

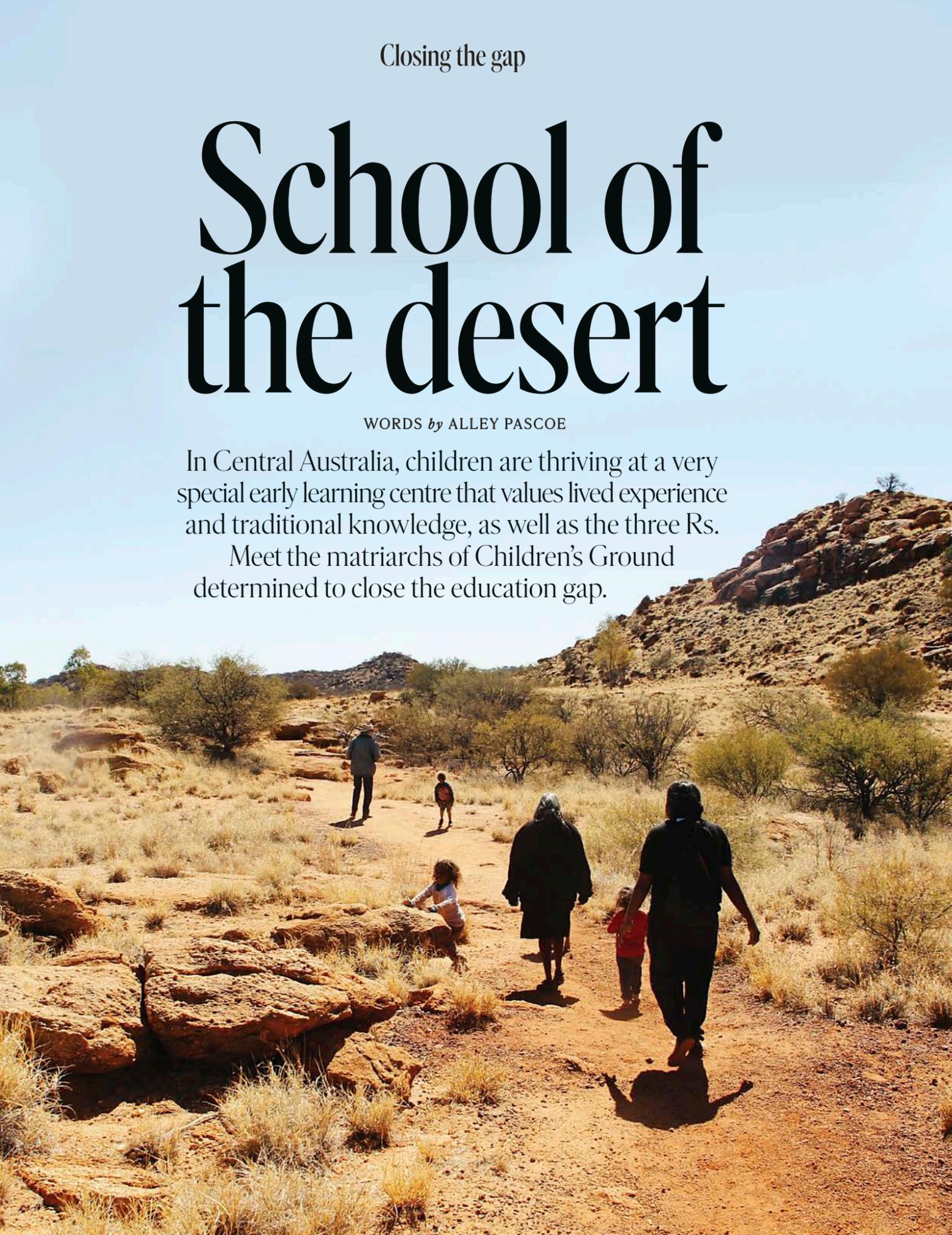
Closing the gap

# School of the desert

WORDS *by* ALLEY PASCOE

In Central Australia, children are thriving at a very special early learning centre that values lived experience and traditional knowledge, as well as the three Rs.

Meet the matriarchs of Children's Ground determined to close the education gap.



**F**elicity Hayes walks through the dry bed of the Todd River leaving soft footprints in the red sand. There's a trail of children following her, the toddlers sitting happily on the hips of the older kids. Felicity, 61, points to the ground at a witchety grub hole, to the hill at a native fig bush, and a fluorescent green budgie nestled amongst the leaves of a gum tree. This is her Country: Tyewerretye (Alice Springs).

