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Upskilling Kimberley Aboriginal Teaching Assistants

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Summary

The Catholic Education Office is committed to striving for excellence in education for all students within the Catholic Education system, including Aboriginal students. The school communities are building relationships to develop an understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal histories, cultural traditions and values, and the contexts in which Aboriginal people live. With this in mind, Aboriginal Teaching Assistants (ATAs) are our most valuable resource in Kimberley Catholic Schools.

ATAs have a variety of skills, but in most cases they have no qualifications for working in a classroom environment. Many ATAs have assisted in their schools for more than 20 years, while the professionally trained school educators and administrators regularly move on. Because of this, ATAs are encouraged to undertake approved study programs to improve their knowledge, skills and competencies so that they can meet the needs of Aboriginal students and their families in the school community.

The aims of this project have evolved, with a focus on improved student outcomes. Successful completion of further study and training will ensure that the Catholic sector is placing qualified ATAs in remote schools in the Kimberley region. This will benefit the ATAs, the students and the community as a whole. This initiative provides pathways for ATAs to undertake further study towards a formal teaching qualification, as well as building a pool of available qualified people to work in the school.

The project also aims to improve the knowledge, skills and competencies of the ATAs. As a result, the project has developed a systematic approach to offering training to ATAs in our schools. The project aims to empower Aboriginal Teaching Assistants (ATAs) to work more effectively with students, thus supporting a positive teaching and learning environment in the future.

These aims include the following:

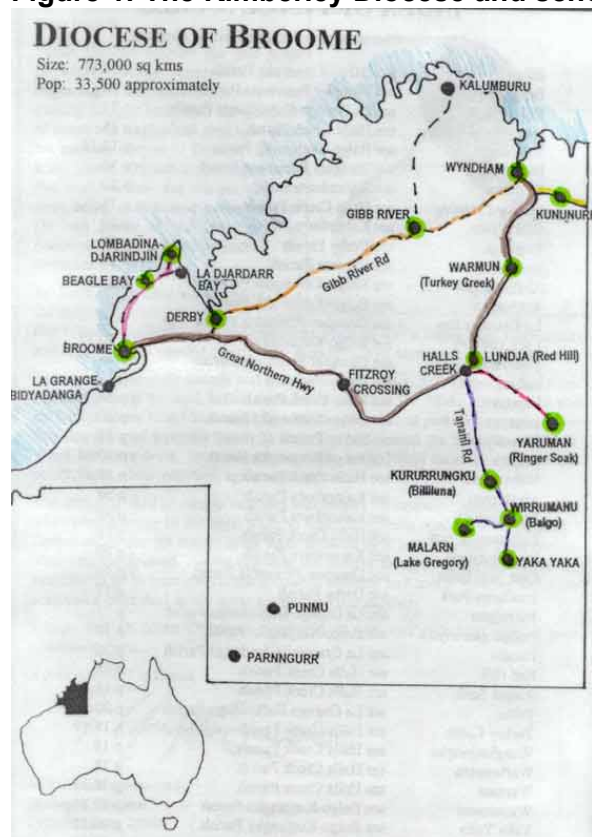
- Raise levels of qualifications within the ATA/community workforce.
- Provide further access to certificate-level and university courses for ATAs.
- Promote varied career paths for ATAs in the Catholic sector.
- Increase the number of employable people in the school communities.
- Inform principals and teachers of the roles of ATAs, and the skills and qualifications they bring to the school.



This project evolved over time, with the focus on improving literacy and numeracy outcomes for students in remote and very remote Kimberley Catholic K–12 schools in Western Australia. Students identified as benefitting from this initiative included Aboriginal students, ESL students, and students at or below the NAPLAN National Minimum Standards.

The Kimberley is one of the world's last great wilderness areas. It covers nearly 423,000 square kilometres, but with an estimated population of just 30,000 people. It has fewer people per square kilometre than almost any other place on earth. The Kimberley has two distinct seasons: dry and wet. During the dry season (May–October), the temperature is warm and comfortable. The wet season (November–April), is characterised by short, heavy downpours in the evening or late afternoon, providing a refreshing change to the heat of the day. Isolation is not only a geographical fact; flooding in the wet season can cut communities off from each other.

Figure 1: The Kimberley Diocese and school locations



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Detailed description of map

Diocese of Broome

Size: 773,000 sq kms

Pop: 33,500 approximately

School locations on map:

- Beagle Bay
- Broome
- Derby
- Gibb River
- Halls Creek
- Kununurra
- Kururrungku (Billiluna)
- Lombadinia-Djarindjin
- Lundja (Red Hill)
- Malarn (Lake Gregory)
- Warmun (Turkey Creek)
- Wirrumanu (Balgo)
- Wyndham
- Yaruman (Ringer Soak)
- Yaka Yaka.

