

# The power of two

Schooling at dual-language Yuendumu is a community affair, with profound lessons for students and teachers alike.

ANGELA ROSSMANITH reports.



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**T**ravel along the Tanami Highway, north-west of Alice Springs, and the road is sealed for nearly 200km before the dirt takes over. Keep going for another 90km and you come to Yuendumu, a Warlpiri community established in 1947.

Yuendumu School is a two-way school where both Warlpiri and English are taught. The Northern Territory Department of Education thoroughly reviewed the program

recently before deciding on the continuation of government funding.

“We’ve just been given another two years’ approval for two-way,” says senior teacher and AEU rep Sally Bryan. “If they think there are gaps in the program, we can be

put on probation or lose the funding for eternity.”

Yuendumu has taught Warlpiri together with English for 30 years, with the aim that students become competent and confident in all aspects of both. “With two-way, students not only develop skills in both languages, but also further develop traditional knowledge and skills,” says Bryan.

In Grades 1 and 2, students learn to read and write in their first language, Warlpiri, and are exposed to spoken English. They learn numbers in both languages. In Grade 3 they begin to learn to read and write in English.

This year 181 students are enrolled, with 10.5 teachers and four assistant teachers. Most of the teachers are also yapa (Indigenous). The school spans from pre-school to senior secondary, which began in 2004 when Year 11 was established.

Most of the students in Year 11, or “Stage 1”, are young mothers about 20 years old. They have a total of eight children, with one on the way.

“The babies come along to school every day, and maybe we’ll have a crèche this year,” says Bryan. “Everyone is very excited as these students hope to go on and finish Year 12. Only a handful of students from remote communities in the Northern Territory have done this—the first in 2003.”

At the school’s Bilingual Resource Development Unit, Warlpiri resources such as books, research and a Warlpiri/English magazine are published.

Last year, Yuendumu became even more involved with the community by launching night school for three

evenings a week, teaching numeracy, literacy, information communications technology, storytelling, art and songwriting.

The usual community involvement includes parents and older women helping with young children in the classroom, and members visit to tell stories and often go along on excursions.

“Every year we go on country visits,” says Bryan. “The whole school and many people from the community go out to five traditional areas belonging to different family groups. We camp out and the children learn about their traditional land as well as practising skills such as building shelters, making tools, hunting, cooking, water collection, painting, body painting and dance. They learn about the stories and songs of their country, and star stories, and about bush tucker.”

The excursion is an operation of almost military proportions. “It’s fantastic. So much is shared with kardiya [non-Indigenous] teachers. It is probably the best experience in most of the teachers’ lives. We all look forward to it and come back enriched and enlivened.” ■

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