



## Jeannie Clague

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I believe every child has the right to a loving and secure family, a safe environment and a broad education; the right to become an active participant in society, to stand and speak for themselves, to develop meaningful relationships and have the freedom to live life with dignity: decent housing, adequate health care and a secure job.

There are too many people in our society falling through the cracks, whose lives are blighted by poverty, unemployment, poor health and inadequate education. I find this unacceptable in the twenty-first century, when we can spend \$45 million bidding for the right to host the World Cup, in a world where the sale of pet food in Japan is worth more than the entire GDP of some developing nations.

However, always the optimist, when I think about social inequality, I think of it in terms of what can I do, what do I know, what does my experience show me and, most importantly, do I have the passion? At our preschool, our experiences working with vulnerable children have not only changed our practice, but also how we think and how we feel. Tears of sadness have given way to a burning rage as we have accepted and activated our responsibilities as early educators.

It is too easy to sit in our tidy little early childhood service and look at the world through rose-coloured glasses; to think that all the children who attend are safe, are fed regular meals and tucked up in a clean bed every night with a bedtime story; in families where at least one parent works, who have nice houses and healthy food in the fridge, and most importantly who can afford to pay their childcare fees.

It is too easy not to think about children who cower under tables because of family violence, who cry themselves to sleep with aching teeth, whose family may be homeless, whose parent may be held in the terrifying grip of substance abuse, where there may be no food, and where depression and mental illness go untreated.

There is a growing body of research that tells us that one of the best and most efficient ways to arrest social dysfunction later in life is to spend money on quality early childhood programs. We all know that Australia has an embarrassingly poor record in terms of expenditure on early childhood within the OECD. We must advocate because it is the right and ethical thing to do.

We must make equity of access really mean something, and start to get those children who are most vulnerable and disadvantaged into good-quality childcare programs. For West Bathurst Preschool this has meant setting up partnerships with other agencies to refer the families that we don't always see, opening up our service, lowering fees sufficiently, engaging with families in a non-judgmental way, and dealing constructively with the lack of transport and associated issues connected with poverty. It has meant banging on the door of government and demanding a better deal for those who cannot speak for themselves.

It has also meant laying aside our professional prejudices and working effectively with health and welfare agencies because we are the front line workers.

We hold the knowledge, the passion and the compassion. If we can't and won't do it, who will?