

# Aboriginal literacy project is good news in any language

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A SYDNEY charity is claiming an educational breakthrough that could save Aboriginal languages from extinction, and simultaneously boost English literacy in indigenous communities.

At a forum in Sydney today the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation will brief corporate donors on the results of a pilot project in the Northern Territory that they say is helping some Aborigines to write in their own languages for the first time.

The foundation believes the widespread inability of indigenous Australians to read and write in their own languages hampers their efforts to learn English, without which education, work and social opportunities are severely restricted.

Of the 250-odd Aboriginal languages spoken when Europeans first settled in Australia, about 55 have vanished, with one dying out every two years.

While linguists have extensively catalogued indigenous languages, there has been less success in developing techniques for teaching them at the primary school level.

At Tennant Creek, in the Northern Territory, the



**Class act ... Aboriginal children are learning to write in their own languages for the first time.** Photo: Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation

foundation has been working to bridge the gap, "mapping" the sounds of the local Warumungu language in the Roman (English) alphabet, and using story boards and other methods to develop basic education

modules for reading and writing the language.

Peter Herwood, who has worked at Tennant Creek Language Centre for the past 15 years, said he had been impressed by the progress.

"The foundation's method has proven extremely popular in the primary school here. For too long Aboriginal languages have been approached by linguists as some kind of historical artefact, but this method makes them usable in a

way that has the potential to transform literacy education in indigenous communities," he said.

It is hoped that some among the first batch of 60 students attending the course will go on to become language teachers.

The foundation's co-founder, Mary-Ruth Mendel, a speech and language pathologist, described first language literacy as the missing link in efforts to improve social and economic outcomes in indigenous communities.

"What's missing for our indigenous kids is early learning experience in their mother tongue. If we can give them that they'll be well on the way to acquiring English language skills that will help them get through school and do all the things that they want to do."

The Northern Territory Government in recent years phased out bilingual education, a move strongly criticised by educators.

To launch its project the foundation was provided with initial funding of \$300,000 by Coca-Cola Amatil. Ms Mendel said the project's mix of government-funded schools, corporate philanthropy, the foundation's expertise and strong involvement of indigenous people had the potential to empower some of the country's most disadvantaged people.

"Reading and writing are the currency of learning at school. If you have a glitch in either, you become marginalised. Literacy is right at the top of what indigenous families want for their children and themselves."