The ATA upskilling project was funded through a Federal Government grant. The grant was to support professional learning experiences by introducing new ideas or research into schools.

The funds were allocated as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Allocation of funds

Area funded	Cost
Personnel costs	\$35,500
Materials	\$0.00
Administrative	\$90,000
Capital costs	\$0.00
Other (eg travel and accommodation)	\$60,600
Total	\$186,100

Catholic Education Office (CEO) staff and Vocational Education and Training-qualified school-based staff now deliver certificate-level courses using the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE) as the registered training organisation (RTO). The teaching and learning pedagogy is based on the both-ways philosophy.

Enrolment in these courses entitles students to the learning and teaching materials from BIITE to complete their studies. BIITE offers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people the chance to study a wide range of courses. These courses are designed to help them gain the skills and qualifications needed to find work, and to help with the development of their communities, particularly those communities following traditional ways of life. All of the institute's courses are developed with the help of people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, as well as employer groups.

To date, 38 ATAs from nine schools have enrolled in Certificate III in Education Support. The Special Projects Consultant's salary was covered by the Catholic Education Office.



Target student group

'Keeping traditional language strong is a vital part of keeping Indigenous cultural traditions strong across Australia and is one of the central visions of the ATA Upskilling Project, along with both-ways learning.' (Professor Jeannie Herbert)

Many Aboriginal students in remote and very remote areas in the Kimberley do not speak English as their first language. This was an additional incentive to upskill the ATAs and provide opportunities for them to become formally qualified educators (and, for some, qualified teachers). They would be teachers richly qualified to educate Aboriginal students in western language and culture, while strengthening their ties with their own language and culture. This is the approach that underpins the both-ways philosophy.

There are at least 44 language groups in the Kimberley. ATAs represent many of those language groups. They also represent both genders, with six men currently working as ATAs in the Kimberley. All ATAs expressed their desire to be part of the project, and are the 'students' involved in the first instance, to upskill them so that they can more effectively support schools and the students in them in three main areas:

- Provide classroom support to the classroom teacher(s)
- Provide a bridge between the school, parents and community
- Provide support in the Aboriginal Studies programs.

Not all of the students in these schools are Aboriginal, so the benefits of upskilling the ATAs have potential benefits for all students in the schools involved. This supports the argument that upskilling the ATAs must be the focus if an effective program to support student outcomes is to be developed.

Method

At the beginning of the project, we thought it worthwhile to map the educational achievements, qualifications and professional development needs of the ATAs currently serving the Catholic Education Office (CEO). Only 13 of the 80 ATAs employed in our Kimberley schools were qualified with a Certificate III in Education Support. This provided the incentive to develop this project, as did the core values of the Batchelor Institute, which include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and cultures, integrity, respect, quality sustainability, leadership and relevance.

At the beginning of the initiative, the CEO and school-based staff received support on campus from the BIITE lecturer, to help them plan and deliver the course in their schools. An initial visit to the remote community schools was also arranged, to meet the ATAs, collect enrolments and help the school principals plan the delivery of the course. Together CEO staff and ATAs set achievable learning goals and negotiated study times with the school.



The training model for this course set aside two days of on-site training each term to be delivered by a CEO staff member, followed up by school-based supported study time each week. Each school identified a school-based support person (with classroom teaching skills) to help establish and maintain a study plan for those undertaking training. Staff from the Western Australian CEO travelled to some schools to deliver the certificate-level courses, and school-based staff already qualified in Certificate IV in Training and Assessment supported the delivery and assessment in their schools.

The ATAs worked through the 'Learning at Work' books at their own pace, and assessments were administered by the CEO staff member responsible for delivery of training. Classroom teachers helped by collecting assessment material to support demonstration of the competencies, in the form of 'direct observations' and 'third-party reports'. The course assessments were done at the completion of each 'Learning at Work' book, then forwarded to BIITE for final evaluation.

It was agreed in the planning phase that a follow-up visit to the ATAs by a BIITE representative at the completion of the course would be necessary. This was to 'sign students off' on the achieved competencies, so that graduation dates could be negotiated with the CEO and BIITE, as well as with the schools themselves, where the ceremonies were held.

Qualitative data in the form of questionnaires, interviews and conversations with ATAs and school staff has indicated that the planning and management of the initiative was a success.

