Adapted from https://www.assoa.nt.edu.au

the SCHOOL of the AIR



Australia is a huge country. Most people live along the coast and that's where you find the big cities: Canberra (the capital of Australia), Sydney, Melbourne... The centre of the island, called the Outback, is mostly unpopulated. But not completely! There are people who live there and work in cattle (cows) farms, camel farms, national parks, mines, police stations and the tourism industry. There are also indigenous communities, where the people who were in Australia before the Europeans came live. All these people are far from towns - and each other! - and their children are too few to have a "normal" school. So, how do they get an education?

Students who live in the southern part of the Northern Territory and the extreme north of South Australia are educated by the Alice Springs School of the Air and use satellite internet technology to have their lessons. The School is based in Alice Springs, in the most central part of Australia. They say it is "the world's largest classroom", as their broadcast area is more than 1.3 million square kilometres. That's double the size of Texas, three and a half times the size of Germany and almost ten times the size of Greece! In 2020, there are 119 students from 3 1/2 to 17 years old, and those furthest from the school are over 1,000 km away from Alice Springs! There are 12 teachers (and 10 support/administration staff) working for the school. They teach eleven grades and their classes are usually small, from 8 to 15 students in each class.

The School of the Air has lessons for 40 weeks a year. Students have the same school year and holidays as the students in other Government schools in the Northern Territory. How many lessons, and how long these lessons are, depends on the year level (e.g. Grade 5). Younger students generally have 30-minute lessons while the older students have up to an hour. The minimum number of lessons per week is nine in the primary school, but some students can have as many as fifteen lessons per week, including music, languages, art and PE. Students spend five to six hours a day, five days a week, working on their lessons at home. The lessons are prepared by teachers at the school and supervised by an adult in the child's home, usually their mother.

Students learn in several different ways. They have online lessons every day, educational material coming to them by post, resources on each class website and one-to-one or small group lessons in REACT (Remote Education and Conferencing Tool), the learning platform they use. Each year level has a teacher who prepares and marks the students' work, teaches the online courses and communicates with the students by phone, email or online.

Do the students ever meet their teachers and classmates? Of course they do. Teachers go out on "patrols" to visit every student in their home at least once a year. There are also "Inschools" or "Get-togethers" when all students go to Alice Springs for a week. They spend time with their classmates and teachers, go on short trips and have fun together. Everybody looks forward to these: as the students live far away from everything, the School of the Air is often their first chance to be with children other than their brothers or sisters.

A. Read the text, then drag & drop above each paragraph what it gives information about:

Learning methods | The Australian Outback | The School and its students | Meeting in person | Lessons

B. Can you figure out what these words mean? Join the words with their meaning:

unpopulated	the things you need to do something
mine	watch over someone
broadcast area	a place where they get coal, gold etc. from the ground
supervise	having no people living there
resources	where you can get a signal from a radio, TV or satellite

C. Choose the correct answer.

1. Students of the School of the air can't go to a more traditional school because _____
2. The School is based _____.
3. The furthest students _____.
4. The School is called "the world's largest classroom because _____.
5. _____ children are getting an education at the School of the Air this year.
6. _____ teachers work at the school.
7. The students are _____ years old.
8. The School of the Air has _____ year levels.
9. The classes have _____ .
10. The online lessons time the students have_____.
11. _____ prepare and give the lessons.
12. The teachers visit students at home _____.

D. Food for thought (=something to think about): How similar and how different is the School of the Air from your own school?