It's a Tuesday morning at the Telegraph Station and Felicity, an Arrernte elder and senior traditional owner from the Irrkerlantye (Whitegate) community on the outskirts of town, is leading a Children's Ground learning session with her "grannies" – the youngest branches in her family tree.

"It's really hard for our kids," says Felicity, who has worked as an educator all her life. "I was teaching Arrernte at a local primary school [six years ago], but the kids never turned up. Being in a mainstream classroom with English-speaking teachers was a struggle for them. So, in 2016, I started working at Children's Ground, where we speak in language and teach on Country."

According to the Closing the Gap Report released in 2020, school attendance rates for Indigenous students had not improved in the five years prior and remained 10 per cent lower than those of non-Indigenous students. As it stands, Indigenous kids are more likely to arrive at school hungry, ill and tired, and less likely to meet the minimum literacy and numeracy benchmarks in an education system that wasn't built for them. As Children's Ground Director M.K. Turner OAM says, "Everyone's always talking about us getting our kids ready for school, but when are the schools going to be ready for our kids?" The answer is Children's Ground.

At Children's Ground, education doesn't happen inside the four walls of a classroom, it happens on Country. The organisation, which was founded



in 2011 after decades of work in Central Australia, has a 25-year strategy, designed and delivered by First Nations people to prevent childhood trauma, suicide, school failure, unemployment, incarceration and ill-health. Their evidence-based approach focuses on quality early childhood education, health, wellbeing, safety and security.

The Tuesday morning learning session led by Felicity starts in a circle. A dozen children sit side by side on a blanket in the shade of a gently swaying gum tree and each takes a baby wipe from a packet in the middle of the group. They wipe their faces as they've been taught, starting with the eyes, then the nose, across the forehead, and down the cheeks to the chin. The bigger kids help the toddlers, who learn from watching – and imitating – their older siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles and elders.

"My brother taught me how to play footy, now I can kick just as far as him," says Shania, 10, passing the AFL ball to Rodney, who's a few years younger than her.

"In Indigenous families, learning is intergenerational. There's no hierarchy, it's a circle: everyone has a responsibility to teach each other," explains Felicity, as she helps Rodney spell his name on a green piece of paper. After faces have been wiped, names spelt and pictures drawn, Felicity takes the kids on a walk in the Todd River, where they dig holes in the sand to find water as their Elders have done for 65,000 years.

Everyone washes the sand off their hands before lunch: fresh fruit, egg sandwiches and chicken curry with vegetables and rice. "I love vegetables!" cheers Shania. The meal was made by Dianne Williams, 46, who works in the nutrition team and has been using her culinary skills in the Children's Ground kitchen for three years. "We're trying to keep the kids away from junk food because we want them to be fit and healthy," she says.

Along with the gap in education between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children, there's also a gap in health. This gap is a chasm:

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Indigenous mortality rates are twice as high. Less than 5 per cent of First Nations kids eat enough fruit and vegetables, and they are 30 times more likely to suffer from anaemia and malnutrition.

It was this knowledge that prompted Western Arrernte woman, Larissa Meneri, 35, to become an Aboriginal Health Worker at age 18. "In the communities, there are a lot of respiratory issues and we often see kids with runny noses, ear infections, chest infections and coughs," says Larissa, who started working as a Child and Maternal Health Specialist at Children's Ground in early 2020, using her knowledge of traditional and Western medicine.

"My great-great grandmother taught me about traditional healing and bush medicine, and now I'm trying to teach the families I work with. In traditional healing, we go out and find plants for medicine instead of buying tablets at the shop."

In both traditional and Western medicine, prevention is better than cure. That's why the kids of Children's Ground are taught how to wash their faces and hands to prevent the spread of germs, and why Larissa works with expectant mothers to teach best health practices from the beginning.

"New mums can feel like they're in a bubble on their own," she admits. "I'm there to help them with medical appointment bookings, health questions and life advice. I try to teach them to take things step by step, day by day."

The hardest part of Larissa's job is encouraging people to ask for help when they need it. The best bit? "Cuddling the babies, of course," she says. "And seeing the mums grow in confidence. I worked with a new mum who was 22 and struggling without much help. I told her to stand strong and to keep learning every day. She's doing pretty well now, and she's thanked me for supporting her."

