**Talking Teachers - Gabi Zolezzi**

**Jane Hunter** [00:00:10] Hi, and welcome to Talking Teachers. I'm Jane Hunter. This is an Australian education podcast series where, in each episode will be exploring what is working and what isn't in our schools. We'll be talking to some of the most informed people in the field and asking questions about the big issues in education. We also want to investigate if it's at all possible to find new solutions to the current challenges in school-based education. I'm co-hosting the series with my colleague Don Carter, and we're both teacher education academics at UTS.

**Don Carter** [00:00:54] Jane, I'm looking forward to today's interview. Today's interview is with a teacher who is in the classroom at the moment, fairly recently graduated, but certainly has lots of insights about what it's like to teach in today's schools. Our interview is going to give us a lot of good information. I'd like to introduce Gabi Zolezzi, who has taught in both independent and government schools.

**Jane Hunter** [00:01:23] Gabi, welcome, and it's great to see you. Gosh, it seems such a long time ago you were in my English teaching methods class, and this is actually your sixth year out. Where is that gone? So I just wanted you to reflect on your experiences, and we're going to talk about that throughout our time together. But are your experiences at the moment aligning with what you expected as a graduate teacher? Well, I can't really call you that more. You're very much post graduate, but as an in-service teacher in schools.

**Gabi Zolezzi** [00:02:04] Yes. Thanks so much for having me on. I really do appreciate it. And it's funny how quickly time goes when you leave your education degree and how quickly you feel like quite a regular in the classroom. So the thing that I think my education degree really prepared me for in the classroom was my subject-specific content knowledge. So really being able to pick apart texts as an English teacher and take my students through that process and just have a really clear pedagogical lens for my practice. And it's really interesting how when you come out of university, you're really in that headspace of what the research says about how students learn, how young minds work, how they develop. And it's really kind of focused on that science of learning in that academic course and realm. And I think it's something that the more you teach sometimes, the less you engage with that academic knowledge, the less there's time for you to kind of go back to that research. So I think what I really loved about going straight into the classroom after my degree was really focusing on that research and having that knowledge base. And it's something I've tried to focus on pulling through the various years of teaching because I think it's so important that our practice is informed by research, is informed by the most current knowledge about how young people learn and what works. And so even though it's been a little longer than we thought, it's something that I've really tried to maintain over the years of my teaching course. Because when you're time poor, it's not easy. It's not easy to steep yourself in your work, in research, and to spend time staying up to date with what universities researching, what academics are saying. So I'd say that is something that I really took away from my education degree and something I've really focused on trying to maintain. Yeah.

**Don Carter** [00:04:11] That's that's really interesting. Gabi and I had the pleasure, like Jane of teaching you during your degree, and I wanted to ask you about your preparation and your teacher education course. And as you know, the teacher education has been in the media a lot recently. There's a review by the teacher education expert panel making recommendations has delivered its report. You mentioned some of the good things about your teacher education course. In what areas could your course have been better?

**Gabi Zolezzi** [00:04:43] Yeah, I think that's a really good question because teaching has become such a broad, multifaceted career and increasingly it demands so much more of teachers than just their content knowledge and their subject knowledge. We're also expected to be mediators to be up to date on student wellbeing, on notions of trauma informed practice. We're also expected to be able to mentor, to lead, but also think whole school, but think classroom. So there's these huge layers of demands. So it is quite a difficult thing to teach in that way. So I suppose one of the things once I got in the classroom, I realised it probably would have been useful to learn more about or talk more about was the importance of actual teacher wellbeing in ways to manage your wellbeing as a teacher. Because we are stretched so many ways all the time and I think as a new teacher the advice we are often given is throw yourself into the job, get involved in everything, make sure you put your hand up for everything. And although. For me, that was incredible advice in a lot of my early schools because it's how I was able to take on leadership roles really quickly in my teaching career. It was also incredibly demanding on me. And sometimes, you know, I don't know if coming straight out, I was fully equipped to balance all of those demands on me as a teacher and to acknowledged that as someone who had very high standards of myself in the classroom, that teaching actually isn't about teaching a perfect lesson every day. That's not possible. It's about accepting that we're always trying to do our best and we always have our kids at the centre of all of our practice and the outcomes and their growth. And sometimes that looks like not a great lesson. Sometimes that looks like the beginning of the lesson being really just a catch up in casual conversation with a lot of students where not a lot of, you know, learning in, you know, double quotation marks is going on. But for me it was that acknowledgement that teaching isn't just about content content, in the secondary sector where I am, but it really is acknowledging that teaching is so much more than that. It's about the relationships, it's about the growth, and it's also about as a teacher being able to balance all of these demands on you and know, knowing when to say no, when to say yes, and looking at your own growth and your own focus.

