

The ripple effect

Vicky Nicholson has built a community of people as committed to Aboriginal students as she is, reports **DANIELLE TOWNSEND**.

There is no one left out of Vicky Nicholson's view of an education community. Her work over the past eight years has inspired teachers, Aboriginal tutors and education workers, students and their families. The statistics also prove what the people involved in her programs know from their experience—her ideas work.

Nicholson, this year's winner of the AEU Arthur Hamilton Award for Reconciliation in Education, is a Senior Education Officer at the Aboriginal Education Unit in the Tasmanian Department of Education. She is a program manager for three innovative programs that could be described as professional development, although the label doesn't adequately describe an experience that can include drama, maths, sharing stories and 'mutton birding'.

The *Improving Numeracy for Indigenous Secondary School Students* (INISSS) program began in 1998 in response to Indigenous students' low numeracy achievement in statewide testing. *Changing Places*, a program targeting literacy and

numeracy skills of primary school students, followed in 2000 and the *Think Tank* program for middle school students has been running since 2004.

All the programs take the approach that Aboriginal students are more likely to achieve when their cultural needs and learning styles are respected and integrated into the classroom. "This positive, supportive environment enhanced the learning opportunities for all students, no matter

“It's great professional learning for teachers because they are surprised at what the kids are able to do.”

what their academic level," says Meg Weily, a teacher who has been involved in Nicholson's program for seven years and who nominated Nicholson for the award.

By inviting teachers, education workers, parents and students to residential workshops, Nicholson wanted to expose them to Aboriginal elders, heritage officers and parents of Aboriginal students who would help them understand the



needs and culture of their Aboriginal students. "It breaks down the barriers of believing that teachers have somehow got special knowledge," says Nicholson.

The workshops are held near to sites that are culturally significant to Tasmanian Aboriginal people in places such as Boat Harbour, Bruny Island, Strahan, Bicheno and Big Dog Island, where students were involved with elders in the traditional harvesting of mutton birds. The program enables students to connect with their own heritage and show that they can succeed. "It's great professional learning for teachers because they are surprised at what the kids are able to do," says Nicholson. "These children are really able to achieve and these results are not showing up on the statistics."

Meg Weily estimates that the programs have included more than 200 teachers in 60 schools in

High Praise

"The past seven years have been the best of my teaching career. *Changing Places* has rejuvenated my enthusiasm and practice. I am a far better teacher."

Meg Weily
*Teacher and nominator
of Vicky Nicholson*

"What she's given is to the whole community, not just the black community, and that's what we're looking for in nominations."

Charline Emzin-Boyd
*Aboriginal Education
Coordinator, NSW
Teachers Federation*

"INISSS was also rigorously evaluated...The gap had been closed for Aboriginal students whose teachers had been involved."

Dr Rosemary Callingham
University of New England

"Within this web of learning, Vicky quietly managed, orchestrated and implemented the most inclusive, collaborative and dynamic learning program I have ever been engaged in."

Maureen Innes
*Lecturer, University
of Tasmania*



Julian 'mutton birding' on Big Dog Island

“I learnt
what being
Aboriginal is.
Before, it was
just a word,
now it's who
I am.”

Julian
*Student, Franklin
Primary School*

Tasmania, reaching around 30,000 students in the past six years.

"The kids that she's touched then move forward," says Charline Emzin-Boyd, Aboriginal Education Coordinator, NSW Teachers Federation and one of the panel who chose the reconciliation award winner. "It's a ripple effect. They grow and ask questions and get involved and they might never have done that."

It is fitting that this year's winner of the AEU Arthur Hamilton Award for Reconciliation in Education was a colleague of Hamilton's, an activist and educator who died in 2004. "He was very good at picking up on people who had really good ideas," says Nicholson, "He trusted us to go away and run with them." ●

DANIELLE TOWNSEND is
commissioning editor for *Australian
Educator*.

"I am firmly convinced that Vicky's work has led to identifiable success for Indigenous learners within Tasmania."

Doug Williams
*Mathematics Professional
Services, Curriculum
Corporation*

"This experience for [my son] was an amazing insight into who he actually was as an Aboriginal person. The growth he went through emotionally affected the whole family..."

Ruth Oates
Parent

"I feel different at school now because I don't get into so much trouble...I am working better. I want to be good so I can go to Big Dog again."

Dion
Student, Margate Primary School

"I've learnt and hung around with Aboriginal people and elders for 20 years and I've learned so much. I think I'm in the education program and they're teaching me, and that's how it's always been."

Vicky Nicholson
*Winner 2006 AEU Arthur
Hamilton Award for
Reconciliation in Education*