

Leading a local learning revolution

Michael Gordon, Aurukun Published: August 13, 2012 - 3:00AM



NICOLE Peeler considered herself a well-travelled Victorian, but she had never heard of Aurukun when she set off with her partner to explore the east coast of Australia after qualifying as a teacher from Ballarat University in 2010.

An ad for a boat with an Aurukun address on a noticeboard at Weipa, in far north Queensland, prompted an internet search that revealed the town was home to a small indigenous community on the west coast of Cape York - and it had a school.

Ms Peeler applied for a job as a casual, with the aim of staying for a term and earning enough money to extend their holiday. Now, she and her partner, Bryce Coxall, 25, a case manager, are into their third year at the school and have no idea when they will leave.

Both are part of a gentle revolution that is transforming some of Queensland's most

underperforming schools into hubs of learning, with the result that some of the state's most remote schools, in alcohol-free communities with minimal services, are increasingly sought after by teachers wanting to make their mark.

"I love my job, I love the children and I want to make a difference to their lives," Ms Peeler, 24, told *The Age* yesterday. "Even though I've only been here just over two years, I can see the changes - changes I never thought I'd see in my time here."

She isn't alone. Executive principal Cindy Hales says just three of the school's 20 teachers have asked to be transferred at the end of their two-year terms. The rest are staying on.

Among them is Naomi Gibb, 26, from Brisbane, who showcased the school's "direct instruction" method of teaching to a swag of CEOs who took part in a working bee at the school at the weekend at the invitation of Opposition Leader Tony Abbott.

To say all were impressed would be an understatement. "I was inspired by the energy and enthusiasm of the teachers and delighted by the reading skills and comprehension of all the children," said Rio Tinto's managing director, David Peever.

So successful was the weekend that Mr Abbott announced after opening the refurbished library that such events would take place every year should he become prime minister.

Central to the method are scripted lessons in a highly structured and intensely monitored program, with teachers assigned the role of bringing each script to life. "That's what we do as teachers - we take this script and we make it our own and engage with the children," says Ms Gibb.

Aurukun is a community with a troubled past that still faces challenges of alcohol brought in by "sly-groggers", underemployment and episodes of dysfunction, which might explain why the parents of both teachers had some reservations until they visited last month. "Now my mum wants to come and work here and so does my dad," says Ms Gibb. Ms Peeler's parents had the same reaction.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/leading-a-local-learning-revolution-20120812-242vj.html>