cahill, Holdsworth, Rowling, & Carson, 2000; Leahy, Burrows, McCuaig, Wright, & Penney, 2016; Roffey, 2016). Observing the behaviour of mentors and facilitators at Learning Ground, it was clear that everyone has to 'walk the walk', not just the participants. During site visits the researchers observed student behaviour which would have been labelled as disobedient or even oppositional in a school or home setting. Mentors and other students responded by using the behavioural or emotional challenge as a teaching opportunity rather than engaging in repeated rule assertions or power struggles. This approach, of using what is normally labelled in schools as 'misbehaviour' as a learning opportunity for the students to develop further skills, is consistent with current views on assisting young people with severe school failure risk (Greene, 2016).

Through actively listening to the feelings of individual participants and in the support they offer during group sittings, mentors reflect the guiding humanistic principles of Learning Ground. Recognising that self-knowledge is often the product of how we perceive others and how we believe others to perceive us, mentors are tasked with the role of untangling the negative self-concepts held by participants. This is approached through combining one-on-one feedback and group participation at a daily ratio of approximately 1:3. Self-concept is also one of a combination of factors that influence young people's decisions about their education, mental health and other behaviours (Parada, 2008; Marsh, Parada & Ayotte, 2004). This in turn is influenced, at least indirectly, by parents' socioeconomic status. According to research by Neuenschwander, Vida, Garrett, (cited in Beswick, 2012), parents in lower SES communities may have lower educational expectations and aspirations for their children, which indirectly influence students' academic achievement, academic self-concept and career aspirations. Providing parenting skills groups to boost parents' confidence, as well as their sense of their own and their children's potential, is thus consistent with the goals of Learning Ground and current available literature.

In conclusion, the programs in content and practice clearly address the stated aims and goals of Learning Ground for its participants in terms of being practical, socially relevant, culturally sensitive, ethical and theoretically based. The programs were found to be particularly suited and effective for supporting the development of the following skills relating to behaviour change:

- Social and Emotional Literacy, enabled by creating a safe place to discuss emotions and learn about them;
- Metacognitive skills that allow participants to understand and reflect on the influences on their own behaviour (or the behaviour of their children), and in turn the influence of their behaviour on others;
- Skills for cognitive and affective reflexivity in relation to individuals' effects on the world and the world's effects on individuals, thus enabling re-evaluation of self-in-environment and culture; and
- Skills for self-awareness that enable re-evaluation of personal strengths and capacities with the goal of creating a more complete positive self-image.

## Findings: Learning Ground's Impact

This section outlines the results of efforts to ascertain the impact of learning ground. Both previous participants and key stakeholder agencies were surveyed (see Research Approach above). Additionally a series of focus groups were conducted with previous participants. Below, survey results are presented followed by results, in the form of emergent themes, of focus groups conducted for the purposes of this evaluation.

### Survey Results

#### Results from Learning Ground Participant Survey

A survey consisting of 20 questions was specifically developed for this evaluation by the research team (see Appendix I). The first six questions asked respondents some key demographics and questions about which programs they had undertaken. The remaining 13 questions addressed key areas of personal effectiveness (e.g. asking for help, coping, and cooperating with others). All surveys were completed anonymously either online or on hardcopies provided to participants at focus groups. As can be seen in Figure 1 below, participants were first asked to rate on a four point scale how true or false each statement was in relation to them currently. Available responses ranged from 'False/Not like me' to 'True/Like me'. Immediately, participants were asked to indicate on another four point scale, how much their participation in a Learning Ground program had helped them in developing that particular quality in them. Available responses ranged from 'Not at all/It didn't help' to 'A lot/It helped me a great deal'. Higher scores indicate greater belief in possessing the quality and greater belief that participating in a Learning Ground program had helped in developing this quality in the participant. The final question requested a brief written response.

		STEP 1 →				STEP 2			
		First: use the Four point scale to indicate how TRUE (like you) or how FALSE (unlike you), each statement describes you at this present time.				Next, indicate how much your participation in Learning Ground has helped you in developing this quality about you.			
		FALSE Not Like me	More FALSE than true	More TRUE than false	TRUE Like me	Not at all	Very little	Much	A lot
1	I am ok with asking for help when I need it	0	1	2	3	0	1	2	3
2	I can cope with difficult people most of the time	0	1	2	3	0	1	2	3

**Figure 1.** Sample questions from participant survey. Participants were first asked to rate on a four point scale how true or false each statement of the survey was in relation to them currently. Immediately, participants were asked to indicate how much their participation in a Learning Ground program had helped them in developing that particular quality in them.

The reliability of a measure refers to the consistency or lack of error of measurement. That is the extent to which the items are measuring the same underlying attribute. The traditional method of estimating the internal consistency reliability of a measure is Cronbach's alpha, ' $\alpha$ ' (Judd et al., 1991; Cronbach, 2004). Alpha can range from 0 to 1, with 0 being complete unreliability and 1 meaning complete reliability (i.e., no random error). Although there is no universal consensus about what is an acceptable level of reliability, internal consistency reliability should preferably be above .70 or .80 (Anastasi & Urbina, 1997). The reliability

coefficient for the questionnaire used in this study achieved a reliability estimate  $\alpha$  of .91 for the first section (self-rating of life effectiveness skills) and estimate  $\alpha$  of .90 for ratings of impact of Learning Ground. These results are well above guidelines and indicate that overall the measure is a reliable instrument to assess general personal effectiveness for the participants of this study.

Following the collection of the online surveys, the data was screened for errors and for incomplete surveys. There were a total of 55 attempts to complete the survey; 47 of these were able to be used for the present analysis. The omitted surveys were incomplete or did not have sufficient information to be included in the analysis.

The average age of participants who responded to the survey was 27 years of age, the youngest being 13 and the oldest being 63. A total of 21 (45%) of the responders identified themselves as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, whilst 14 (30%) were male. 98% of responders were born in Australia. The majority of responders (96%) reported living (as indicated by postcode) in the Blacktown LGA. The most common postcode given was 2770 (68%) belonging to the suburbs of Bidwill, Blackett, Dharruk, Emerton, Hebersham, Lethbridge Park, Minchinbury, Mount Druitt, Shalvey, Tregear, Whalan and Willmot. Next most common was Ropes Crossing, 2760, (9%). Two respondents indicated living out of the Blacktown LGA, in Cataract and Denham Court (Postcodes 2560 & 2560).

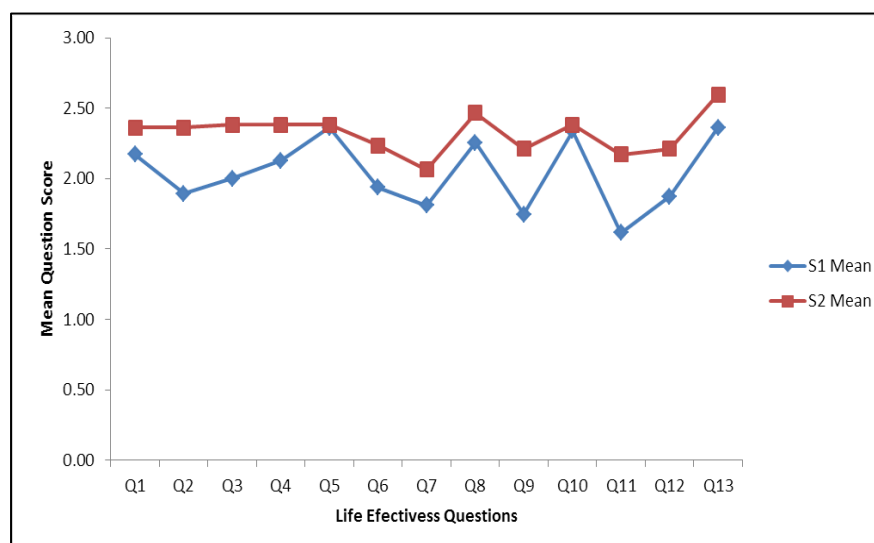
Most responders (60%) had completed at least one program at Learning Ground Mt Druitt, whilst 23% had completed at least two and the rest (17%) had completed three or more programs. There was a broad representation of program attendees. Table 1 shows the distribution of attendees for each of the programs. It is important to note that the total numbers do not equal the number of surveys returned. As previously explained, many survey responders participated in more than one program. The table shows that there is a broad representation of both the adult orientated programs (Family Skills & Enablers) and the younger age programs (Adolescent).

Initial results in relation to the participants' responses to their self-evaluation of life skills and the ability of Learning Ground to assist can be obtained by looking at the mean scores for Step 1 (S1) and Step 2 (S2) side by side (see Figure 1 above). Table 2 below shows the mean scores for each of the 13 questions for both S1 (How 'true' individuals felt the comments were for them) and S2 (How much they had felt Learning Ground had helped in developing this skill through its programs. Scores range from 0 to 3, higher scores indicating a higher level of agreement. The relationship between the scores can also be visualised in the form of a graph plotting both scores side by side. Figure 2 below shows the relationship between both S1 and S2 mean scores.

**Table 1. Learning Ground programs attended by survey responders**

Program	Number of times program identified
Family Skills	17
Enablers	23
Adolescent	29
Young Adolescent	5
Senior Adolescent	6

**Note.** Totals do not match total sample as participants have participated in more than one program



**Figure 2.** Mean scores (n=47) for Life Effectiveness Questions for **S1** (How ‘true’ individuals felt the comments were for them) and **S2** (How much they had felt Learning Ground had helped in developing this skill). Scores range from 0 to 3, higher scores indicating a higher level of agreement. **Q1:** I am ok with asking for help when I need it; **Q2:** I can cope with difficult people most of the time; **Q3:** I do well in social situations; **Q4:** What I do and how I do it will determine my successes in life; **Q5:** I try to get the best possible results when I do things; **Q6:** When I work hard on something I am confident I will succeed; **Q7:** When things around me change I cope well; **Q8:** I am good at cooperating with others; **Q9:** I can handle negative things most of the time; **Q10:** If I succeed in life it will be because of my efforts; **Q11:** I am calm when things go wrong; **Q12:** I can manage day to day problems most of the time; **Q13:** I try and listen to other people’s views on things.