Since first launching in Central Australia a decade ago, Children's Ground has expanded to work on the land of the Bolmo People in the Top



**Clockwise from above: At Children's Ground, lessons take place outside classrooms, on Country; learning to source and prepare bush foods; the children and Felicity on Country; Felicity teaches her grandchildren to identify a water source on the dried up Todd River. In Indigenous families, learning is intergenerational.**



End and the land of the Larrakia people in Darwin. Their grassroots approach mirrors past work done in New Zealand and Hawaii, where First Nations grandparents led educational reforms 30 years ago.

On the Children's Ground bus from the Burt Creek community to the Yucca Plains playground where the Thursday learning session is being held, the kids easily slip between speaking English and Arrernte. I spy with my little eye something beginning with A: *angkulye* (clouds). Today, the usually bright blue sky is heavy with grey clouds. The usually dry air is thick with the threat of rain.

In Australian folklore, if you hear black cockatoos calling, rain will follow. In Arrernte culture, if you hold a baby to the sky, rain will follow. On the horizon, black cockatoos sing while a mother lifts her newborn delicately into the air. Raindrops fall from the *angkulye* and stain the red dirt. The kids squeal with joy; it's the first rain they've seen in months. This is the space where Children's Ground operates: the intersection between Western practices and First Nations knowledge.

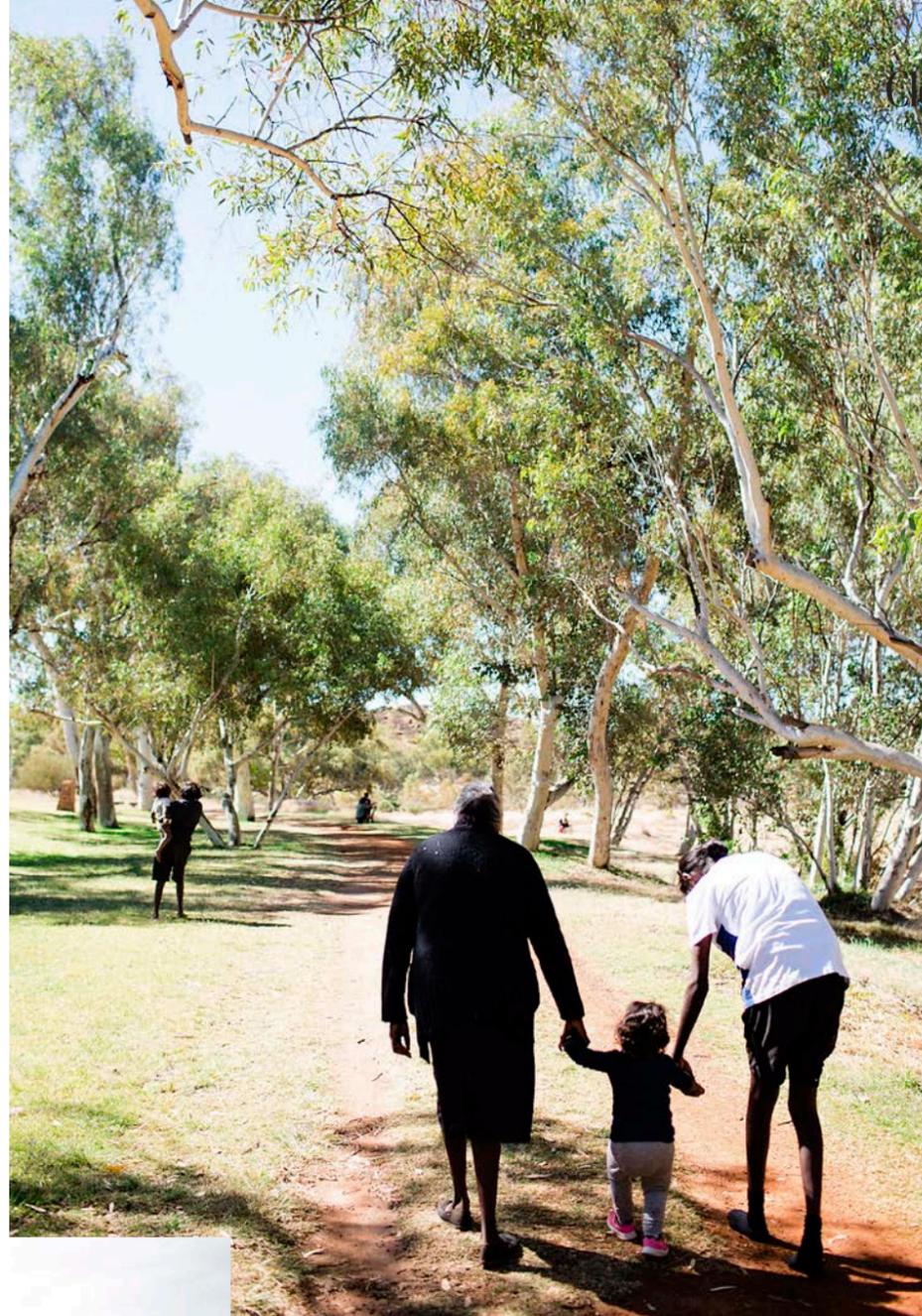
"We want our kids to learn in Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways, so they can be strong in both worlds," says Felicity. "The kids learn so much at Children's Ground. They ask questions, speak in language and use their manners. They become role models for others in the community."

