

Remote Kowanyama is Ben Mahony's first teaching position

Queensland's RAIS induction prepares teachers for remote area posts



One day 28-year-old Ben Mahony was enjoying city life in Brisbane and the next he was in a remote location in Tropical North Queensland, waist deep in swamp water, covered in leeches and on the lookout for goose eggs for lunch.

Not exactly an every day occurrence but when *Education Today* asked him what that felt like, Mahony replied: "It was a good experience and very different."

It was a steamy day in January at the height of the Top End's big wet and he had not long arrived at the remote community of Kowanyama (Place of Many Waters) Aboriginal Community to begin a permanent teaching position with a minimum two-year tenure. This is his first teaching position and his first time living in a remote region.

The community is located about 30 km

inland from the coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria in the 72,000 km² Mitchell River catchment that sweeps across Cape York Peninsula to Cairns about 600 km away. Five main river systems, including the Mitchell, and numerous tributaries spread across the landscape.

The countryside around Kowanyama Aboriginal Community consists of flat open woodlands, mostly paperbarks, gum trees, cabbage palms and assorted grasses. There are just two seasons: wet and dry.

During the wet season from November to April, when monsoons known as nhawrr yirra (the Rainbow Snake) bring life giving water to the land, the dirt road to Kowanyama becomes impassable. It is one of three communities in Queensland that get cut off for months at a time.

The only way in and out then is by aircraft. A commercial service to Cairns brings in supplies

four times a week and makes travel to other places possible. The upside of this isolation is a suddenly green landscape with abundant waterholes bursting with bird life, including brolgas, jabirus, pelicans and corellas.

By comparison, the dry season turns the land to dust and Kowanyama burn offs leave the grasses and trees black. And, though water holes, rivers and the ocean look inviting, crocodiles and stingers put an end to any hope of a refreshing dip. The local swimming pool is a popular place to cool off.

In contrast, Ben Mahony grew up in the Blue Mountains of NSW. He then lived in Gladstone, Queensland for two years before moving to Brisbane to attend university. So how has this city boy taken to living and working in an Aboriginal community of just 1200 a long way from anywhere?

“The best thing about living here is all the new experiences and the people you get to meet,” he told *Education Today*. “It is quieter here and there is a lot of space. While it’s very country, it has everything you need.”

Kowanyama is a dry community where locals make their own fun. They have parties and get together for the football.

“I’ve taken up fishing and I have a dirt bike,” Mahony continued. “I’ve also made a lot of new friends. There are many teachers here that are relatively new and I’ve made friends with a bunch of locals as well.”

Mahony teaches multi-age classes from grades four, five and six, and said he couldn’t ask for better students. In the classroom the children are keen to learn, outside they beam with friendliness.

“The kids are always around town, smiling and waving. They ask you questions and happily tell you what they’ve been doing. Being part of the school you become somewhat of a celebrity because every child in town knows you and then so do their families too,” he said.

Kowanyama State School has 200 students and a staff of 35; 16 teachers, 11 assistant teachers and teacher aides – who are usually Indigenous, as the school tries to employ locals first – a principal, deputy, head of the department curriculum, a liaison officer and admin staff.

The Cape York educational reform, *Bound for Success*, includes a rigorous curriculum framework, providing clear direction for teachers in each year level aligned to state wide moderated outcomes.

The majority of Kowanyama State School’s students are Indigenous and teachers need to build their skills in teaching English as a second language.

For Mahony, this has been one of the difficulties of teaching in a remote community, but he added that Kowanyama is easier than some remote communities because a lot of its members speak English, even at home. Still, the teachers’ aides are used a lot.

To help him prepare for his new life in the bush, Mahony, along with 140 other teachers, completed Remote Area Incentive Scheme (RAIS) induction training last December in Brisbane and Bribie Island, and then in Cairns in January.

“The RAIS covered a whole range of issues that we would be exposed to, such as understanding the culture we were going into, the language barriers, behavioural differences and customs,” he said.

“There were a lot of conferences and team building exercises, which showed us how to look after ourselves and do the best job possible in a strange classroom.”

Mentor teachers, who had worked in remote communities, discussed their experiences and Mahony said it had been useful to hear about someone else’s encounters firsthand.

“They helped us understand what to expect.”



Under the *Partners for Success* initiative all teachers, transferred or newly appointed, are required to apply to teach in an identified Indigenous school and go through a rigorous selection process. This has had a significant impact on the quality of teachers in remote Indigenous schools.

The RIAS has been running for around 15 years and applies to all state schools in Queensland. These are measured on a sliding scale of remoteness.

Cindy Hales, Director of Creative Arts Partnerships with the Department of Education and Training, said that the current model has been operational since 2003.

“For our schools, as the most remote Indigenous schools in Queensland, the RAIS not only attracts significant financial incentives for teachers, it provides a really targeted recruitment, selection, induction and support program, plus

professional development,” she said.

To ensure respect is shown at all times, Aboriginal elders and community leaders are involved in RAIS recruitment and induction and say how they expect teachers in their community to perform in and out of the classroom.

“We really welcome them as part of our school community and it’s really exciting to have such a powerful partnership,” Hales said.

School principals, mentor teachers and experienced teachers are also actively involved. Queensland offers what it calls a “Boomerang transfer” to teachers who have more than four years experience in the state’s urban schools, this guarantees a return to their base school after two years.

Visit www.education.qld.gov.au for information on the Remote Area Incentive Scheme. Visit Kowanyama State School at www.kowanyamss.eq.edu.au