



**smh.com.au**  
**The Sydney Morning Herald**

 [Print this article](#) |  [Close this window](#)

## Talking in tongues

March 29, 2008

Advertisement



Ned Yeomans, the 11-year-old school captain at St Joseph's Catholic School in Walgett, has a couple of rare talents for a blond-haired boy from the bush.

He is something of a super-fish, having represented NSW and placed fourth in the under-11 years breaststroke at the Australian swimming championships.

He also speaks Yuwaalaraay, the indigenous language of Walgett's Aborigines.

Asked to demonstrate his skills, he grins, looks skyward for a moment, and offers the following: "Dhigayaa buluuy nhama muyaanga. That means 'the black bird is in the big tree'. Dhigayaa means bird, buluuy means black, nhama means the and muyaanga means in the big tree".

Ned's mate Geoffrey Walford, 10, a member of the large indigenous family that produced the rugby league player Ricky, reckons their language skills might come in handy one day. "When you get a job, and they ask you how many languages you can speak, you can say two!" he says.

Ned and Geoffrey are two of the 170 children at St Joseph's and an estimated 5000 across the state who are learning some of the oldest languages on earth, because they attend a mostly indigenous school.

They say it's fun. But teachers, parents and linguists say it is improving self-esteem, literacy and school attendance, rescuing indigenous languages from near oblivion and bringing communities such as the 8000-member Walgett shire, 700 kilometres north-west of Sydney, closer together.

"It's the white kids *and* the black kids," says Sharon Cooke, an Aboriginal education consultant for the Catholic diocese of Armidale.

"They all learn together and sing together, it's really quite beautiful, it's quite emotional when you see it ... and not just for the Aboriginal kids. You'll see the pride on the faces of non-Aboriginal kids as well, that they're learning this language."

Cooke, who oversees 25 Catholic schools, says the positive effect of the language program is palpable at St Joseph's, where just over half of the students are indigenous and Yuwaalaraay is now the school's compulsory language other than English under Board of Studies guidelines.

Tanya Morgan, a teaching assistant and mother of four former students, said her daughter Courtney had been "a shy little

Aboriginal girl who blossomed when she started learning the language".

Her son, Nathan, went from the backblocks of Walgett to the prestigious St Joseph's College in Hunters Hill on a scholarship and is now studying education at the University of Sydney.

"I think it was the confidence they got from learning the language and having that pride," Morgan said. "Three of my girls are now studying Japanese at Mary MacKillop College."

However, not all St Joseph's parents were supportive of the classes at first, including the indigenous ones.

In 2005, 92 per cent of indigenous parents and 55 per cent of non-indigenous parents were in favour, said a report by Dr Paddy Cavanagh at the Australian Catholic University.

Those who were opposed wanted a choice of languages, or preferred the teaching of European languages that could be continued in high school or Asian languages for business purposes.

But most had now come around, says Meredith Logan, a non-indigenous teacher and mother of a kindergarten student, Claudia, 5.

"There's always some hesitation when new things first are introduced but I think everybody knows it's part and parcel of our school and it's ingrained as a positive thing now and any teething problems along the way have all been ironed out.

"It's just teaching [the non-indigenous children] generally to be tolerant of other people and other people who are different. People can be different but essentially everybody's the same."

For those who have lived in Walgett since the first half of last century, it has changed the town.

"I can speak for a lot of our elders who feel the same as I do, and I look at it this way, it's reconciliation. It brings two cultures together instead of pulling away from one another, which we used to do, says Aunty Fay Green, a local elder.

"They're together now, they are. You can see that in the school, they stand by one another."

The story of how Ned, Geoffrey and their peers came to speak Yuwaalaraay is one of flukes and near-fanatical devotion. There almost wasn't a language left for them to learn.

Gathered on reserves and missions and apprenticed to farms and factories, most of the Kamilaroi and Yuwaalaraay people indigenous to the land where the Namoi River meets the Barwon River stopped speaking their native tongues early last century. "A generation ago language was spoken out there on the mission ... but we children weren't allowed to speak it. Even if you knew it, you wouldn't speak it because you would be frightened of being taken away," Green recalls.

Even among Aborigines, speaking their language sometimes drew admonishment - an attitude that had become entrenched in the present generation when the language teaching began.

"The kids were very shy when it started," Green says. "They lacked self-esteem and they used to say 'shame' about things like that, so I had to tell them to be proud."

But a handful of dissidents had kept the languages alive last century - using them while "out on the track" or at home with family and friends. Passing anthropologists had recorded two octagenarian elders, Arthur Dodd and Fred Reece, speaking on tape.

By 1994, when a Christian Brother named John Giacon arrived in Walgett, an elder called Uncle Ted Fields, speaker of several indigenous languages, was teaching occasional lessons at local schools.

Together they began to put the remnants of oral knowledge down on paper, and over a decade built a 350-page dictionary of Kamilaroi and Yuwaalaraay words. They also developed extensive teaching resources, using the tapes, the memories of elders and an elementary grammar compiled by a visiting PhD student 30 years ago.