ATAs enrolled in the following courses aligned to registered training organisations:

- Certificate II in Community Services (Children's Services)
- Diploma of Education Support.

This initiative was intended to support Aboriginal ATAs. However, it was evident that non-Aboriginal teaching assistants were also in a strong position to be sponsored by schools to complete studies in:

- Certificate III in Education Support
- Diploma of Education Support.

We realised that Certificate IV in Training and Assessment was critical to support the training offered to ATAs, so several school-based staff (including three office-based consultants) were given the opportunity to complete it so that they could support the ATAs. This ensured consistency in the approach, delivery and assessment of the various courses undertaken in the individual schools.



An additional component of the project has been the inclusion of the Early Years Learning Framework, in the form of the Remote Indigenous Professional Learning project (RIPL) for the Early Years Learning Framework. Teachers who attended a two-day professional learning workshop about RIPL have been using the set study time to unpack the kit with the ATAs. This is supporting the ATA's literacy and numeracy skills – regardless of their involvement in this initiative – and supporting the skills of the students they assist in the classroom. These teachers are reporting to the Department of Education Western Australia (DEWTA) about the process and the involvement of ATAs in the early childhood programs in schools as part of the CEO and DEWTA collaboration to support Aboriginal students and students in remote and very remote areas of Western Australia.

Results

To date, about 18 ATAs have successfully completed their courses, passing all of the required tests and assessments. There has been an identifiable increase in the competence and confidence of ATAs, which correlates with the performance of students in their care. Anecdotally, students are also displaying increased confidence and participation in classroom activity as a result of ATAs' involvement in the initiative.

Although these conclusions are based on anecdote and qualitative data, principals and teachers have commented on how the ATAs are now actively participating in staff meetings and seeking professional learning opportunities. Principals and teachers have also commented on the engagement and change in professional dialogue between school staff generally since this training commenced. This is possibly because of a better understanding of the roles and responsibilities of ATAs. Many staff have shown interest in pursuing further study. This includes ATAs, some of whom are considering enrolling to complete a Bachelor of Education degree.

Seeing ATAs engaging in further study also gave students positive role models. This supports observations that students' outcomes were influenced by the upskilling of the ATAs. The outcomes for Kimberley schools include academic, social and community outcomes. Part of the impact on community is the benefit to the ATA of a qualification in a Certificate III in Education Support, because it entitles the ATA to an increase in salary. This financial benefit provided an incentive to continue the initiative, because of what it offers participants professionally and personally in the long term. ATAs and schools are interested in participating in another round of the initiative because it is clear there is an established training pathway that can lead to becoming a qualified teacher. One of the ATAs who completed her BIITE qualifications has recently been awarded a scholarship to enrol in a Bachelor of Education course at university.



At the completion of the course, one of the ATAs made the following comments:

'The biggest strength to this program is the support. I was very impressed that when we needed help, it was only a phone call or email away. Also a big strength is the fact that the people and lecturers came out to us at the school. The study books and content were easy to read and understand, very user friendly. Ongoing support from the Catholic Education Office will see that this course is valued, and that will make it valued in our schools. It would be good to complete a Bachelor of Education and become a fully qualified teacher.' (Aboriginal teaching assistant)

Another commented:

'I managed to help others who needed help and I pushed myself to reach the limit in finishing the books. I enjoyed getting more engaged with the kids. I had great support from everyone: family, school, Catholic Education Office, as well as our work team, who are also studying. They kept pushing me and made me achieve the things that I wanted to get done. I had a lot of time to think about this, but I've made my choice to go further in my studies and become a teacher in Early Childhood. The people around me are impressed with me, so I want to continue.' (Aboriginal teaching assistant)

Anecdotal reports tell us that this initiative was successful in many ways. One is the ability of ATAs to now articulate their understanding of educational pedagogy and practice – using 'teacher talk' – and apply their understanding of policy and process. An example of this was when one of the ATAs made it her responsibility to manage an issue of confidentiality breached by another ATA (who had not taken part in the initiative).

Part of this ability to become engaged and self-motivated was reflected also in the way that study groups formed and functioned when there was no provision for any externally formalised arrangements. A previously inarticulate and shy male ATA delivered the graduation ceremony address on behalf of his colleagues, demonstrating his new-found confidence and ability to communicate to great effect. The potential for demonstrating to students what was possible was clearly evident in the successes of this initiative.

In school communities it is evident, again anecdotally, that some teachers have re-evaluated their perceptions of the role of the ATAs in their classrooms. As a result, the interaction and inclusion of ATAs in educational discussion has expanded.



