

Students blossom as Noel Pearson's way hits Pilbara

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Noel Pearson with Martu children of the Western Desert at Donkey Hill, just outside Jigalong community, about 170km east of Newman. Picture: Marie NirmeSource: News Corp Australia

FIVE hundred Martu children at five schools in the Pilbara desert have become the biggest cluster of Australian students to begin learning under the Direct Instruction teaching method championed by Cape York leader Noel Pearson, and there are early signs of big change.

In northeast Western Australia this week to see the highly scripted method in classrooms outside Cape York for the first time, Mr Pearson declared there was a moral imperative in the program's continued rollout to remote schools, where so many students have failed to achieve.

"We have got a great moral purpose here, a moral purpose for the survival of these communities and these people," he said.

As remote communities across Western Australia brace for selective closures threatened by Premier Colin Barnett, Mr Pearson linked the communities' future to education. "The Martu have the same vision as I have for my people, which is for them to live long on their land," he says

"The whole question of the viability of these remote communities rests on making schools work.

"School is the heart and the future of these communities, more important than the economy there because kids can go to where the economy is or they can create one. But they can't if they don't have an education."

At the West Australian Aboriginal community of 350 people at Jigalong, the Direct Instruction method has coincided with a sharp increase in attendance.

Jigalong, a state government school, has long had very high truancy rates but so far this year more than two-thirds of the students have an attendance record of 80 per cent or above, a significant improvement.

It has only been seven weeks since the radical method began in five classrooms across three deserts on Martu country, but Aboriginal education officer Karen O'Brien says the children have responded in an extraordinary way to the clear and regimented lessons.

"It's like watching the shell of a mussel open up," she said.

When assessors visited last year, they deemed none of the 100 children was able to do work beyond Year 3 level, including teenagers in the high school that forms part of the desert campus.

Now children in Year 1 are writing their names and dates of birth with confidence, a step that has delighted Martu chairman Brian Samson.

He told a community meeting at Jigalong this week he did not go into the classrooms on his country for 20 years because he was so upset by the low standards reached there.

"A few years ago, in the last mining boom, we had talks with big mining companies and they were going to employ our young people but they came back and said, 'Sorry, their literacy and numeracy is not up to standard'," Mr Samson said.

"It was so disappointing and a big wake-up for a lot of us. I thought, 'This can't go on', and that's when we started looking for a new way."

Now, he says, all Martu parents should go and see the change happening in their schools.

At the Rawa school in Punmu community, 11-year-old Martu boy Jake is reading simple stories cautiously but unassisted in a way he could not last year; his skills are progressing so fast his teacher Jim Sligar predicts he will advance two grades this year. Asked how he learned to read whole sentences, Jake replies: "It's easy."

Rawa teacher Joanna Josem says her class of six-, seven- and eight-year-olds is thriving on the routine and discipline of Direct Instruction.

She was trained in inquiry-based teaching, where lessons followed students' interests and were relatively free-flowing. Now she puts the children through spoken-English drills with an electronic whiteboard, making them repeat sentences back to her in unison, and they call out the answer to the same question several times in short, intense sessions. "This is very different to how I'm used to running a classroom," she said. "But it's going so well and there's a strong language focus, which makes perfect sense."

Mr Pearson's Good to Great Schools Australia has accepted the federal government's request for him to implement the method in 40 remote schools in Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia.

Source: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/indigenous/students-blossom-as-noel-pearsons-way-hits-pilbara/story-fn9hm1pm-1227271986680>