**Table 2. Mean scores for each of the life effectiveness questions measured by the survey**

Question	Mean S1	Mean S2
Q1 I am ok with asking for help when I need it	2.17	2.36
Q2 I can cope with difficult people most of the time	1.89	2.36
Q3 I do well in social situations	2.00	2.38
Q4 What I do and how I do it will determine my successes in life	2.13	2.38
Q5 I try to get the best possible results when I do things	2.36	2.38
Q6 When I work hard on something I am confident I will succeed	1.94	2.23
Q7 When things around me change I cope well	1.81	2.06
Q8 I am good at cooperating with others	2.26	2.47
Q9 I can handle negative things most of the time	1.74	2.21
Q10 If I succeed in life it will be because of my efforts	2.34	2.38
Q11 I am calm when things go wrong	1.62	2.17
Q12 I can manage day to day problems most of the time	1.87	2.21
Q13 I try and listen to other people’s views on things	2.36	2.60
<b>Mean for all questions</b>	<b>2.04</b>	<b>2.32</b>

**Note.** S1 (How ‘true’ individuals felt the comments were for them) and S2 (How much they had felt Learning Ground had helped in developing this skill). Scores range from 0 to 3. With higher scores indicating a higher level of agreement.

It can be seen from these results that Learning Ground participants rated their personal levels of effectiveness quite high with an average score of 2.04. Participants also attributed their effectiveness to the help received at Learning Ground, with a high average score of 2.14.



Although scores are consistently high across all questions, higher gains were reported with a mean score ranging between 2.4 and 2.6. for the following items: *I do well in social situations; if I succeed in life it will be because of my efforts; I am good at cooperating with others; I try and listen to other people's views on things*. Slightly lower effects, with a mean score ranging from 2.1 to 2.2, were reported for: *When things around me change I cope well; I am calm when things go wrong; I can handle negative things most of the time; I can manage day to day problems most of the time*. However, these differences are minimal, indicating that program effects are distributed equally across each of the life effectiveness areas measured by the questions. These high scores indicate that the programs are having a positive effect across many areas of life effectiveness. These results are consistent with Learning Ground's goals of enhancing participants' social, emotional and personal life effectiveness.

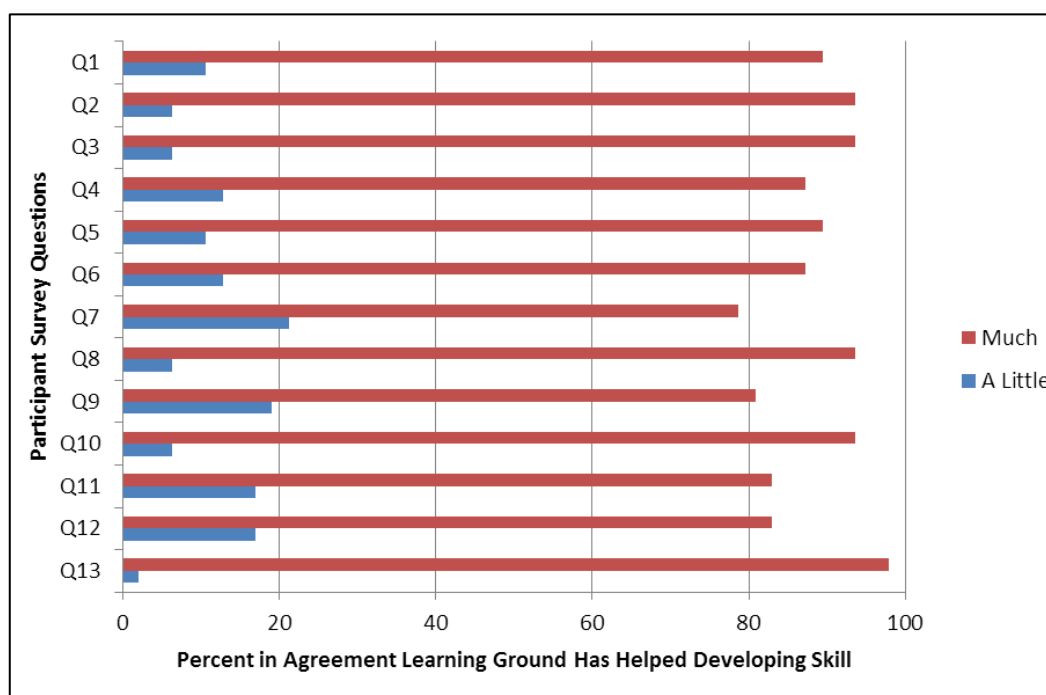
Further analysis was carried out to understand how much participants attributed Learning Ground with helping them to develop the specific life effectiveness qualities measured. For this purpose participants' mean responses for each item were aggregated for the four scale points of the survey for S2, which asked how much participants had felt Learning Ground had helped in developing their skills (see Figure 1 above). The possible four responses were: Not at All, Very Little, Much and A lot. Table 3 provides the results of this analysis. The table shows the percentage of participants who endorsed each of the four categories.

**Table 3. Percentage of participants who endorsed each of the 4 categories of S2**

Question	Not at All	Very Little	Much	A lot
I am ok with asking for help when I need it	2	9	40	49
I can cope with difficult people most of the time	0	6	51	43
I do well in social situations	0	6	49	45
What I do and how I do it will determine my successes in life	4	9	32	55
I try to get the best possible results when I do things	4	6	36	54
When I work hard on something I am confident I will succeed	2	11	49	38
When things around me change I cope well	0	21	51	28
I am good at cooperating with others	0	6	41	53
I can handle negative things most of the time	0	19	40	41
If I succeed in life it will be because of my efforts	2	4	47	47
I am calm when things go wrong	0	17	49	34
I can manage day to day problems most of the time	0	17	45	38
I try and listen to other people's views on things	0	2	36	62

**Note.** n=47. S2: How much they had felt Learning Ground had helped in developing their skill. Values taken from mean scores for each of the questions. All values are rounded to nearest whole number.

The results presented in Table 3 indicate that participants attributed Learning Ground with helping them to develop each of the life effectiveness skills measured by the survey. For example, in relation to the statement "*What I do and how I do it will determine my successes in life*," the results show that 55% of participants' mean scores for this item were in the helped 'A lot' range, 32% in the helped 'Much' and approximately 13% in the helped 'little' to 'Not at all' range. The fact that most participants felt that Learning Ground contributed to their acquisition of each skill is represented in Figure 3. The graph shows the percentage of participants who felt that Learning Ground either helped 'A Little', obtained by combining 'Not at all' with 'Very little' results; or 'Much', obtained by combining 'Much' and 'A Lot' results. As can be seen, participants overwhelmingly attributed learning key life effectiveness skills to participation in the Learning Ground programs.



**Figure 3.** Percentage of participants who felt that Learning Ground Programs either helped ‘A Little’, obtained by combining ‘Not at all’ with ‘Very Little’ results; or, ‘Much’, obtained by combining ‘Much’ and ‘A Lot’ results for participant survey results in S2 (How much they had felt Learning Ground had helped in developing this skill). **Q1:** I am ok with asking for help when I need it; **Q2:** I can cope with difficult people most of the time; **Q3:** I do well in social situations; **Q4:** What I do and how I do it will determine my successes in life; **Q5:** I try to get the best possible results when I do things; **Q6:** When I work hard on something I am confident I will succeed; **Q7:** When things around me change I cope well; **Q8:** I am good at cooperating with others; **Q9:** I can handle negative things most of the time; **Q10:** If I succeed in life it will be because of my efforts; **Q11:** I am calm when things go wrong; **Q12:** I can manage day to day problems most of the time; **Q13:** I try and listen to other people’s views on things. n=47.

Additionally, the participant survey asked respondents in question 14 “If someone wanted to know about Learning Ground and you could only tell them two things, what would you tell them?” 46 participants provided answers. Table 4 summarises the participant responses according to themes and provides sample answers provided by the participants. As Table 4 shows the thematic analysis of the statements made by previous participants who completed the survey yielded 6 overarching themes. The statements highlighted that *Learning Ground is a safe, happy and respectful place; At Learning Ground you learn life changing skills; Learning Ground increases your self-worth and self and other discovery; Learning Ground provides support; Learning Ground is an asset to the community;* and a *general* theme. These results are consistent with the overarching aims of Learning Ground and confirm the positive impact that the differing programs are having.

