

2007 National Excellence In Teaching Awards

State and Territory Teaching Excellence Award Recipient



Penny James

Diploma of Teaching, Bachelor of Education, Master of Special Education,
Graduate Certificate in Disability Studies, Certificate 3 in Fitness
Elizabeth Special School, Elizabeth, South Australia
Nominated By: Governing Council

Position: Special Education • Level taught: Special Education • School type: Government • Town: Elizabeth • Category: Primary • State: SA

Special needs students benefit from the 'accidental' teacher

A sudden change of direction started Penny James on a lifelong journey of educating. Penny has been teaching for more than 20 years and for the past seven of those she has been caring for special needs students at Elizabeth Special School.

Penny brings a love of dance and drama to her curriculum. She has organised many school plays, assembly performances, and Rock Eisteddfods. Through these events, her special needs students gain confidence and self-esteem, and learn about teamwork and goal setting.

Many of Penny's students have sensory and social issues associated with autism. Penny has instituted special programs to help these children based on sensory integration therapies while other programs target basic learning behaviours. It is a measure of Penny's success that she and her students have moved to an annexe class based at the mainstream school. Her students now participate in integrated classes for library, literacy, music, performing arts, and technology and now also participate in school, sharing skills, knowledge, and responsibilities as part of the host schools.

Insight

Q: In your opinion, what makes a good teacher?

A: One who continually asks, "What is it my students need to learn?" and "how will they learn it best?" rather than "what do I want to teach them?"

Q: How do you maintain your enthusiasm for teaching?

A: I maintain my enthusiasm for teaching by seeking new challenges, knowledge and relationships.

Q: In hindsight, what do you wish your training provided you with more of?

A: I received excellent training and a high level of practical experience. A mentoring system and induction program would have made the transition from student to professional easier.

Q: What is the most difficult aspect of teaching today?

A: The most difficult aspect of teaching today is recognising, understanding and managing a classroom with huge diversity of student needs and welfare issues, while delivering a full curriculum.

Q: What is your greatest challenge as a teacher?

A: My greatest challenge is to grow as a professional and embrace change. New skills, knowledge and experiences only serve to improve teaching quality.

Q: How has teaching changed over the years?

A: There has been a greater shift towards student wellbeing, serving the emotional as well as academic needs of students. The challenge is balancing the roles of teacher and counsellor.

Q: What is the single most important thing you, as a teacher, can do to connect with individual students?

A: I look for the best in my students. I recognise that we are all different and have something to offer the world. Connecting is about communicating and appreciating difference.

Q: If you were the Minister for Education, Science and Training for a week, what would you try to change?

A: Acknowledge the changes in education in this technological world and marry the new learning styles of students with new styles of educational delivery, which includes funding and resourcing.

Q: What keeps you awake at night?

A: The start of a new year is the start of a new journey. I toss and turn in anticipation of what lies ahead.

Q: If your students could describe you in three words, what would they say?

A: I asked my students this question – remembering they are students with disabilities: Raksmeysaid, "pretty", Kyle said, "my teacher", Bao said, "silly".

Contact Details:

Principal: Ian May
Phone: (08) 8255 6613

Teacher: Penny James
Phone: 0412 618 018 (school) or 0402 236 405

For further information, please contact:

Janet Thomas, Public Relations, ASG on behalf of the NEiTA Foundation.
Telephone: (03) 9276 7758 Mobile: 0402 837 758 Email: publicrelations@asg.com.au

The NEiTA Foundation is administered by the Australian Scholarships Group Friendly Society Limited
ABN 21 087 648 879 Head Office: 23-35 Hanover Street Oakleigh Victoria 3166
Telephone: (03) 9276 7777 Facsimile: (03) 9563 2780 Website: www.asg.com.au or www.neita.com

Proudly supported by



Australian Scholarships Group

SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S EDUCATION