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E-readers kindle desire to learn

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Teacher Allison Stewart and student Heath Roffe, who has made great progress since using an e-reader at the Lake Wyangan public school. *Source:* News Limited

A PROGRAM that sends e-readers to Aboriginal children across the country to improve their literacy is revolutionising the reading habits of some of the most impoverished children, prompting indigenous leader Marcia Langton to call for its broader rollout.

The Indigenous Reading Project, a new, non-government, not-for-profit organisation, finds indigenous youngsters that want to read and loans them a Kindle e-reader.

If the child makes progress over time and reaches key goals, they get to keep the Kindle.

Eleven-year-old Heath Roffe, who attends Lake Wyangan Public School just out of Griffith, NSW, has had his life transformed by his new Kindle.

His mother, Amanda Harris, said she could hardly believe the progress Heath had made since August.

"It's amazing. He is actually motivated to read now," she said.

Heath's teacher Alison Stewart said he had made some significant gains through the program.

"He is enjoying his reading and there is something about using e-reader technology that has engaged him.

"Heath has gained confidence to try to decode unknown words when reading by himself. He can't wait to get his e-reader out every day and practice reading."

The program's chief executive, Dan Billing, said he was overwhelmed by this year's results. "This year we offered 105 places to indigenous students across the country; 22 were city-based, 60 were from regional areas and 23 were from remote communities," he said.

He said that overall, 89 of the youngsters made significant, measurable improvements in terms of their effort and achievement levels.

"Based on these test scores, we have given 89 students a Kindle of their own. These students now have a cheap and simple way to access e-books. It's a well-deserved reward for hard work and achievement. We think our most significant news is that the bush kids did the same and even better on some measures than regional and urban kids. This is confirmation to us that our approach can work regardless of where the student lives."

The program's patron, indigenous leader and academic Marcia Langton, said the scheme should be rolled out more broadly because it was having such good results. "I think there are schools where this kind of program would work. I would love to ... get the (funding) to roll it out into the schools where programs like this are needed. You can immediately see the advantage in low socio-economic areas where children do not have access to reading materials. The information divide disadvantages youngsters because most well-functioning schools use iPads and Kindles now."