**Table 4. Participant Survey Brief Response (q14) Thematic Analysis Results**

Theme	Sample Statements
<b>Learning Ground is a safe, happy and respectful place</b>	It is a good place they treat me with respect; Learning Ground is a happy place to be .It's a safe place; They like you there; Learning Ground is a second home to a lot of people and a safe place; everyone treats each other like family no matter how different you are; LG is accessible to all people who want help or advice; The staff and mentors are very friendly and help wherever they can
<b>At Learning Ground you learn life changing skills</b>	It opens your mind of not being scared of learning more about yourself. You have lots of things to give and receive and learning ground teaches you that by helping you notice the little things; I am learning new things The Family skills program & Enablers program have changed my life and outlook on the world, I have a clearer understanding what it is to be a better person ;It's a great facility to learn life skills that schools don't teach; They help you sort put a way to handle situations
<b>Learning Ground increases your self-worth and self and other discovery</b>	It's helping me improve; It makes you proud of yourself. It gives you courage to try; It gives you good news about being Aboriginal; It's a very good program helps kids with confidence in themselves; It makes you believe in yourself; You will understand others.
<b>Learning Ground provides support</b>	they help you with respect and hard times at home and school; if you need a friend you will always find one at LG; Support through most problems; It is a different environment and gives the kids the 1 to 1 teaching they need to succeed; LG is a family, a family that always there for you no matter the circumstances.
<b>Learning Ground is an asset to the community</b>	Helps to give young people the opportunity to feel worthy to participate and to belong. Very important to the Mt Druitt community; Learning Ground is such a valuable asset to all of the local community. It can help families with so many facets of their life and it is a wonderful support; kids from the area benefit from LG they are shown that regardless what their home/family/social life is like at LG they are loved and believed in.
<b>General</b>	Learning ground has amazing tasting food; LG helps you a lot; it's good. You can learn; it is good and fun

**Note.** Sample statements are samples of the total number of statements given by 46 participants to the question: "If someone wanted to know about Learning Ground and you could only tell them two things, what would you tell them?" Samples have been chosen as representative of all statements belonging to that theme. Statements have been de-identified to maintain anonymity.

## Results from Key Stakeholder Agency Survey

A survey consisting of 10 questions was specifically developed for this evaluation by the research team (see Appendix II). The first two questions asked for basic background information to identify the type of service the respondent belonged to (e.g. health, education), and the main Learning Ground services accessed. The following four questions used a 10 point Likert scale to gauge respondents' opinions in four key areas: their knowledge of Learning Ground services; ease of access to these services; the usefulness of the services to their clients; and the usefulness of Learning Ground to the community. The last four items were open ended questions inquiring whether the agency: understood what Learning Ground did, its main strengths, challenges accessing the programs and suggestions for improvement. Surveys were distributed electronically online and via email by Learning Ground following ethical protocols. Following a period of time a member of the research team contacted stakeholder agencies via phone and completed the survey over the phone only if the agency volunteered to do so. This was done to increase the number of responses received. The participants, whether completing the survey electronically or via the phone were assured anonymity and no identifying information was retained by the research team or provided to Learning Ground in relation to which specific agencies provided feedback. A total of 21 key stakeholder agency surveys were received; of these 18 had complete data that could be used for analysis. Table 5 shows the various agencies that responded to the survey.

<b>Table 5. Type of Stakeholder Agency Surveyed</b>	
Agency	Frequency
Education Primary	4
Education Secondary (High School)	4
Health	1
Department of Family & Community Services	1
Non-Government Community Agency	4
Other	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>

**Note.** 2 of the 'other' categories specified belong to local government and a drug and alcohol service. Two did not indicate service type.

Table 6 shows the distribution of programs accessed by agencies responding to the survey. It is important to note that the total numbers do not equal the number of surveys returned; as previously explained many survey responders have accessed more than one program. The table shows that the most frequently accessed programs by responders are the Family Skills, Enablers and Young Adolescent programs.

<b>Table 6. Learning Ground programs accessed by survey responders</b>	
Program	Number of times program identified
Family Skills	6
Enablers	7
Young Adolescent (12 – 17)	8
Senior Adolescent (17 – 21)	0
Young Peoples'	1
Other	4

**Note.** Totals do not match total sample as agencies have accessed more than one program

Table 7 below shows results for the four questions asking respondents to provide their opinion on a 10 point Likert scale in relation to Knowledge of Learning Ground's work; Ease of obtaining Information from Learning Ground; Usefulness to the agency's clients; and Importance of Learning Ground to the community.

<b>Table 7. Descriptive for Questions 1 to 4 Stakeholder Survey</b>				
Question	Mean	Mode	Min	Max
Knowledge of Learning Ground's work	7.11	7	4	9
Ease of obtaining Information from Learning Ground	7.72	9	3	10
Usefulness to the agency's clients	8.11	9	4	10
Importance of Learning Ground to the community	8.94	9	5	10

**Note.** Responses were made on a 10 point Likert Scale (1-10) higher scores indicate a positive response and greater agreement with the question. Mode indicates the most frequent score given to that item. n = 18.

The minimum and maximum scores indicate that for these ratings there was a lot of variability in the responses, reflecting different experiences for the agencies in relation to the areas being assessed. Respondents' average response in relation to their estimation of their knowledge of what learning ground does and ease of obtaining information from Learning Ground were above the midpoint with an average score of 7.11 and 7.72 respectively out of 10. The mode however indicates that the most common experience is a positive one in relation to knowledge about Learning Ground programs (mode = 7) and ease of obtaining information from Learning Ground (mode = 9) suggesting that agencies are on the whole aware of what Learning Ground does and are able to obtain necessary information. Continuing with the analysis, the results also clearly show that the agencies regarded Learning Ground as an important aspect of the community (mean of 8.94 out of 10) and highly useful for their clients (8.11). For both of these questions the most common response was 9 indicating a high level of impact in relation to benefiting clients and value adding to the community as a whole.

The last four questions of the survey required respondents to provide brief responses to a series of questions (see Appendix II). The responses obtained were analysed thematically. Table 8 presents the main themes that were extracted with reference to each of the questions.

**Table 8. Key Agency Survey Extended Response Results Summary**

Question	Sample Statements
<b>PURPOSE</b>	Learning Ground creates a unique service. It is a holistic learning centre for families in the local community. They provide a place for young people to learn how to learn, to develop emotional intelligence and self-discipline, underscored by a respect for Darug culture – as a cultural /spiritual grounding. Helps students develop cultural and family values. Focus is on “each one -teach one” and respect.//They develop community mentors through their family programs that assist parents to feel connected, empowered and centred on improving their own communication skills with their children.//Engages students and families that often feel isolated from the formal learning structures of school and community agencies. Learning Ground helps children learn how to respect each other and be assertive. Learning Ground represents a strong sense of acceptance and belonging that is often lacking in the lives of those who feel socially and emotionally disenfranchised by institutions. It helps build resilience.//Provides participants with behavioural management support. It provides targeted intervention that schools are not able to provide.//Learning Ground supports students to socially and emotionally develop the skills required to finish their formal education. These skills also enhance their employability.

**Note.** Table 8 continues next page.

**Table 8. Key Agency Survey Extended Response Results Summary (Continued)**

Question	Sample Statements
STRENGTHS	<p>Learning Ground offers crucial emotional and social support to the community and its youth. It is able to tailor programs to individual needs that can facilitate a student's positive behavioural engagement and bridge back into a productive integration with their school and community.//LG offers concrete emotional stability – kids in Mt Druitt often see so many short- term programs and faces, so much so, that long-term stability and supportive networks can be rare. LG helps children who have struggled at school to experience success by providing a stable support outreach.//It has an established ethos of cross-cultural respect within the community of Mt Druitt.//On a community level LG seem to be achieving supportive skills –based connections that schools are not achieving in this region with troubled family contexts and their children. Schools do not garner the same level of trust that is manifested by Learning Ground.//Collaborative and highly efficient.</p>
CHALLENGES	<p>Not enough places available to meet the demand of children requiring this kind of intervention and emotional support/mentoring.//Sometimes it is difficult to get students a place because demand exceeds availability. More spaces need to be made available – no other such resources in Mt Druitt.// NSW Department of Education has created barriers for schools that are keen to engage with Learning Ground by giving directives that they are not an approved organisation.// Transport to venue.// Funding for an expansion of the programs and working space.// Some organisations were not aware of the range of programs and even the existence of Learning Ground.</p>
RECOMMENDATIONS	<p>Some children have social and emotional/psychological disabilities – LG needs greater support from authorities and local government to meet the needs of these children with school liaison being stronger. // Learning Ground needs to work towards gaining endorsement with the NSW Education Department – around 'duty of care'. Some schools mark down students who attend Learning Ground as "unjustified leave" even though the parents have informed the school of the support they are receiving. // Stronger connections between LG and staff – more exchange about the students LG is working with...it would be helpful if LG could present to staff at a PD and liaise in ways that are supportive and complementary. // Where possible filtering through 'good news' stories to the community via local newspaper and government agencies who support Learning Ground // LG could connect with Principals networks where different regional organisations present what the can offer schools as adjuncts to formal learning through their programs.// Scheduled visits for schools every term would develop a more structured connection and communication of the schools. This could be a 2-way process where Learning Ground also commits to annual presentations outlining their programs to the schools during staff meetings or professional development days.</p>

**Note.** The information represents overarching summaries for each of the questions, not quotes from the participants.

The results in relation to Question 7 indicate a consistent understanding of Learning Ground's whole of child and community approach. The responses did not seem to indicate that the program was seen as a purely behavioural program but that indeed it targeted community, culture, identity and support which are not able to be provided in schools. Question 8 results clearly identifies a number of strengths consistent with Learning Ground's mission of being a respectful and safe environment, which offers social and emotional learning and develops high levels of trust with their participants. Q9 identified a number of challenges in relation to funding, where it was thought that it should be increased, and the lack of available spaces in the programs, due to the space and funding restrictions. An important challenge were barriers being created between Learning Ground and NSW Schools administration with inconsistent messages about whether schools should engage with Learning Ground being given to school

principals due to the lack of being BOSTES approved. Q10 which canvassed recommendations clearly indicated the need for Learning Ground to have an active role with schools. Suggestions were made in relation to providing staff development, visiting schools, and providing school staff access to Learning Ground. As a whole the responses were positive and respondents predominantly wished that it was possible for more students to access learning ground and for more collaboration between schools and Learning Ground.

