

2015 ASG National Excellence in Teaching Awards

National Award Recipient



Casey Hawkins

Alyangula Area School, Alyangula, Northern Territory

Described as 'energetic, artistic, warm and encouraging', Casey Hawkins is a Year 3/4 teacher at Alyangula Area School in the remote Northern Territory. The school is one of four schools in the Groote Eylandt archipelago.

Casey loves that her students come from 'all over'. She has many local Indigenous Anindilyakwa students and others who have lived in every state and territory due to their parent's work. There's a mine in Alyangula and this means there's a high turnover of families, but Casey embraces it as an opportunity to look for new and creative ways to engage her students.

Teaching such a diverse range of students presents teaching challenges, and Casey meets them head on. She recognises the complexity of planning and delivering her lessons and spends a great deal of time working out how to integrate ICT, interpersonal, and visual and play-based elements. She also factors in those with special needs to ensure they receive the same level of teaching.

Casey says all her students get variations of the same content, but with an equal opportunity 'to achieve the desired outcome'. Her EALD (English as an additional language or dialect) students use Dragon Dictation to help produce stories and she complements this with online audio sources, and says her students are expected to 'learn together and acknowledge the contributions of others'.

'I do think it's very evident upon entering our classroom that we're a community of learners,' she says.

Casey's National Award is for Community Engagement.

| POSITION | OTHER RESPONSIBILITIES | CATEGORY | SUBJECTS/LEVEL TAUGHT | YEARS TEACHING |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|--------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| Teacher | | Primary | Year 3/4 | 3.5 |
| YEARS AT THIS SCHOOL/CENTRE | SCHOOL TYPE | NOMINATED BY | TOWN/SUBURB | STATE AND POSTCODE |
| 1.5 | Government | Parent | Alyangula | NT, 0885 |

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What is the most challenging aspect of being a teacher?

I think that one of the greatest challenges for a teacher is to speak the same language as each individual student in the classroom. Now, I'm not talking about literally speaking in a different language, I mean finding a way to effectively engage and communicate ideas to diverse learners who are likely to tune in different ways.

There is a lot of discussion at the moment around improving teacher training and teacher quality. What are your thoughts around this? Do you think teacher training and teacher quality needs to be improved in Australia?

With technology advancing at such a rapid pace, more so now than ever before, I think it is our duty as educators to stay a few steps ahead of those we claim to be teaching. Sadly, as a pre-service teacher, I observed many long serving, senior teachers shying away from using anything requiring a power source to enhance their lessons.

The education department rolls out 'the latest' ground breaking programs, advocates for alternative learning spaces and provides funding for the schools to purchase more gadgets than they know what to do with. Unless the school has a really enthusiastic teacher championing the latest addition and making it their personal mission to ensure everyone at least attempts to 'give it a go', more often than not, it will sit dormant.

How do you think teacher training could be improved?

I believe that those who are acknowledged by the school community as 'stand-out' teachers are those who can adapt their interactions to suit the range of personalities within the classroom. They are the teachers who dedicate the time to learning how to best relate to each student, know their interests, their social behaviour and what motivates them. Building strong relationships with each student is the key to being an influential facilitator, which is why I believe universities and trainers need to place a greater emphasis on helping teachers develop their interpersonal skills.

What advice would you give a new graduate?

When I first started, I felt like I had to always exhibit a high level of confidence even if I was freaking out. For example, I'm a weak speller and the thought of misspelling frequently used words in front of an audience would make me blush with embarrassment. I always dreaded modelling writing on the board as I would call on students to dictate their ideas while scribed. Rather than feel excited by a student's exotic word choice, I'd cringe while attempting to write the word, then spend the remainder of the lesson fixated on whether it 'looked right' and praying no adult entered the room in fear of their superior spelling knowledge and potential associated judgement on my overall teaching ability.

It was only after a few year of teaching that I became genuinely comfortable admitting to my students when I didn't know how to spell something and allowing them to suggest strategies I could use. It took even longer to recognise how vital it is for students to witness that vulnerable side of a teacher and be explicitly shown that it's okay to make mistakes.

If there was one aspect of teaching you would like changed, what would it be?

Teachers are required to heavily rely on written assessment to delegate student's results and give feedback. While necessary, the assessments teachers are expected to use place great emphasis on one's ability to perform under a very prescribed set of circumstances.

In my opinion, written assessments in some ways do not reflect the real world, particularly in the twenty-first century. We now value different types of intelligences such as social and emotion intelligence. We highly value creativity and entrepreneurship. We can forgive someone for not having the immediate answer as long as they know how to find it. We want to surround ourselves with people who display enthusiasm and who can effectively communicate under diverse circumstances. Written assessment doesn't measure these valuable skills, nor gives students the opportunity to celebrate these qualities within themselves.

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