

'School's In' Or 'Gathering Our Treasures'

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Introduction

Katherine School of the Air (KSA) is a Distance Education School funded by the NT Department of Education.

KSA students are:

- ◆ isolated primary school students who live in the top half of the NT
- ◆ NT residents temporarily living overseas
- ◆ NT residents temporarily travelling within Australia
- ◆ fee paying students

KSA has:

- ◆ an enrolment of 300 students
- ◆ 22 teaching staff
- ◆ 8 ancillary/administrative staff

Philosophies & Practices

Students are grouped in clusters, which are multi-age groups of students, determined by geographical boundaries.

Teachers are responsible for providing individual correspondence lessons for each cluster member, plus a weekly on-air session for the group as a whole.

Each cluster member is visited at least once per year by the cluster teacher.

Each student is also a member of a peer group which meets thrice-weekly for on-air sessions.

This year there are 20 clusters, and the total area of the NT covered is 800,000 sq. km. One cluster is a global cluster whose members are temporarily living overseas.

Teachers write course materials that cater for the individual within the multi-age home classroom, based upon the NT curriculum.

All students acquire literacy skills through a developmental process which is not necessarily age-determined.

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Inschool

KSA families have five annual face-to-face contacts with teachers:

- ◆ patrol visit
- ◆ Inschool – whole school community in Katherine for one week
- ◆ mini school – clusters in near proximity
- ◆ camp – whole school community at Batchelor Outdoor Education facility for one week
- ◆ swim school – whole school community in Katherine for one week

Inschool features a conventional school week for students and teachers, plus a home-tutors conference for parents and teachers. Students and peer teachers are housed in year groups at the next-door primary school, the Clyde Fenton Primary School, and the home tutors' conference is housed at either the KSA building or, as per 1999, at one of the town's hotels.

The Inschool program for students includes:

- ◆ classroom activities
- ◆ screening and assessment
- ◆ immunisation and school dentist
- ◆ junior Rangers
- ◆ bush dance
- ◆ Jump Rope for Heart
- ◆ Life Education
- ◆ school photos
- ◆ Sports Day

Teachers are thus involved in the planning and presentation of both curriculum materials for the classroom and workshop materials for the home tutors' conference.

Home Tutors' Conference

Home Tutors' Conference is an integral part of Inschool. We will be looking at *why* it is held; *how* it is able to be held; *who* it is for and *what* it is.

Why hold a Home Tutors' Conference?

The most important reason for this conference is for Katherine School of the Air, (KSA) to be able to give support to all the home tutors. The support given takes many different shapes and forms based on the individual needs of the home tutors. Depending on their time with KSA and previous skills home tutors all have different needs. Some are coming to Inschool for the first time and need to know about the fundamental organisation of KSA, whilst others have been with the school for several years and are seeking support to further develop their skills in home tutoring. The workshops provided at the conference are for both sectors of tutors and parents and are developed as needs arise from the parents / home tutors. At the end of each year there is an open forum where these needs are discussed, allowing time for KSA staff to develop a workshop to support those specific needs.

The support provided at this conference does not come from KSA alone. It also comes from the other members at the conference and professional guest presenters. I have outlined the different types of support and the reasons why tutors / parents benefit from attending the conference:

- ◆ support to facilitate smooth operation of KSA – mail system
- ◆ informing about new ideas and how to implement those ideas in their family / community
- ◆ building rapport – between teachers, tutors, parents
- ◆ networking
- ◆ developing skills to facilitate home tutoring

How is the conference able to be held?

Because the parents / tutors indicate needs for specific support and workshops does not mean that KSA can automatically hold a conference to provide these. There is the little fact of money! The willingness and enthusiasm of the families to attend certainly makes it easier to organise but with the distances being travelled there are always finances to consider. So how does KSA assist these families and who provides the funding for the conference to be able to take place?

Assisting the families – funding is available from a Commonwealth Programs submission and School Council to assist with travel and accommodation. All the families are eligible to apply. The money for travel is allocated based on kilometres travelled. The funding does not cover the total amount that the families need to be able to attend the conference. The families are therefore showing their commitment as it does cost them money.