Anna, seven, has been going to Children's Ground since she could walk. "I love playing at the park," she says when asked what she likes best. "And I love being on Country. This is my Country. My mum's Country."

For Anna's mum, Priscilla Ferber, whose sister and niece work at Children's Ground, it's important for her daughter to learn about her culture from family on her Country. "Anna goes to school in town, but she really enjoys going to Children's Ground – learning Arrernte, going out bush, digging for honey ants and being on Country," says Priscilla.



**"I love playing at the park and I love being on Country. This is my country, my mum's country."** – Anna



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"She's always happy when she gets home from Children's Ground."

At Yucca Plains (named after the spikey prickles that cover the ground and stick into the soles of thongs), the kids take turns jumping over a makeshift skipping rope while the adults cook damper and kangaroo tail on the fire. When a row between a little boy and girl turns to tears, one of the fathers sits down with his son for a chat, speaking softly and calmly. The little boy apologises – in the same soft voice as his father – and the tears on the girl's cheeks dry like the raindrops on the red dirt.

After a day of singing, counting in

photobomb each other. Some photos are used in illustrated story books. There's *Athakwere Akweke Angkethakew* (*The Thirsty Little Mouse*), *Artweyehene* (*Family*) and *Alkngarrileme* (*Warnings*), which are written in Arrernte and English and illustrated by Amanda Turner. "The storybooks are good memories for our kids and a resource for everyone else," explains 44-year-old Amanda.

"For me, language is life. We need to make these books to teach our kids and grandkids how to read and write [in Arrernte], so they can teach their kids and grandkids," says Felicity.

"Teaching kids is like a garden. You go

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**Left: The children learn about culture, Country and language with Felicity. The matriarchs want a healthier, safer, more equitable future for their children and grandchildren. Far left: Health worker Larissa Meneri teaches families about traditional healing.**

Arrernte and English and eating kangaroo tail, the learning session ends with a moment of meditation. The kids lie down on the picnic blanket with cucumber slices on their closed eyes. They are guided to listen to the sounds around them, feel the earth and to reflect on all the good things that happened during the day. When they sit up, they're not guided to eat the cucumber slices, but most of them do, with delight.

At each learning session, photos are taken on a communal iPad. As with everything else, the older kids teach the younger ones how to pose and smile for the camera, and cheekily

and plant your seeds. You water the garden and you wait for them to grow. If there is a little bit of weeding to do, get the weeds out. Then the children grow up really strong."

The matriarchs of Children's Ground – including Felicity, Dianne, Larissa, Amanda and the fierce Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe Director, M.K. Turner OAM – are united by a shared hope: a healthier, safer and more equitable future for their children and grandchildren. In this future, First Nations languages will be taught widely and spoken freely, their 65,000 years of culture celebrated, and the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous kids closed forever. To make this future a reality, children need to be centred, communities supported, and the Country needs to be respected. This is the Children's Ground way.

"We've survived for centuries and we're still surviving now. I want to share our strength of knowledge and wealth of spirit with everybody, and I want the next generation to stand together, face forward, speak loud and never back down," adds Larissa, who is determined to give her 10-year-old son all the opportunities she didn't have growing up.

The beauty of Children's Ground is that it doesn't just benefit the kids. The positivity spreads like a vine through the branches of family trees growing in the communities they work with. Since joining the team more than a year ago, Larissa says she's gained confidence and strength – thanks, in part, to elders like Felicity.

"When I first met Felicity, I was nervous and awkward because she's like a celebrity," says Larissa, with a laugh. "I have so much respect for Felicity, she speaks what she thinks and stands strong. She is the light that I want to follow."

Leaving soft footprints in the red sand, Felicity is paving the way – and lighting the path – for the elders of tomorrow and her "grannies" of today. **AWW**

To find out more about Children's Ground, visit [childrensground.org.au](http://childrensground.org.au)