

Teenage teachers learn to share the gift of reading

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Speaking the same language... year 10 student Richelle Watson, centre, with some of her year 2 and 3 students at the Tennant Creek literacy program. *Photo: Glenn Campbell*

WHEN the year 10 community literacy class girls first made the short car trip from Tennant Creek High to the local primary school four months ago, they complained that they might throw up or faint.

"At first I found it scary. I was nervous and I didn't know what to do. It made me feel sick. My head was going all over the place," says Tina Walker, 16, who remembers mumbling and stuttering. Their task: to read aloud to children eight years their junior and to learn how to teach literacy.

Their teacher, Julie-Anne Spina, recalls: "You could see their faces go pale. But when the kids looked up with those little eyes, their hearts started melting and now they don't feel the fear."

Richelle Watson, a self-contained 15-year-old who is one of five students mentoring local year 2 and 3 children learning to read and write in English and Warumungu, says: "It's a gift to speak two languages and teach them to younger ones."

The University of Western Sydney sent another gift. Six master of education students have just spent a month in the high school as prac teachers.

The girls' evolution from stage-fright to poised performers is now so pronounced that they are aiming higher than many indigenous youths dare. They want to be teachers.

The idea of bringing together different generations, including local Warumungu speaking elders who teach their language in the classroom, springs from the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation's work to assist refugees in Sydney and Wagga. "It creates a different dynamic to the student-teacher relationship," says the foundation's executive educational adviser, Eric Brace, who helped introduce this inter-generational teaching to Tennant Creek.

Tennant Creek High's principal, Erica Prosser, marks the project as "highly successful".

"It keeps the doors open between older and younger generations and in all cultures that is slipping."

Four in five of her 250 students are Aboriginal, while every year 40 per cent of pupils leave and are replaced by new faces. Most speak English as a second, third or fourth language. This linguistic facility makes them high achievers and it is a matter of finding ways to help them become literate, Ms Prosser says.

An elder, Judy Nakkamarra Nixon, who takes part in the program and teaches Warumungu to the students and UWS visitors, says she is "relieved" when others learn from her because the language needs to be spoken to live. But Aboriginal children need good English, too.

"If it is half this and half that, it is difficult," she says. "They should learn both ways so it can balance the things in their lives."