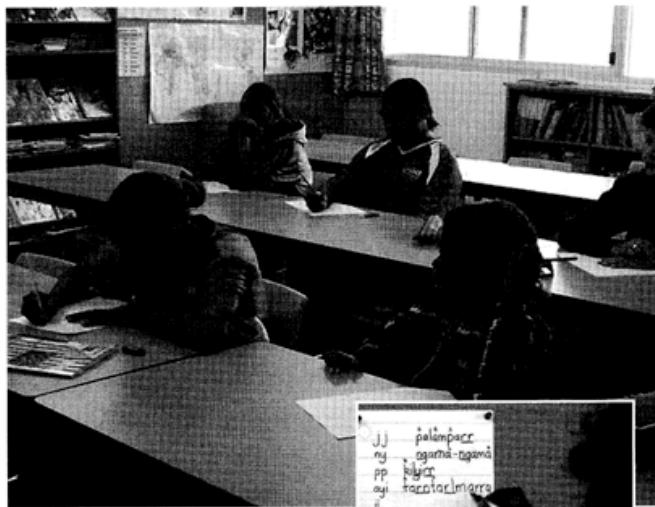


TALKING ABOUT COMMUNITY PROJECTS

Saving indigenous languages from extinction also gives birth to literacy skills.

story by Niall Mulligan



The basic criteria for the 2006 Givewell Best Community Project Award

were reasonably straightforward. The project needed to focus on a major social problem, to provide an innovative, imaginative, practical solution, and to have clear, attainable outcomes.

The winner, the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation's First Language Reading Course, imaginatively addresses the literacy problems which can occur in remote indigenous communities. At the same time this project is helping to preserve ancient indigenous languages whose continued existence is under threat.

The first requirement was the conversion of the oral Waramungu language into phonetically based reading course-work. Working with the local elders, ALNF devised a phonemic code-marking alphabet for the language. Once that was completed, the next step was the construction of first language literacy teaching materials.

Mary-Ruth Mendel, a Sydney speech pathologist, played a key role in the program design: 'The development of pre-literacy skills in a person's first language is an essential component in building the neurological pathways that lead to effective literacy skills.'

With the help of indigenous tutors, often parents or volunteer teacher aides, the course's unique teaching materials are used at Tennant Creek High School. With 74% indigenous students the school provides a basis to assess the effectiveness of the scheme's methodology. Meg Iles, principal of Tennant Creek High School, said

the project had already made a significant difference to the school's academic life.

'The program has given indigenous students an understanding that the school is genuinely about and for them.

'Speaking and working academically in their own language has given them a sense of pride and engagement, this pride is reflected in our 86% attendance record for indigenous students,' she says.

The next phase of the project will apply phonemic awareness principles to other indigenous languages. Work has already begun on building phonetic alphabets for the Wambaya and Warrimirri languages.

Funding is via the **Coca-Cola Amatil** Foundation to the tune of \$300,000. Alec Wagstaff, Director of Corporate Affairs, explained that they were drawn to the project by ALNF's 'exceptional passion, innovativeness and lack of fancy overheads.'

The ALNF had previously worked with the Foundation on the literacy programs that were a requirement of J K Rowling's licensing of the Harry Potter image rights to Coca-Cola. □

Other Finalists

St Lucy's School, *Grey to Play* playground project took a dull, lifeless space and transformed it into a colourful, engaging and educationally structured environment

The new playground allows St Lucy's teachers and volunteers to develop the students' imaginations while simultaneously providing them simulated real world experience. St Lucy's raised more than \$400,000 to fund the building of the playground and are now working hard on fundraising more than \$3m for a ground-breaking Creative Arts Centre.

Safely Home, a joint initiative of Alzheimers NSW and the NSW Police, uses a customised database and numbered identification bracelets to provide some security for those Alzheimers sufferers who have a tendency to wander.

Paracad Victoria's *Career Path* provides a flexible training environment for sole parents who wish to pursue accredited courses of study in the disability sector. The scheme recognises the students' transferable parenting skills while offering peer support and a study program whose timing allows for the family demands placed on a sole parent.