## Focus Group Results

A total of 3 focus groups were carried out for the purposes of this review. One consisted of the adult participants, one of adolescent participants and one of mentors. This section presents the results of the thematic analysis conducted on the transcripts of each of the focus groups. Each focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes and was facilitated by two members of the research team.

### Results from Adult Learning Ground Participant Focus Groups

A total of seven participants took place in the adult focus group. The participants were both male (2) and female. The age range was between 45 and 63 years of age, with all of them having participated in the Enablers and Family Skills programs. Table 9 provides information on the emergent themes that were extracted as part of the analysis. The focus group participants' experience led them to believe that Learning Ground represents a unique space in the Mt Druitt region. It is a culturally safe space that meets children and adults in a way that is supportive and valuing of their social and emotional needs. The Adult programs help widen participants' views of the world, teaching them to become empowering social leaders; engaging and networking with their community and families. Learning Ground helps people deal with their emotions and find spiritual purpose in life. Learning Ground teaches participants, to go beyond the surface of what a person is presenting, in order to understand what is happening beneath the acting out. Furthermore, Learning Ground has given people social and emotional strategies that have transformed their family and community life. It is experiential in its pedagogy and incorporates traditional Aboriginal philosophy and values. Learning Ground is embedded in the community; it is the community at work and as such removes any stigma associated with being sent or coerced to do any of their programs. The main challenge identified by the focus group was that Learning Ground needs greater funding to expand its limited context.





**Table 9. Results from Adult Learning Ground Participant Focus Groups**

Theme	Sample Statements
<b>Learning Ground represents a unique space in the Mt Druitt region. It is a culturally safe space that meets children and adults in a way that is supportive and valuing of their social and emotional needs</b>	<p>I feel that the kids have more respect for the people here at Learning Ground than I feel that they do at the schools. But it is helping them improve their respect for the teachers and the heads of school that they have, because here there's more patience and there is more one on one time with the child. I think it helps that with every - we know that every child is different. Every child's family life, home life, social life is completely different. No child is the same and knowing that and knowing the temperament of the child helps them and helps the mentors and the facilitators be more compassionate, open and more - being able to confide in someone. You don't have that at school... I see it like swimming lessons. Everyone in society knows it's a good idea to send your kids to swimming lessons. It protects them if they fall into the water and it's a safety thing. But the other aspect of a child's upbringing is the enabling. That is just as important. I mean it's not life threatening but it is just as important for the wellbeing and the strength of that child to keep going. I believe that sort of thing needs to be incorporated into the school systems, like you do swimming lessons and whatnot. It's something that children, at all ages, and adults can benefit from.</p>
<b>The Adult programs help widen participants' views of the world, teaching them to become empowering social leaders; engaging and networking with their community and families</b>	<p>So I found out about Learning Ground when we visited here through TAFE, so I was intrigued and started volunteering here and as a volunteer [youth] do the Family Life Skills and Enablers program. I think it's helped out with me in how I deal with things, not at home but like away from home, like the way you speak to people... I raised three pretty good kids. I'm not saying they're anything special. But they've kept out of the drugs and they've got a job and they're doing stuff for themselves. But when I did the course with Melissa on family skills, I learnt so much. I thought to myself if only I did that back then. If only I thought of that back then. My kids wouldn't have these little issues that they've got. You know? Some of them are big issues but...But I still believe that the enablers has to be incorporated first to give them belief that they can - there's no point giving them a whole heap of this is what you can do, if they don't believe they can. I think that's the main thing we should never forget. Is they need to be instilled in them is their ability to do it.</p>
<b>Learning Ground helps people deal with their emotions and find spiritual purpose in life.</b>	<p>For me, it made me change my whole perspective of life. The way that I was living was like organised chaos and I wasn't happy in my work and I was ready to just punch somebody and happy to spend some time in jail.... With getting involved with the enablers program, it helps you think beyond that and you want to give back.</p>
<b>Learning Ground teaches participants, to go beyond the surface of what a person is presenting, understand what's happening beneath the acting out.</b>	<p>There's a reason behind the behaviour...Well it's opened up a few doors and I enjoy working with different parts of the community...The limitations that society puts on people. Limitations that your partner or your family life or your history as put on you where you might have failed and you think you can't do that again or that you can't do that, you're not capable of achieving something.... To stop all the negatives, to stop all the can't dos and the limits...As an adult, I needed that. I learnt from the enablers course and I learn every day</p>
<b>Learning Ground has given people social and emotional strategies that have transformed their family and community life:</b>	<p>I started the Family Skills program, which has actually changed my life... After doing the Family Skills program and learning the skills from the program and introducing that into my home life, everything just turned to be more positive. I was getting much better behaviour from my son</p>

Note. Table 9 Continues next page.

**Table 9. Results from Adult Learning Ground Participant Focus Groups (Continued).**

Theme	Sample Statements
<b>Learning Ground is a place where ‘deep listening’ takes place. It is experiential in its pedagogy and is founded on traditional Aboriginal philosophy and values</b>	It’s very experiential. Is that how you say it? Like where you’re experiencing things, you’re not writing things down and learning from textbooks and stuff like that. That’s where I think I really enjoy that I’m such a practical learner. That is a very traditional Aboriginal way, is knowledge is handed down in storytelling and that’s how people seem to learn and you feel better about yourself and others when you can sit around and do something like this. Rather than have to read it in a text book and then nothing sinks in and you don’t get to express yourself. But you can listen to others if you don’t say anything or you can express how you feel without feeling that judgement.
<b>Learning Ground is in embedded in the community; it is the community at work and as such removes any stigma associated with being sent or coerced to do any of their programs.</b>	If more things are available for this in more areas, then it doesn’t become that stigmatism of when you go to do a program like the family skills program which is a parenting program. Most people won’t do it because if its offered to them, they think they’re being judged as a bad parent. If it was more widely available to do these things that people come and do more voluntarily, that it would help parents and children in that generation gap that’s getting more or less each time, I personally feel that doing the family skills program every - twice a year with everyone and learning different things from different people, is great for me, in my job
<b>Learning Ground needs greater funding to expand its limited context</b>	That’s more people being able to teach the Enablers program outside of Learning Ground. But still be related to the Learning Ground chain reaction thing but to actually take that to other places, because obviously they’re not big enough to cater for everybody and it works in small groups.

**Note.** Sample statements are samples of the total number of statements given by participants to the focus group questions (see Appendix III) Samples have been chosen as representative of all statements belonging to that theme. Statements have been de-identified to maintain anonymity.

### Results from Adolescent Focus Groups

A total of eight participants took place in the adolescent focus group. The participants were both male (3) and female. The age range was between 13 and 25 years of age. For this adolescent group Learning Ground represented a culturally safe ‘free space’; not without rules but free of the stigmatisation and bullying that often informed their school life. Learning Ground allowed for a greater clarification of social values and a consistency around acceptable behaviour management where deep personal interest is taken in each of the students. At Learning Ground everyone learns from each other how to understand their emotions and that, in life, we often have choices. By far the most consistent challenge was the desire for further funding, and a wish to expand the program with longer hours and more than just one day a week.



**Table 10. Results from Adolescent Learning Ground Participant Focus Groups**

Theme	Sample Statements
<b>Learning Ground represented a culturally safe 'free space'; not without rules but free of the stigmatisation and bullying that often informed their school life</b>	It's less drama than school is. Always fighting, girls bitching all the time. I'd rather come here so I don't have to listen to all that and get away from it... Mostly my manners. Because I never used to have much manners and then I come here and they help me through it.... Because I feel like I have more of an opportunity to do things I want. Like at school, sometimes when I'm in the classroom, I can't focus on what I have to do because of all the kids around me. I feel like I'm not getting at that goal that I should be getting at.
<b>Learning Ground allowed for a greater clarification of social values and a consistency around acceptable behaviour management:</b>	Well, with school you get away with more things than anything, I reckon. Especially at my school. If you swear, the teachers don't care. They don't care at all...(here) We're learning Life Ed skills...It's better - better than schoolwork
<b>Learning Ground is a place where deep personal interest is taken in each of the students.</b>	Yeah. Because I want to become a preschool teacher. I've wanted to be a preschool teacher, ever since I was younger. I babysit my cousins and everything. I just - that's my goal. I want to become a preschool teacher and it's hard for me when I've got all these other kids around me at school. So I can't focus on what I have to do... They think it's good because before we came we were more, this is who I am (sic.). Now that we've been coming we've gotten more respectful...mentors (make life better)
<b>At Learning Ground everyone learns from each other how to understand their emotions and that, in life, we often have choices</b>	Because they teach us how to control our anger... Like, on Wednesdays the other - the younger groups come here, the primary school people come here and some of the people in our group go to teach the primary school... If you're at school and someone is being naughty or something, or someone's picking on them, you teach them what you can do different
<b>Challenges/wishes</b>	Longer hours. Yeah, the whole week. Two days a week. One day a week (at school) and the rest Learning Ground... Better funding... A different facility.

**Note.** Sample statements are samples of the total number of statements given by participants to the focus group questions (see Appendix III) Samples have been chosen as representative of all statements belonging to that theme. Statements have been de-identified to maintain anonymity.

### Results from Mentor Focus Group

A total of nine participants took place in the Mentor focus group. The participants were both male (3) and female. The age range was between 26 and 64 years of age, with all of them having participated in the Enablers and Family Skills programs. The mentors believed that Learning Ground is a place where social and emotional healing takes place. It is a place of acceptance - acceptance of 'self' and acceptance of 'others'. Mentors interact in ways that bring out confidence in students who desire human attention and unconditional acceptance within a non-judgemental learning space. They strongly believed that mentorship is a two way process that enhances both the human development of the mentors as well as the participants. Trust is the binding quality at Learning Ground that allows participants to grow and develop. Learning Ground responds to people as individuals, not to their reactive behaviour, as a co-operative caring team under the ethos of "each one teach-one". They believed that mentors encourage affective, social and behavioural reflectivity and inner awareness in each of the children and that this was a means by which they promoted change. The challenge identified by the mentors

was the need for Learning Ground to create stronger links with schools with the purpose of enhancing and maintaining the gains which the young people make.

