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Centre helps students begin new chapter in life

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UNTIL just a few months ago, year 6 Aboriginal student Aliesha Price was struggling to read. She tripped over tricky words and skipped whole chunks of text, making textbooks difficult to understand and lessons hard to follow.

Since enrolling in the Exodus Foundation's intensive literacy program in Redfern, she can read aloud smoothly from a novel, only slowing occasionally to sound out longer words.

Aliesha is also more confident and settled in class. She is even looking ahead to how her new-found skills will help her in the future. "There'll be more things I'll have to read if I want a good job," she said.

Aliesha's teacher at the foundation's new literacy tutorial centre, Maricel Salazar, said her reading had dramatically improved and that her fellow students made an average of 15 months' progress over 18 weeks of the program.

More than half of the 34 children in the course - 24 from years 4 to 6 and 10 from years 1 and 2 - are indigenous. Students can apply through their schools or can be nominated by their teacher.

"She's willing to try anything now whereas before she'd say, 'I can't do this,'" Ms Salazar said. "She's reading fluently - she can decode difficult words more easily, and there's this hunger to know more words."

The Exodus Foundation's national education manager, Glenys O'Riley, said the classes were aimed at students whose literacy skills were lagging at least two years behind their chronological age.

"Every child who has had the chance to at least be exposed to the program has made gains," Ms O'Riley said.

The Redfern centre is one of several run by the foundation around the country, which have a strong indigenous focus.

The Redfern school was originally in Alexandria but moved this year to the National Centre of Indigenous Excellence, which officially opened in February and runs programs for young indigenous people in sport, art, education and culture.

The foundation's first literacy centre opened in Ashfield more than 15 years ago and three centres were recently opened in Darwin, with another due in a few months. One centre is also in Queensland.

This year about 320 students up to year 8 will attend a literacy centre for three hours a day, five days a week for 18 to 20 weeks. Where possible, the program is delivered away from the student's mainstream school.

Ms O'Riley said the biggest gap in children's skills was often phonics, which connects spoken sounds with written letters or parts of words. Children were often surprised they can read once they learned these basic skills.

The teachers use programs designed by Professor Kevin Wheldall and his team at Macquarie University. The Multilit program (Making Up Lost Time In Literacy) is for older learners, while Minilit (Meeting Initial Needs In literacy) is for younger students.

These intensive methods were matched to each child's ability, Ms O'Riley said. They also combined crucial aspects of literacy theory such as comprehension and phonics while carefully tracking children's progress in spelling, vocabulary, reading accuracy and comprehension.

The founder of the Exodus Foundation, Reverend Bill Crews, said the idea for the centres had grown out of his organisation's work with homeless children. He had found that poor literacy skills were holding disadvantaged children back in life, so he approached the university about its research.

Governments, individuals and corporations have since funded the centres' growth. "Four years after going through our program, 90 per cent of our kids are still at school, whereas [without it] you wouldn't expect many of them to be at school at all," Mr Crews said.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/education/centre-helps-students-begin-new-chapter-in-life-20100512-uy9k.html>