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Results for phonics make great reading

SIX months ago, 11-year-old Kevin Neave was reading at the level of an eight-year-old.

In Year 6 at Millner Public School in Darwin and facing high school next year, Kevin's reading skills were on par with an average Year 3 student and he was already in the gap that has come to characterise the achievement of indigenous students in school.

Today after completing an 18-week course at the Exodus Foundation's new literacy tutorial centre in Darwin, Kevin is reading at the level of a Year 9 student. The books he used to read, like Aussie Nibbles, with short chapters, large print and pictures, stay on the shelf in favour of Robert Louis Stevenson's Kidnapped, Johnathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels and his most recent selection, The Amber Spyglass by Phillip Pullman.

Kevin's improvement in reading is matched by a transformation in the boy, with Northern Territory co-ordinator for the Exodus Foundation Kayci Kirk saying Kevin is more confident in his ability, eager to talk about his experience, and well behaved in the classroom.

"He was very stilted in his reading, one word at a time and a reluctant reader," she said.

"He didn't smile readily, he would curl over his work and hide behind his hair, his long fringe.

"He's still a little tentative but now knows he can do it. He's not hiding behind his hair as much, he's sitting up tall."

Kevin is a member of the first class of 30 students to graduate from the Millner Tutorial Centre based at the primary school.

The centre is one of four tutorial centres the Exodus Foundation will open over the next year, using federal government funding to provide the remedial reading course Multilit (Making Up Lost Time In Literacy) program developed by Macquarie University education researchers, based on the direct and systematic teaching of the sounds that comprise the English language, known as phonics.

The first intake at the centre comprised 18 students in Years 4 to 6 doing Multilit and 17 students in Years 1 to 3 doing Minilit (Meeting Initial Needs in Literacy), a version designed to intervene early to help children at risk of falling behind in literacy.

Before starting at the Millner Tutorial Centre, the Years 4 to 6 students were reading on average almost three years behind their age and were more than four years behind in their reading comprehension. After 18 weeks, the students had improved their age in reading accuracy by an average 17 months, by nine months in reading comprehension, 18 months in spelling and could read 45 per cent more words correctly per minute.

The Exodus Foundation, based in Sydney and established by Reverend Bill Crews, runs a school for homeless youth and two tutorial centres in Sydney, one in Gladstone in Queensland and is planning more.

Exodus Foundation national education manager Glenys O'Riley said the main skill missing in the children who come to the literacy centres is usually phonic skills, the ability to sound out unknown words.

"Phonic awareness is usually the weakest link. Sight words (memorised by children) takes them up to a reading age of about eight but most of us need to have our phonics," she said.

"They don't get taught phonics explicitly, they're just exposed to it and expected to pick it up by osmosis. For some kids it works but for many kids it doesn't work."

Dr Riley said Multilit works because it is based on explicit and systematic teaching of phonics and other skills, with students tested regularly.

Justine Ferrari, Education writer