**Table 11. Results from Mentor Learning Ground Participant Focus Groups**

Theme	Sample Statements
<b>Learning Ground is a place where social and emotional healing takes place.</b>	<p>We get the respect and we find that we enjoy coming here and doing things for this place. Because it's not expected, it's just we're appreciated for doing it...the best way to sum up Learning Ground in the words of the kids is that this is a safe place for them. A lot of them don't have that. They can't be comfortable in their home environments or, you know, their home lives and they feel - like many kids have said to me, this is where they feel most comfortable... Yes, it isn't numeracy and literacy taught and it's not the school syllabus. But the fact that there's the behavioural change program, there's literacy and numeracy being taught... If we want to help these kids everyone's got to understand what's going on in their lives, not just us, because we can only get them so far. They have to go home and get that same treatment to continue to go on, otherwise they're going to keep going in this vicious cycle and get nowhere</p>
<b>Learning Ground is a place of acceptance – acceptance of 'self' and acceptance of 'others'.</b>	<p>I didn't know how to deal with anything and Learning Ground really helped because they gave me my coping mechanism... It allowed me to believe in myself (as a leader)/ I think what makes us different too is the training because we can now notice and when the kids come up upset in the morning we can acknowledge that. We don't rush them and go, what's wrong and rah, rah, rah? We know what's going on. You know, it's alright, they've had a bad day so we'll give them their space. You know, we can report to each other. Whereas schools, maybe at home, they come in like that... Children have emotions that they don't know how to deal with. So when you put them in time out for something that they really can't control, they're still learning to control, it's really - it's counterproductive... Usually just spending a bit of time with the child and getting to - well letting them know that we understand that - you know, that it's okay for them to be feeling upset and just letting them talk it out is pretty much I think mostly what they need before they can go back and sit down and participate again. You know, it's just one of us reaching out to the child.</p>
<b>Mentorship is a two way process that enhances both the human development of the mentors as well as the participants</b>	<p>I mean our words of wisdom that we follow is each one, teach one and I really do believe that we get as much out of this as the participants do and we are learning from each other. I think that's what is so key about the relationship that it does go both ways. We're not their friends but we are - we're their mentors... So the whole program is based around behavioural change so we are assisting them in that area. Where we see good behaviour we encourage it through positive description, through emotion coaching and we follow the program that [Myra](sic.) has so beautifully done</p>
<b>Learning Ground Mentors interact in ways that bring out confidence in students who are desire human attention and unconditional acceptance within a non-judgemental learning space</b>	<p>Learning Ground opens the door where there's that gap in the middle that's never been filled. For some of the kids, I think that's what they need. They need to know that there are other options, they're accepted for who they are. They don't need to change - [their] behaviour is an issue, but I think, from what I've learnt from the last year as being a mentor, it bridges the gap for the kids from either, like I said, being acceptable in mainstream school, to being an outcast and there's that middle in between; A lot of these kids don't have consistency in their lives and they see, if not every single face in this room, they see a familiar face every time they're here and they panic when you're not. I was away - I'm not saying it was just me but that week I was in Fiji when I came home the Wednesday group said to me, where were you? I said, I was on a holiday, blah, blah, blah. Are you going to be in next week? Like are you coming back? I thought you were never coming back... They're open to the idea of being part of something else.</p>

**Note.** Table 11 Continues next page.

**Table 11. Results from Mentor Learning Ground Participant Focus Groups (Continued)**

Theme	Sample Statements
<b>Trust is the binding quality at Learning Ground that allows participants to grow and develop</b>	I think that's something that I have noticed more too, that confidence in the students because they don't feel that they're heard in a big classroom setting and they don't think that anyone cares in a school setting. Whereas I think they're feeling more and more here that they are heard and they do care... Also just giving them the praise for - like the attention for good behaviour and showing them that it's not just bad behaviour that gets you attention...
<b>Learning Ground responds to people as individuals not to their reactive behaviour as a co-operative caring team under the ethos of "teach-one-each-one" two way consistency of learning</b>	I think the biggest thing I feel being a mentor is that a lot of these kids don't have that one adult that they look up to. So our role is to be that one significant adult in their life, you know, like Paris said. We're not a friend. We're someone they can trust and tell all their problems too because we're not going to judge them.... I think we treat each child as an individual, who they are and we base our support for them as an individual. It's not something that, this is what we're going to do for you and it's all the same. We look past I think their front too. Kids build up a front. Big tough exterior persona or a big mouth person a that they.... I think we treat each child as an individual, who they are and we base our support for them as an individual. It's not something that, this is what we're going to do for you and it's all the same. We look past I think their front too. Kids build up a front.
<b>Learning Ground Mentors encourage affective, social and behavioural reflectivity and inner awareness</b>	So we see the kids as reacting to something that's happened to them either at home or at school or whatever. When they do muck up or they do misbehave, whatever they call it, we're aware that something's triggered it off, especially if it's something that's not in their norm. We'll look past to find out what that is and then deal with it accordingly...Don't just take it at face value and it does come from somewhere and learning about how the brain matures and works. Then the program I think is so clever in that it does allow the participants to become more self-aware and more aware of their behaviour and also why they behave the way they do and what environmental effects or things at school or family might be triggering things and how to better deal with those situations. I mean it really is - like we are all learning...What we've been taught is there's no such thing as a bad emotion. Anger, jealousy, happiness. They're all emotions that we feel and they're all normal. It's how the child reacts to those things. You've got kids that are coming from dysfunctional families that are feeling frustrated and angry and hurt and scared, more so on certain days than other days.
<b>Learning Ground needs to create stronger links with schools</b>	Just very quickly, I would say on this sort of note is that it would be great if schools didn't regard us as a threat and that we are actually doing good work... and that it is in the best interests of the child. It's not irrelevant. I don't know if they think it's a fight for funding or something but this service is available. It does have great outcomes so use it. They think they'll lose their funding if they don't do it in-house so they're hesitant to send the kids to a program that's not been run at the school. It would be interesting for a counsellor to come in and sit in on at least some sessions. Yeah and we can encompass a lot of things because a lot of the schools are unaware of the significance of the program and how it is a designed program by an educational psychologist. They're not aware of that. They're not aware of this training so we need to educate the schools as well as to what is happening here. I believe the program could be so much more beneficial if it was across the board, if it was implemented into the school system. So these kids that do come here and they might come here on a continuous and the other students have got a five week course of it or a week course could be done. Then they've got the support, they've got understanding. They're not going from this place which is completely different to what they're used to and then battling with all the other students, the parents, the teachers who have no idea what they've been learning this one day.

**Note.** Sample statements are samples of the total number of statements given by participants to the focus group questions (see Appendix III) Samples have been chosen as representative of all statements belonging to that theme. Statements have been de-identified to maintain anonymity.



## Conclusion

The impact of Learning Ground was assessed using a mixed method approach. Previous participants, mentors and key stakeholder agencies were able to provide feedback in relation to their experiences with Learning Ground. The results show that previous and current participants in Learning Ground's core programs believe their participation had facilitated their growth in relation to cooperating with others, listening to others' views, effort, ability to succeed, seeking support, and social skills. Strongest growth was felt in relation to their ability to consider and listen to others' points of view and coping with difficult people. The results suggest that the programs, although useful and still contributing to their growth, had a lesser impact on their ability to handle difficult things most of the time and to cope with significant change. Consistent with the enhancement of people's self-awareness and metacognitive skills the differentiated pattern indicated that the participants had insight into their own challenges. This was also evident in the open ended responses to the questionnaire, which highlighted positive effects including sense of safety, respect and belonging to their local community. Participants reported learning life changing skills, improvement in their sense of self-worth and enhanced confidence whilst experiencing a sense of connection and support.

In relation to the key stakeholder feedback, they were aware of Learning Ground and they accessed Family Skills, Enablers and the Adolescents programs. They were knowledgeable about the purpose of learning at Learning Ground, the programs on offer and their ethos. Importantly the results clearly indicated that the agencies considered Learning Ground a valuable asset in the community, commenting on the uniqueness of Learning Ground. When reflecting on the usefulness to their clients of the programs they had accessed, the majority agreed on the positive impact of the programs on their clients. The agencies see Learning Ground as a unique service that engages the disengaged, and provides crucial social emotional support. However, they also highlight the need for the program to be expanded. A strong recommendation is made that there should be further dialogue between Learning Ground and school communities so that the young people may further benefit via the school's interaction with them.

The adult participants emphasised the safe place which Learning Ground provides and the responsiveness to the individual. They appreciated the opportunity to learn valuable life skills, the insights provided into their emotions, their understanding of others, and their invigorated sense of purpose. In addition, it provided valuable skills and strategies for dealing with relationships and improved their communication skills with their children and other significant relationships in their life. They particularly commented on their personal growth in efficacy and esteem.

Similarly, the adolescent focus group valued the space Learning Ground provided. This space was characterised as non-coercive where they were treated with respect and provided with support to learn important things about themselves, life, and to work things out for themselves and with others.