Today, Giacon teaches masters students in Aboriginal languages at the University of Sydney. "Lingo" teachers John Brown and Karen Dumas spend 100-plus hours a year in the classrooms at St Joseph's and nearby state schools, using everything from a guitar to "lingo bingo" boards to impart the language of their ancestors to Walgett's children, black and white.

Since the language program began, notwithstanding the drought, indigenous enrolments at St Joseph's have grown from 30 to almost 100 students.

If it's a minor miracle that indigenous languages are being taught in Walgett, it's a major one that they are also being taught in 45 other schools in NSW. Australia has the dubious honour of being the world's capital for endangered languages, according to the Enduring Voices Project, a language preservation initiative backed by *National Geographic* magazine.

David Harrison, the project's co-director, has said we risk losing "an immense storehouse of knowledge", particularly about our country and the species that live in it. It is children who often decide a language's fate, he said, when they choose to abandon an ancestral tongue for another more widely used language.

Although there are indigenous languages being taught in more or less structured ways throughout Australia, NSW remains the only state with an indigenous languages policy, enabling easier co-operation between government agencies.

St Joseph's has, by many accounts, the best language program in NSW, but it was the serendipitous outcome of prior research, an inspirational educator, a trusting indigenous community and a Catholic Schools Office dedicated to the notion - an alchemy that is not easy to replicate elsewhere.

First, there is the fact that languages in some areas are all but extinct (see breakout story). Then there are the sometimes delicate relations between indigenous parents and schools.

"The first priority is that the local Aboriginal community wants their language available in a school context. Some feel their language was stolen and want to keep it to themselves," says Professor Gordon Stanley, the president of the NSW Board of Studies.

Third, a program requires community members who are willing and able to teach, as well as funds to develop resources to teach with. Even at St Joseph's the submission-based nature of federal government funding means the future of the program is never guaranteed.

Next, the community must be able to work with a linguist to revive their language, some of whom are accused of not having indigenous people's interests at heart. And once a program is up and running, the departure of a teacher can scuttle it.

At St Joseph's, for example, where Dumas is now a qualified teacher, her aspirations to work full-time mean that the principal, Anthony Spiller, must now hunt for a funding needle in the haystack to train a replacement.

"There is no systematic approach to training language teachers," Giacon says. "And sometimes protocols that say the community is going to decide who teaches the language can hold it back."

Despite those hurdles, 41 state schools in NSW were teaching Aboriginal languages to some degree by 2006, according to a Board of Studies survey - although few offer it as their mandatory, 100-hour language other than English. Only five of the schools teaching indigenous languages were Catholic or independent.

"It has been a long journey," Stanley says, but language programs in schools such as Broulee Public School on the South Coast have now become an attraction for some parents.

Others at Bourke High School, Bowraville Public School and Chifley College in Mount Druitt have won plaudits.

The development of a Board of Studies kindergarten to year 10 syllabus in 2003 has also led to increased interest from communities and schools, which has sparked interest in mainstream Aboriginal language courses in the broader community, says a Board of Studies inspector, Kevin Lowe.

It has led TAFE and the University of Sydney to offer new courses in Aboriginal languages - all of which benefits Aboriginal communities.

A language centre at Nambucca Heads, also assisted by a Christian Brother linguist, is reviving the Gumbaynggir language in that part of the world for both schools and elders who want to learn the language that was denied them as children.

In Newcastle, the Arwarbukarl Cultural Resource Association is building technology that allows indigenous communities to rebuild language and has trained 20 communities around Australia in how to use it, with sponsorship from Microsoft.

The former indigenous affairs minister Mal Brough recently criticised indigenous language teaching when English was not the child's first language. However, those criticisms are less relevant when Aboriginal languages are taught as a language other than English under the Board of Studies curriculum, in the same way as foreign languages might be.

But the benefits of language revival are not as easily measured as health or employment outcomes.

On the day that the Australian Parliament apologised to indigenous Australians for their past mistreatment, Brough told a *Quadrant* magazine event that he did not need academics in Sydney and Melbourne telling him languages were dying out.

"We are seeing people wiped out," he said. "Let's get that right and maybe the culture will live on."

For Giacon, a self-described "wog" who remembers coming to Australia in the 1950s and being told by his Italian mates to speak English and "be an Aussie", the St Joseph's experiment shows the two are inseparable.

"My father went to year six and my mother went to year seven. But I've got three or four degrees and my sister's a pharmacist. In Walgett, I would say to myself, these kids are at the same level I was at in the '60s and '70s. And yet they're not getting uni degrees," he says.

"The more it's OK to be a blackfella, the better your health is going to be ... I think the head space and the gut space of indigenous people is crucial to whether they are going to get jobs and look after themselves."

### **Linguistic fragments**

In 1788, there were 70 Aboriginal languages in NSW; only a handful are still in use:

- \* Yuwaalaraay - 2500 words remaining;
- \* Kamilaroi (Gamilaraay) - fewer than 1000 words. They have a 70 per cent vocabulary overlap.
- \* Yitha Yitha (NSW/Victorian border) - fewer than 150 words.

North Coast languages, such as Gumbaynggir, and the far west survived better than South Coast and north-western tongues.

*This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2008/03/28/1206207395354.html>*