The funds necessary to provide resources to plan and deliver the workshops are supplied by School Council.

Who comes to Home Tutors' Conference?

All home tutors and parents of enrolled KSA students are encouraged to attend Home Tutors Conference. This year we had over 160 students and 100 home tutors.

What is Home Tutors' Conference?

Home Tutors' Conference is a series of workshops to provide support and information to further develop the skills of the home tutor. The workshops cater for the needs of all tutors. The workshops presented at this year's conference can be listed in the following categories:

- ◆ school systems – The Mailing System.
- ◆ specific learning areas – Social Education; Phonics; Hands on Maths; Genre; The Arts; Working Scientifically; Oral Language; Number Sense and Calculation; Spelling; Mathematics Encouragement; Developing Reading Skills; Health and Physical Education.
- ◆ behavioural needs – 1,2,3 Magic
- ◆ ways to enhance learning – Brain Gym; Introduction to First Steps; Handy Hints for Making your Classroom a Fun Learning Environment; Multiple Intelligences; Which Hat is Which?
- ◆ ESL students – Oral Language; Maths Games; Looking at Words
- ◆ technology – Getting the Most from your Computer / Internet.

Presenters of the workshops included KSA staff, professional guests (including Helen Summers, Behavioural Optometrist and Kristen Oddy, Behaviour Management) and parents.

Learning with and from each other helps build the relationships between teachers, tutors and parents. Parents who have educated their children through School of the Air have a wealth of information and experiences to share with other parents and us teachers.

As an example of how the workshops are developed to meet the specific needs of tutors I would like to share with you two oral language workshops. One planned with the needs of ESL tutors and students in mind and one planned for tutors who speak English as their main language. Although the workshops are programmed with the needs of specific tutors in mind it is ultimately the decision of the individual tutors as to which workshops they attend. If the KSA cluster teachers know a workshop would be of particular value to their tutors they encourage the tutors to attend.

To plan for the workshops the teachers take into consideration:

- ◆ what the tutors want to get out of this workshop?
- ◆ the best method of presenting the workshop to get the information across.

The main aim of the ESL workshop was to model for the tutors, activities they could do with their students to improve specific oral language areas that are constant stumbling blocks for these children. Each of the five focus points had particular games that could be played to improve the children's knowledge in that area:

Focus	Games
◆ Language separation	Language snake
◆ Singular / Plural	Bingo; Galloping Goanna
◆ Personal pronouns	Guess the matching picture
◆ Description	Barrier games; Mystery bag.
◆ Questions	Guess the matching picture.

The major resource for the planning of this workshop was Berry and Hudson (1997) *Making the Jump*. Catholic Education Office, Kimberley Region.

With the oral language workshop for English as a Main Language tutors, the focus was the different types of oral language needed for learning:

- ◆ language for social interaction.
- ◆ language and literacy.
- ◆ language and thinking.

Both workshops were planned to be informal, for small groups and a hands on session. The major difference in the planning was that the latter assumed a comprehensive knowledge of the English language whereas the former was teaching about the English language.

Evaluating what we do

Home tutors fill out evaluation sheets and responses are published in the KSA News. From the responses given this year the conference was extremely worthwhile.

Teachers and home tutors both seek feedback and suggestions about, and for, workshops. An open forum allows a means to encourage feedback and suggestions. Cluster teachers also speak to their home tutors individually.

Challenges

The success of Inschool and Home Tutors' Conference has led to certain challenges that need to be met before next year's event. The biggest challenge is to find a suitable venue! Up until now KSA has used the facilities of Clyde Fenton Primary School (which is adjacent to KSA) to accommodate the children attending. Home Tutors' Conference has been held within the KSA building and, this year, at a nearby hotel. The numbers now gathering for Inschool and HTC have meant that we have outgrown the available space. We are now looking at options that include finding a new venue; changing the time scheduled for Inschool; changing the format of Inschool. It is a challenge all at KSA are keen to meet in order to maintain the success of this important *gathering of our treasures*.