Finally, in emphasis of the impact of Learning Ground, mentors described their appreciation of what they learnt from volunteering at Learning Ground and their pleasure in being able to give back to others through their mentorship. Having experienced the program and the benefits they have achieved provides them with a capacity to empathise closely with the young people they mentor. Many of them described having experienced the sorts of challenges at school, and in the community, which the young people attending Learning Ground are currently

experiencing. They saw it as a privilege to be able to both assist and learn from the young people in the programs. This attests to the power of the ethos of “each one teach one” to break down hierarchies and build authentic relationships between participants and mentors. This is an outstanding feature that permeates the Learning Ground community and makes it so successful.

## Discussion

Learning Ground’s programs have a core central philosophy closely aligned to humanistic principles, but they also draw from Aboriginal understandings of the world, cognitive behavioural perspectives, and sociocultural approaches. The programs’ flexible delivery and supportive environment also closely align with theoretical models of human change, in particular, approaches to change that go beyond focusing on individual dimensions (e.g. only emotional change, only behavioural change) or singular causes of risk (e.g. biology or social influences). Such models of change incorporate a number of theoretical perspectives into a comprehensive approach that, guided by a central principle, can be applied across diverse settings, populations and outcomes for both prevention and treatment. Learning Ground has applied the principle of “each one teach one” in this way to underpin a suite of intersecting programs that meet local challenges and build community capacity to address significant social and behavioural challenges.

The main drawback confronted by Learning Ground is paradoxically associated with the flexibility and holistic design of its programs. While this approach is effective for meeting participants’ developmental needs, the adolescent programs are evidently deemed insufficiently academic to meet the criteria for obtaining endorsement as a Board of Studies Teaching and Educational Standards (BOSTES) Alternative Education Program. This flexibility also makes it difficult to pinpoint the most relevant parts of the programs. Further specification of explicit learning goals, standards and assessments could potentially enable Learning Ground to meet the BOSTES criteria. However, given our observations of the need for, and effectiveness of, individual tailoring of the program and supports, it is questionable whether the effort to meet the BOSTES criteria would be worth the loss of implementation flexibility. The research team considers that the degree of formalisation required in this process would risk detracting from the programs’ effectiveness with the high risk population it serves.

For education systems the issue of what to do with youth whose behaviour persistently challenges expected standards remains vexed (Arlington, 2011; Dobia, 2013), despite recent initiatives to implement systemic interventions to improve schools’ management of student behaviour (Mooney, Dobia, Barker, Power, Watson, & Yeung, 2008). An analysis of long suspension rates in NSW Department of Education schools between 2005 and 2009 showed an increase of 33% (Uniting Care Burnside, 2011). The data for suspensions shows disproportionate trends, with regions that have higher rates of social disadvantage showing higher rates of suspension. Similar disparities have been found in other states and internationally (Hemphill & Hargreaves, 2009). These higher rates of suspension in disadvantaged communities in Australia remain significant even after controlling for factors such as antisocial behaviour, gender, age, family functioning, peer group and academic failure (Hemphill, Toumbourou, Smith, Kendall, Rowland, Freiberg, & Williams, 2010). Evidence from the various stakeholders who participated in the Learning Ground evaluation attested to the difficulties encountered by schools in the Mt Druitt area when dealing with student behaviour problems, including their frequent resort to the use of suspension. In this context, Learning Ground’s work with young people who



experience behaviour difficulties at school was clearly valued by schools and community agencies.

Research shows that excluding students from school frequently compounds academic difficulties and undermines engagement. Suspension increases antisocial behaviour and has negative impacts on students' wellbeing in both the immediate and longer term (Hemphill et al, 2010). With 42% of suspensions in NSW schools handed out for 'persistent disobedience', there is a clear need for more proactive approaches to encourage appropriate behaviour and re-engage students who may be struggling with school for a variety of reasons. Learning Ground was acknowledged by the stakeholders interviewed as having particular expertise and success in helping young people to re-engage constructively when they return to school after a period of suspension.

The social exclusion impacts of school suspension are particularly evident for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. In NSW in 2014 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were 6.8% of the total student population but accounted for 26% of suspensions (NSW DEC, 2014; NSW DOE, 2015). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth were also over-represented in both justice supervision and youth detention by a factor of 18 when compared with non-Indigenous youth (AIHW, 2013; 2014). These figures reflect the sense of "national emergency" expressed recently by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, who observed with alarm that "we are better at keeping our young people locked up in detention than in school" (Amnesty International, 2015, p. 3). Approximately up to 70% of the youth who currently attend Learning Ground are from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. In working closely with local Aboriginal Elders and incorporating Aboriginal perspectives throughout its programs, Learning Ground seeks to affirm a sense of respect for and pride in Aboriginal culture. In the materials and practices observed there is a clear and deliberate attempt for Learning Ground materials, activities and 'space' to acknowledge Aboriginal culture. This is evident in the abundant artwork, signage and motifs in both English and Darug languages, as well as in the attempt to embed activities that privilege an Aboriginal worldview in the various Learning Ground programs. Taking this approach helps to validate Aboriginal participants' sense of self and provides a context for addressing racist attitudes and values both in the general society and in communications between participants from different cultural backgrounds. Clear evidence from the focus group and open-ended survey responses supported the importance of this work for restoring young people's self-worth and capacity. This finding is consistent with emerging research showing the centrality of cultural identity for cultivating resilience and wellbeing amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth (Dobia, Bodkin-Andrews, Parada, et al., 2013; Dobia & Roffey, in press; Kickett-Tucker & Coffin, 2011; Priest, Mackean, Davis, Briggs & Waters, 2012).

Learning Ground's programs and pedagogical approach directly address the participants' social and emotional development, thus leading to positive impacts for life effectiveness. The economic and lifetime benefits of developing social and emotional skills have been highlighted in a recent report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2015). This report advocates that social and emotional skills are needed alongside cognitive skills to foster lifetime success. Social and emotional skills that lead to greater cooperation, task perseverance, and problem solving have beneficial impacts on varied outcomes within the labour market, health systems and, importantly, life satisfaction. "Cognitive skills matter, but social and emotional skills, such as perseverance, self-control and resilience are just as important. All of these skills need to be fostered for individuals and societies to prosper." (p17). The OECD report pinpoints the unique place of schools in augmenting these skills as part of

their everyday practice. In providing programs, not only for young people of school age, but also for the wider community of which they are a part, Learning Ground has established a unique and highly effective approach to enabling personal development and civic engagement. Strong endorsement of the long-term benefits of the Learning Ground approach was provided by focus group participants, for whom Learning Ground had been instrumental in growing their sense of capacity and effectiveness across multiple domains.

School-based research into social and emotional learning (SEL) also supports the approach taken at Learning Ground. SEL is defined as “practices and policies that help children and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that can enhance personal development, establish satisfying interpersonal relationships, and lead to effective and ethical work and productivity” (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich & Gullotta, 2015, p. 6). The Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) promotes the use of evidence-based programs for systematically teaching five interrelated social emotional competencies in schools. These comprise self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2015). The results of this evaluation indicate that participants, mentors and agencies alike recognise the contribution of Learning Ground to each of these areas. A recent meta-analysis reviewed findings from 213 studies into the effects of universal SEL programs run by schools, and demonstrated significant improvements for six outcomes: social and emotional skills, attitudes toward self and others, positive social behaviours, conduct problems, emotional distress, and academic performance (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011). The effects on academic performance, which showed the equivalent of an 11 percentile point gain, were comparable and in some instances higher than effects found in meta-analysis of purely educational interventions. Similar evidence of positive effects on a range of skills, including academic performance, through universal social and emotional learning and mental health support has been demonstrated in Australian schools (Dix, Slee, Lawson & Keeves, 2012). Unlike these studies, the evaluation of Learning Ground programs and outcomes lacked the scope for undertaking pre-post analysis; hence it was not possible to measure specific gains over time. However, the research discussed here from the broader field of social and emotional learning is consistent with the approach taken at Learning Ground, and so provides evidence of the relevance and currency of Learning Ground’s educational program, complementing the stakeholder feedback on its effectiveness.

Despite the evident success of Learning Ground in supporting and re-engaging young people experiencing complex difficulties, the evaluation revealed some sources of tension with schools and education systems. The Key Agency Survey indicated that while the usefulness and importance of the services provided by Learning Ground were rated very highly, and the need to provide more places was strongly advised, some schools and educators in the area were wary of Learning Ground’s lack of formal status with the Department of Education and seemed to regard its educational approach with suspicion. This is especially unfortunate for the numbers of high risk, high need young people who live in the Mt Druitt area and require the kind of tertiary level service provided by Learning Ground, that seeks to maximise support for participants across the range of challenges they face. In this respect Learning Ground’s approach is consistent with a ‘wraparound’ intervention model, which is particularly indicated for young people experiencing complex difficulties.

Both the national school mental health initiatives (KidsMatter and MindMatters, see Graetz, Littlefield, Trinder, Dobia, et al., 2008) and the Department of Education’s Positive Behaviour for Learning initiative (PBL, see Mooney et al., 2008) employ a public health model based on a whole school approach that frame learning, behaviour and wellbeing within a tiered system of

support needs. The universal level forms the first tier where all students receive instruction in social and emotional skills (KidsMatter and MindMatters) or behavioural expectations (PBL). The second tier describes the need for targeted interventions for students with difficulties requiring more intensive support at the school level, while the third (tertiary) tier recognises that some students with complex difficulties will need individualised assistance from specialist services. To provide adequate support for these students, schools need to develop effective partnerships with community agencies involved in the provision of mental health, welfare and specialist education services. Since most schools in the Mt Druitt area have undertaken some level of PBL training, it would seem helpful to formally orient the relationships between schools and Learning Ground according to this framework, in which Learning Ground should be recognised as a tertiary service provider with an identified role for working with young people at risk. In this regard it is encouraging that some local schools have already recognised the value of establishing a partnership approach to working with Learning Ground. Teachers from these schools have been allocated to oversee the Learning Ground students, and have undertaken regular visits to the Learning Ground centre to learn about its work with students.

