

Children helping to keep language alive

Emma Downey

THE faces of a group of young children from a multicultural background light up when Renee Houldsworth enters the classroom at St Mary's Preschool in Tamworth, greeted by an enthusiastic chorus of "Yaarna".

Ms Houldsworth is there for the class' fortnightly language lesson - no ordinary lesson though as the children are learning the basics of the Gamilaraay language - one of the world's oldest spoken languages.

The Gamilaraay language program began in early 2023 under the NSW Department of Education's Ningnahn No More program, seeking to increase the level of Aboriginal languages being taught in early childhood education and care (ECEC) services across NSW.

The department operates three language hubs across NSW under the Ningnahn No More language program, from Gunnedah, Dubbo and Coffs Harbour, helping to foster a lifelong connection to country, culture and learning among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Each hub comprises an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation which coordinates language teachings across multiple ECECs in their region. The goal is to have 50 per cent of Aboriginal children in ECEC having access to an Aboriginal language program in the year before school by 2025, as outlined in the first Steps Strategy.

The Winanga-Li Aboriginal Child and Family Centre in Gunnedah coordinates teaching resources of the Gamilaraay/Yuwaalaraay/Yuwaalayaay Aboriginal languages across the Tamworth, Gunnedah, Walgett, and Moree Plains regions.

Ms Houldsworth, who is the Winanga-Li Aboriginal child and Family Centre language hub coordinator and based at Quirindi, said the program currently has about 1600 preschool children, between the ages of three and five years, located in 32 ECECs across the Gamilaraay nation.

"Winanga-Li has always been about culture, so when we were given this opportunity, our aim has been to go bigger and better with it," she said.

"We are proud to be able to deliver the language hub program alongside the department of education - together we play a pivotal role in continued efforts towards language revitalisation in early learning centres."

Ms Houldsworth said the initiative was not just about language revival.

"It's a vibrant cultural renaissance - for Aboriginal children and community members these efforts mean re-connection with their



Renee Houldsworth runs a Gamilaraay language lesson with St Mary's Preschool students in Tamworth. Picture by Peter Hardin

ancestral roots and an opportunity to keep the heritage alive," she said.

"For others it's a chance to embrace and respect the linguistic and cultural diversity that enriches our nation. The Gamilaraay language, with its rich history and wisdom, is an integral part of Australia's cultural tapestry."

Ms Houldsworth said participating children loved the learning experience.

"We have about 500 children who identify as being Aboriginal since we've been running the program," she said.

"Everywhere we go now we have people greeting in language, and the children identify animals in language, along with body parts in language, even colours.

"I see children every fortnight and they get excited when they see me come in. The visit is not just about the language, we do fun stuff with the children, like songs, dance, and games - it helps to break up their week."

Ms Houldsworth is excited about helping to revive the Gamilaraay language "which was lost for so many".

"For me to be able to do this and bring it back at such a young age is just the best opportunity and very rewarding," she said.

Like most things, the younger children

For me to be able to do this and bring it back at such a young age is just the best opportunity and very rewarding.

Renee Houldsworth

start to learn something the better.

"At this age, children's brains are like sponges. You teach them anything and they keep it in," she said.

"We work with monthly themes, which gives children enough time to remember the information, focusing on about 10 words related to the theme," she said.

"For example, we're up to food and today I'll only teach them six of the words.

"We don't try to give them everything all in one go because they won't remember it - so monthly themes, different activities every visit but focusing on the key words."

Ms Houldsworth said some families used the Gamilaraay language at home, and in

some cases the children went home to teach their parents the words they have learned.

"I've had parents come up to me and say their children come home with all these new words and it's from 'Renee at Winanga-Li' - I've had lot of great responses from what we're doing."

St Mary's Preschool nominated supervisor Natalie Abberfield said the children Ms Houldsworth works with at the school "love the classes".

"We have 38 children in the group Renee is teaching, and our teachers are also learning along with them," Ms Abberfield said.

"The children use the language during classes, not just in Renee's classes, meaning it's pretty well embedded now."

Ms Abberfield said the school was very multicultural, meaning the bulk of the children taking part in the classes were not of First Nations heritage.

"Parents reactions have been great, they are happy with it," she said.

Ms Abberfield said St Mary's was already trying to embed First Nations knowledge in the school's curriculum aside from Renee's classes .. something most preschools are doing now.



Regional Angel
Investor Network

Explore new investment opportunities. Become a member of Regional Angels