Lessons learned

The initial consultations with ATAs, teachers and school principals have given us a very clear direction about future planning of the training. Many areas were identified, as outlined below.

The ATAs did not want to leave their communities to study. Family and community obligations take precedence over study and the ATAs wanted to study, but in their own schools and communities.

The on-site delivery and support at the school and community level was the key to success. Each school had a coordinator or support person (preferably with classroom teaching skills) to help establish and maintain a study plan for the ATAs undertaking training.

Agreements were negotiated with each workplace to ensure the ATAs in the program were given the support they needed complete their study. This included time during work hours for study or professional development and tuition.

The success has been evident in schools where the study sessions were provided on a regular basis, and the collaborative nature of study among the ATAs generated support for everyone to succeed.

The support from the Western Australian CEO, school staff and principals was incredibly generous and essential. The overall professional and personal development of ATAs undertaking the study was evident in professional classroom practice and the dialogue that developed with team teachers.

Schools engaged in this program need to release ATAs from their classroom duties for two training days per term.

The study time each week needs to be supported by a school-based mentor.

Classroom teachers need to consider the amount of time needed to support lesson planning and writing observations for ATA assessments, and may need to be compensated for that time.

A collaborative method of delivery and support to students in remote communities will increase the qualified and skilled workforce for our schools, so it is important to develop the delivery and support in schools and across the area.

The project does have some flexibility in the varied and extensive components of study required, but ATAs rely on support to stay on track with their planning.



Successful completion of further study and training will ensure that the all education sectors are placing qualified ATAs in remote schools in the Kimberley region, so it is an initiative worth supporting even if there are difficulties.

The program provides ATAs with opportunities and pathways to undertake further study towards a teaching qualification, as well as creating a pool of available qualified people to work in the school. This can be used to promote teaching and learning in the school and across the school community.

It is always good to talk about successes, but there were times during the delivery and development of this initiative where the potential for study and classroom experience did not eventuate as hoped. In future rounds of this program, better input is required from project managers to make sure that all of the participating schools, teachers and administrators understand their roles in the process, and are clear about the aims and outcomes of the program, and whether those aims and outcomes are achievable.

When there were issues that had the potential to impact on a group of ATAs' ability to study and learn, they organised their own study and contact arrangements, and met regularly to achieve their goals. In this way they achieved successful outcomes for themselves and demonstrated the aims of the initiative.

Next steps

The attrition rate of qualified teachers assigned to schools in remote and very remote areas is very high. This shows that the potential of this initiative to return fully qualified teachers to their schools and communities will significantly improve students' outcomes in the future. These outcomes will undoubtedly include social outcomes. Principals are reporting that ATAs who did not participate in this initiative are asking when the next course will run.

Research base

The ATAs in this program received training using the both-ways learning pedagogy of the Batchelor Institute in the Northern Territory, which combines Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and ways of learning and western knowledge and ways of learning.

Students, lecturers and support staff all journey together in a rich and supportive teaching and learning environment. The aim of both-ways learning builds on learning from home and also contributes to the knowledge that students share in their home communities. For many students, this means validating their new knowledge and learning with their elders.



This initiative aims to produce graduates who are highly skilled, bi-cultural leaders with a strong identity and skills in learning and problem solving. Ober and Bat (2007) note the comments of Wilson (1996, p. 46), who argues that this pedagogy gives Aboriginal people pride as Aboriginal people in their community and in the outside world, preparing them for the future so that they can teach their own children the knowledge that was given to them, at the same time making them aware of educational opportunities available for their children.

By graduation, each student has gained a stronger identity as an Indigenous person, and has learned to engage with both knowledge systems.


These principles can be further expanded into approaches and methodologies of teaching and learning; approaches that do not turn their backs on traditional languages and cultures but embrace them and marry them to the dominant culture.

The both-ways philosophy embedded in this initiative encourages graduates to:

- embrace a both-ways philosophy in lifelong learning and professional practice
- be self-confident and have a strong sense of identity
- value learning, critical analysis, creativity and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholarship
- be a strategic thinker who can make and implement decisions
- appreciate, value and operate in culturally and intellectually diverse environments
- work professionally and ethically, independently or with others
- accept individual and community responsibility and obligations.


Further reading and links

Note: A comprehensive list of references is contained in 'Both-ways: the philosophy' by Ober and Bat, which supports the research base and pedagogy of both-ways learning.

Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education 2013, [Both-ways learning](#) , Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, NT.

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Ober R & Bat M 2007, '[Both-ways: the philosophy](#)' , *Ngoonjook: a Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues*, no. 31, pp. 64–86.



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