The difficulties experienced by young people participating in Learning Ground programs often arise from, or are exacerbated by, disadvantage. They may experience discrimination associated with race, class, gender and/or income. They may be exposed to pejorative labels and punitive interventions, such as exclusion or withdrawal from formal schooling contexts, which do not promote behavioural, affective or cognitive change. Their family situation may be disorganised, with little adult guidance or supervision from an early age. They may experience dysregulated parenting by adults who are themselves struggling socially and emotionally. As a consequence, many of the young people whom Learning Ground engages have a negative self-perpetuating and internalised deficit self-talk whilst simultaneously struggling with the expectations of formal schooling. These factors are difficult to address in formal school settings where large classroom cohorts leave little room for individualised attention. Learning Ground responds by attempting to present a safe haven of trust and personalised mentorship without the temporal and resource constraints of school structures and systems.

The detrimental impact on learning and wellbeing of aversive affective states (e.g., anxiety, depression), and school environments which may expose students to racism, bullying and violence, are now well documented. However, interventions in these areas are not just about the removal of unpleasantness in schools, or the excessive control of behaviour. It is also about the gains which are made when affect regulation and development are also seen as the core business of learning spaces alongside academic development. The kind of intensive, individualised, non-judgmental support provided by Learning Ground is essential to enable students experiencing these kinds of difficulties to address developmental trauma and disadvantage so that they can engage effectively in school and in life. This is where Learning Ground is at its best.

Based on the results presented in this report the following section outlines some recommendations for the consideration of the Chain Reaction and Learning Ground executive.

## Recommendations

Overall, the evaluation found that Learning Ground was very highly regarded by participants and stakeholders for the quality of its programs, the outcomes they produce, and its unique community-embedded model of operation and service. Analysis of program content and delivery identified that its effectiveness is based in coherent and appropriate theories of human development, a relational pedagogy of engagement, volunteer training and community empowerment. Although there was substantial regard among those surveyed for Learning Ground's work, respondents also identified that there were barriers to the development of effective partnerships with local schools that needed to be addressed.

The following recommendations suggest several strategies which may enable Learning Ground to build closer partnerships with schools around student engagement, behaviour management, referral processes and school integration of young people attending Learning Ground programs. These strategies involve effective communication regarding Learning Ground programs, liaison and collaboration with schools, and providing teachers with opportunities for professional learning and development.

- *Undertake strategic promotion of Learning Ground programs in school education forums and directly with referring schools.* Greater school awareness of Learning Ground programs and philosophy will enable better understanding of Learning Ground's approach and more effective partnerships to be developed with schools. School-based PBL team meetings offer particularly appropriate opportunities for presenting and discussing Learning Ground's approach.
- *Consider employing a schools liaison officer to undertake promotion and engagement strategies that will build stronger, more effective links with local schools.* A schools liaison officer with experience working with the NSW Department of Education and a sound appreciation of Learning Ground could provide added support and bridge into the schools, particularly through working with school-based PBL and welfare teams. This role will help to ensure that young people with complex needs are assisted through effective partnerships, with the potential to develop a joint case management approach.
- *Work with schools to develop a supportive re-entry program at the school for students who are transitioning between attending Learning Ground and school.* For example, some of the feeder schools have allocated specific teachers to oversee the Learning Ground students, often complementing this with a term visit to the centre. This kind of support for re-entry is consistent with the PBL tiered approach of providing additional support to students to improve the engagement of students with behavioural difficulties and increase their success in meeting behavioural goals.
- *Investigate how the effective mentoring approach used at Learning Ground might be incorporated into schools.* School-based mentoring strategies have been found to be effective supports for students exhibiting behavioural difficulties. Mentors are often teachers with whom the student has a trusting relationship. This kind of approach is recognised within PBL as an example of a tier 2 program. Given the highly effective system of mentoring established by Learning Ground, there is a strong case for investigating the potential of establishing a mentoring program, based on Learning Ground principles, within the schools. This might entail school staff undertaking the

Mentor Program at Learning Ground, or it may be that existing Learning Ground mentors could be involved in some way in the schools. These possibilities could be explored with PBL team leaders or coaches within the schools and/or with the state-based PBL and Wellbeing Coordinators.

- *Offer teacher professional development workshops in emotion coaching and descriptive praise.* These approaches to supporting young people are particularly indicated for those who may have experienced trauma, and are effective and nurturing for all students. Workshops offered to teachers around working in this way with students who have complex difficulties may help them become more directly attuned to the socio-emotional behavioural needs of their students and to the importance of the work Learning Ground is undertaking.
- *Investigate the possibility of having teachers from local schools complete the Enablers Program.* Pre-service teachers could also be encouraged to undertake the program. Undertaking the Enablers program would thoroughly familiarise teachers with the approach taken at Learning Ground and help to build a consistency of language, strategies and values between Learning Ground and schools in support of students' successful re-entry into mainstream learning. As a starting point it would be helpful to ask current staff and volunteers who are teachers about the challenges and possibilities for working with teachers in this way.
- *Seek ways to provide Aboriginal youth with opportunities to explore their cultural heritage.* There is strong evidence that cultural identity development is a critical resilience factor for Aboriginal people. This is not something to be imposed, nor is it a straightforward process, particularly for the many Aboriginal people who have experienced historical dispossession and dislocation. How can Learning Ground help young people who wish to explore their heritage to make links with relevant Elders, resources and cultural activities that can support their inquiry? This is something to be considered with Elders and cultural leaders who have a more intimate knowledge of the local community.
- *Consider further opportunities to develop the Aboriginal-specific content of Learning Ground programs in light of recent developments in Aboriginal education.* Recent developments in Aboriginal education have led to the production of many new resources and frameworks for teaching Aboriginal perspectives. Should Learning Ground seek to further develop its work with Aboriginal youth and others in this area, in conjunction with local Elders and community leaders, there are a number of educational and cultural resources and strategies that could be drawn on. It may also be beneficial in this light, and for the purposes of advocacy, to establish a connection with the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group.

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## Appendix I: Learning Ground Participant Survey

This survey was available both online and as a hardcopy to participants. All responses were anonymous.



**Learning Ground Survey - 2016**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in our survey. Please remember that all information collected will be treated as private and confidential and your individual answers will not be disclosed to Learning Ground.

**ABOUT YOU**

Firstly, we would like to ask some background information about you.

1. How old are you now? \_\_\_\_ years old

2. Are you ..? (please tick one).

☐ Male (1)

☐ Female (2)

3. What is the postcode of where you live? \_\_\_\_\_

4. Do you identify as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

5. Which country/nation were you born in?

\_\_\_\_\_

**ABOUT YOU AND LEARNING GROUND**

Which groups/activities at Learning Ground have you participated in the past year? (Please tick all activities you have participated in)

☐ Family Skills Program (1)

☐ Enablers Program (2)

☐ Adolescent Program (3)

☐ Young People's Program (4)

☐ Senior Adolescent Program (5)

☐ Other (6)--- Please write the name of the activity/program:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

PLEASE GO ON TO THE NEXT PAGE.



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This is a chance for you to look at how you think and feel about yourself. Please remember this is not a test and there are no right or wrong answers. It is important that you report how you feel NOW (not how you felt at another time in your life, or how you might feel tomorrow).

#### WHAT TO DO

**STEP 1:** First use the four point scale to indicate how 'TRUE' (like you, the statement describes you very well) or how 'FALSE' (unlike you, the statement doesn't describe you at all), each statement is a description of you at this present time.

**STEP 2:** Next indicate how much your participation in Learning Ground activities, programs, and or groups has helped you in developing this quality about you from 'Not at all' (you don't believe participating in Learning Ground has helped develop this quality) to 'A lot' (you believe that participating in the Learning Ground has significantly helped you develop this quality).

		STEP 1 				STEP 2 			
		First: use the Four point scale to indicate how TRUE (like you) or how FALSE (unlike you), each statement describes you at this present time.				Next, indicate how much your participation in Learning Ground has helped you in developing this quality about you.			
		FALSE Not Like me	More FALSE than true	More TRUE than false	TRUE Like me	Not at all	Very little	Much	A lot
1	I am ok with asking for help when I need it	0	1	2	3	0	1	2	3
2	I can cope with difficult people most of the time	0	1	2	3	0	1	2	3
3	I do well in social situations	0	1	2	3	0	1	2	3
4	What I do and how I do it will determine my successes in life	0	1	2	3	0	1	2	3
5	I try to get the best possible results when I do things	0	1	2	3	0	1	2	3
6	When I work hard on something I am confident I will succeed	0	1	2	3	0	1	2	3
7	When things around me change I cope well	0	1	2	3	0	1	2	3
8	I am good at cooperating with others	0	1	2	3	0	1	2	3
9	I can handle negative things most of the time.	0	1	2	3	0	1	2	3
10	If I succeed in life it will be because of my efforts.	0	1	2	3	0	1	2	3
11	I am calm when things go wrong	0	1	2	3	0	1	2	3
12	I can manage day to day problems most of the time	0	1	2	3	0	1	2	3
13	I try and listen to other people's views on things	0	1	2	3	0	1	2	3

14. If someone wanted to know about Learning Ground and you could only tell them two things what would you tell them? \_\_\_\_\_

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Thank you for completing this survey.

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## Appendix II: Learning Ground Key Stakeholder Agencies Survey

This survey was available both online and as a hardcopy to participants. All responses were anonymous.

