

Connecting with culture

The award-winning program of Aboriginal educator **Theresa Sainty** is giving her people a voice.

by **Krista Mogensen**

In January, Tasmanian educator Theresa Sainty was awarded the AEU's Arthur Hamilton Award for Outstanding Contribution to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education for her program *Connecting Community, Country and Culture*.

Sainty's not one to seek the spotlight. "It's not about the individual," she says before noting that word came through in the very same week that Trefoil, a mutton bird island off the north-west coast of Tasmania, had been handed back to the Tasmanian Aboriginal community. "That's a big celebration. It's fantastic news," she says.

For Sainty, the award is recognition of the efforts of many in her community to give Tasmanian Aboriginal people a voice and connect children with their identity and culture.

When she took up a new role with the Tasmanian Education Department in 2004, she was aware that many Aboriginal students were disconnected from school and at risk of leaving early. Her response was to start taking them out 'on country' during school holidays. "For some of the young ones, it was the first introduction to their culture," she says.



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Six years later, *Connecting Community, Country and Culture* is a comprehensive 'cultural classroom' program that builds students' self-esteem and raises cultural awareness among teachers. It is based around visits to country, and learning guides and assessment tools that enable teachers to integrate what the students experience into their overall learning progress.

Beautifully produced DVDs, books, puzzles and posters celebrate the continuation of traditional practices such as mutton-birding and shell stringing. They are designed for the students, but also help teachers engage with them on a deeper level.

The program clearly engages and inspires students. "What I've noticed most of all is the pride you see in these young people – pride in their identity. They stand up a bit taller," says Sainty.

Local Aboriginal elders, cultural educators and Aboriginal education staff, including curriculum experts and early years liaison officers, have supported the program from the beginning. They ensure the materials show respect for old learnings.

"Our community has to be okay about what we put out there. There are some aspects of shell stringing, for example, that I don't know and it's not my place to know. What I'm putting out here must be right and it must be 'kosher' to discuss in the wider community."

Some assumed truths have to be set straight. "For example, it used to be taught in school that Truganini was the last Tasmanian Aborigine. You can imagine how confusing that myth was." It has contributed to the ongoing denial and invisibility of Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

"That's probably why we are such a strong community now, and why our people are at the forefront of campaigns for Aboriginal rights – even within the AEU." (Arthur Hamilton was a staunch advocate for Indigenous education.)

Sainty is also Aboriginal language consultant for the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre's Language Retrieval Program, and she writes curriculum and contributes Aboriginal perspectives to the education department's eCentre.

"We're not only educating the wider community here in Tasmania, but our countrymen and women on the big island. There's heaps more to do." 1

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