### About your organisation

1. Which service area best describes your organisation? Please tick.

- ☐ Education Primary
- ☐ Education Secondary
- ☐ Education Tertiary (Uni/TAFE)
- ☐ Education other: (Please provide details) \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Health
- ☐ Department of Family and Community Services
- ☐ Other (Please provide details) \_\_\_\_\_

2. What are the main services you have access from Learning Ground in the past 12 months? Please tick as many that apply.

- ☐ Family Skills Program
- ☐ Enablers Program
- ☐ Adolescent Program 12 -17
- ☐ Senior Adolescent Program 17-21
- ☐ Young People's Program
- ☐ Other --- Please write the name of the activity/program: \_\_\_\_\_

### Please give us your opinion about the following

On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your knowledge of what Learning Ground does? Please circle the number closest to your opinion.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
I don't have much knowledge of what Learning Ground does      I have a very good knowledge of what Learning Ground does.

How would you rate the ease of getting information about the services provided by Learning Ground? Please circle the number closest to your opinion.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
Not Easy      Very Easy

How would you rate the usefulness for your client of the services Learning Ground provides? Please circle the number closest to your opinion.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
Not Useful      Very Useful

In your opinion how important are the services Learning Ground provides to the community? Please circle the number closest to your opinion.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
Not important      Very important

Please continue on the next page.



### Extended Questions

In as few words as possible, please tell us what is your understanding of what Learning Ground does?

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When thinking about your access of learning ground programs in the **last 12 months**, can you please comment on:

In your opinion, what are the main strengths of the programs offered by Learning Ground?

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When accessing Learning Ground, were there any challenges, and if so please elaborate?

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Do you have any suggestions that may help Learning Ground better assist your organisation and or your clients?

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Thank you.



## Appendix III: Learning Ground Participant Focus Group Questions and Instructions

### Focus Group outline for Learning Ground study

The idea of this focus group is to hear from you about your experience of Learning Ground and what difference it has made for you to be coming here. While we would really like to hear what you have to say we also respect that it's entirely your choice to participate in the discussion. If there is any question you would rather not respond to you can choose to pass.

We are conducting this process as a group discussion. In a group discussion individuals often have different points of view. This can be really helpful for getting a range of ideas. Hearing what others say might remind you of something or trigger some new ideas that you wouldn't have thought of otherwise. It is really important to respect everyone's opinion and their right to have that opinion. There is no place here for put-downs. We are all going to listen respectfully to everybody and we are going to respect their views and their right to have them by refraining from making any judgments about what others have to say either during the focus group or afterwards.

Even though we love to have an interesting and exciting discussion, we need to hear all of you. If people start talking over each other we will stop the discussion and wait until everyone is listening respectfully before we go on. As we only have a limited time with you and we want to make sure we hear from everyone we may refocus the discussion back on the topic if we feel someone is going off track or is monopolising the conversation in a way that makes it difficult for others to come in.

Questions for focus group discussion(with optional prompts in brackets)

By way of introduction, would you mind telling us how you came to join the Learning Ground program? (Just briefly.) (You don't have to say anything personal if you'd rather not. It's completely up to you. You can choose to pass if you wish.)

How is the program here different from learning at school? (*Are there some ways it's the same?*)

What are the most memorable or important things you've learned from the program (*so far*)?

Has being part of Learning Ground helped you to make connections with other people? (*How?*)

How has being part of Learning Ground helped you to participate in your local community?

In what ways has coming to Learning Ground made a difference for you?

Do you have any suggestions that would make Learning Ground even better?

## Appendix IV: Sample Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form



School of Education  
Western Sydney University  
Locked Bag 1797  
Penrith NSW 2751  
Australia  
Telephone: 02 4736 0051  
Email: [r.parada@westernsydney.edu.au](mailto:r.parada@westernsydney.edu.au)

### Participant Information Sheet

**Project Title:** Learning Ground: Community education for social inclusion and personal growth

**Project Summary:**

You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Dr Roberto Parada and Dr Brenda Dobia of the School of Education, Western Sydney University. We are working with Mt Druitt Learning Ground (a principal project of the Chain Reaction Foundation) to help them evaluate the programs they offer. We want to hear from current and past participants in Learning Ground's programs to find out about your experience of Learning Ground and how it might have made a difference to you. You are invited to participate in a short survey, a group discussion, or both. (See further details below.)

**How is the study being paid for?**

The study is being sponsored by the Ian Potter Foundation on behalf of Learning Ground.

**What will I be asked to do?**

You have the option of a) joining a focus group discussion, b) taking a short survey or c) completing both.

The focus group discussion will ask about what brought you initially to Learning Ground, your experience of Learning Ground programs and community, what difference it has made to you to attend Learning Ground, and whether you have any suggestions for ways it could be improved. The focus group discussion will be audiorecorded for research purposes. Only the researchers will have access to the audiofile and transcript.

The focus group for those currently attending the Adolescent program will be held at 1:30 on May 23rd at Learning Ground. If you are also willing to fill out the survey please arrive 15 minutes early so you can complete it before the focus group gets underway.

If you would like to only complete the survey you will find a copy attached to this information sheet. You can complete it and send it back to the address on the form by mail or via email. If you would prefer to take the survey by phone please contact one of the researchers to arrange a convenient time for us to phone you.

**How much of my time will I need to give?**

The focus group sessions will last for 60-90 minutes.

The survey can be undertaken by email or by phone, at your convenience and will take no more than 15 minutes.

**What benefits will I, and / or the broader community, receive for participating?**

Your feedback will help Mt Druitt Learning Ground evaluate its services so as to grow the quality of the programs it offers. You may also find that reflecting on your own experience at Learning Ground and hearing from others is a positive experience that helps you grow.

**Will the study involve any discomfort or risk for me? If so, what will you do to rectify it?**

No discomfort is expected. However, since you will be telling us about your experiences there may be a slight risk that the discussion will touch on an experience that is uncomfortable for you or that you do not wish to discuss. Please be aware that your participation is voluntary. You do not have to answer any

Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form Version 1 090516

question that makes you feel uncomfortable, and you can withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

In case something distressing does come up for you that is not easily resolved please contact your local Headspace <http://headspace.org.au/>, 8887 5600, or beyondblue <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/>, 1300 22 4636, for assistance.

**How do you intend to publish the results?**

Please be assured that only the researchers will have access to the raw data you provide.

The findings of the research will be published in an evaluation report for Learning Ground and may also be published in an academic journal. No names will be used in the report or journal publication and any information you provide will be kept strictly confidential.

\*Please note that the minimum retention period for data collection is five years post publication.

**Can I withdraw from the study?**

Participation is entirely voluntary and you are not obliged to be involved. If you do participate, you can withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

If you do choose to withdraw, any information that you have supplied in the focus group discussion will be removed and destroyed. As the survey is completely anonymous it will not be possible for us to identify and remove it after it has been submitted.

**Data storage**

There are a number of government initiatives in place to centrally store research data and to make it available for further research. For more information, see <http://www.ands.org.au/> and <http://www.rdsi.uq.edu.au/about>. Regardless of whether the information you supply or about you is stored centrally or not, it will be stored securely and it will be de-identified before it is made available to any other researcher.

**What if I require further information?**

Please contact Dr Roberto Parada or Dr Brenda Dobia should you wish to discuss the research further before deciding whether or not to participate.

Dr Roberto Parada  
Senior Lecturer  
Phone: 4736 0051  
[r.parada@westernsydney.edu.au](mailto:r.parada@westernsydney.edu.au)

Dr Brenda Dobia  
Senior Lecturer  
Phone: 4736 0729  
[b.dobia@westernsydney.edu.au](mailto:b.dobia@westernsydney.edu.au)

**What if I have a complaint?**

This study has been approved by the Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee. The Approval number is H11663

If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Ethics Committee through the Research, Engagement, Development and Innovation office on Tel +61 2 4736 0229 Fax +61 2 4736 0905 or email [humanethics@westernsydney.edu.au](mailto:humanethics@westernsydney.edu.au).

Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

If you agree to participate in this study, you may be asked to sign the Participant Consent Form.



### Participant Consent Form

This is a project specific consent form. It restricts the use of the data collected to the named project by the named investigators.

Project Title: Learning Ground: Community education for social inclusion and personal growth

I, \_\_\_\_\_ consent to participate in the research project titled Project Title: Learning Ground: Community education for social inclusion and personal growth.

I acknowledge that:

I have read the participant information sheet [or where appropriate, 'have had read to me'] and have been given the opportunity to discuss the information and my involvement in the project with the researcher/s.

The procedures required for the project and the time involved have been explained to me, and any questions I have about the project have been answered to my satisfaction.

I consent to participating in (please tick all that apply)

\_\_\_\_ Participant focus group discussion

\_\_\_\_ Audio recording of the focus group discussion

\_\_\_\_ I would like a member of the research team to contact me so I can do the survey over the phone.  
Please contact me at the following number \_\_\_\_\_

\* Please note that any contact details you provide will be used strictly for the purposes of conducting the research and will be destroyed as soon as the survey has been completed.

I understand that my involvement is confidential and that the information gained during the study may be published but no information about me will be used in any way that reveals my identity.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without affecting my relationship with the researcher/s now or in the future.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Return Address: Dr Roberto Parada  
School of Education  
Kingswood Campus  
Western Sydney University  
Locked Bag 1797  
Penrith NSW 2751

[r.parada@westernsydney.edu.au](mailto:r.parada@westernsydney.edu.au)

This study has been approved by the Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee. The Approval number is: [enter approval number]

If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Ethics Committee through the Office of Research Services on Tel +61 2 4736 0229  
Fax +61 2 4736 0905 or email [humanethics@westernsydney.edu.au](mailto:humanethics@westernsydney.edu.au). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

[westernsydney.edu.au](http://westernsydney.edu.au)

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