**Don Carter** [00:07:29] Yeah, that's a really good point. And your point about it being a multidimensional role is really true. What about partnerships with parents, etc.? Have you found that in the schools you've taught in? How demanding is that?

**Gabi Zolezzi** [00:07:43] I feel like in my experience I've had I've been working in schools that have really great support networks, so really great leadership teams who really help through that contact with parents, that engagement with parents. I personally have found parents a really manageable part of the job. I know that that's not true of a lot of people in teaching, but I do also really try and express for my students a sense of agency and control over their learning. Where my expectation is if they have questions and if they have concerns that they voice them. And so I really try and kind of as a secondary student and someone who teaches a lot of seniors, I think it's really important that they take that ownership over their learning in year 11 and 12. And so if they have questions, I think it's really important that those questions come from them, ideally, as opposed to coming from a parent or someone who might not necessarily know the whole picture of the assignment or of the work. And so I think that for me, that's why a lot of my contact with parents is always really positive. A lot of that communication and generally really well supported through that whole process.

**Jane Hunter** [00:09:03] So you've touched on a number of different parts of the job. So Gabi, what are the best parts of being a teacher?

**Gabi Zolezzi** [00:09:17] Great question. And I think there are so many great parts, otherwise I probably wouldn't still be here in doing it because I really do love it. And I actually, I'm not sure entirely where I read this, but I heard it once described as teaching is a job of two sides of the door. And the side of the door that I love is the classroom side of the door. So when you go in with your students in the room and you are trying to really spark that curiosity and for me, that love of literature and what language and what storytelling can do in our world, because without stories and without English, without language, you know, where would we be? And for me, I find that an incredibly rewarding place because you can see how language opens up a world of possibility for students. And when they can read a text and come to some kind of new revelation about themselves or their world. It's an incredibly empowering thing as an educator to know that you help them get them. And so I think that side of the door where you're working directly with students and you're really seeing that growth is the part that I really, really love. But it is true that increasingly teaching is becoming more and more about the other side of the door. So that side of the door that you close behind your classroom and you head to your office and you sit on your own and you go through paperwork and you go. Through all of the other kind of administrative demands. There is contact with parents that marking which in English, as anyone will tell you, is enormous. And we all know that it's obviously crucial to mark and to give feedback, but we're constantly having discussions about how we can make sure students really engage with and work with that feedback, because sometimes it feels like we're mocking and we're mocking and we're mocking and students can look at a grade and just move on without necessarily looking at all of those perfectly crafted comments and annotations that we've spent so long kind of going through. So I think that that idea of it being two sides of a door really kind of speaks to, I think, what a lot of people do love about teaching and why people go into teaching. It's for that classroom, it's for that engagement with students, it's for that growth. And the more teachers can stay and have control over that space, I think the more important it will become. And that's where a lot of the love is.

**Don Carter** [00:12:02] So, Gabi, you've talked about the classroom and then the other side of the door. We know for a fact that there are students in schools around the place who don't enjoy English. Now, Jane, and I are both English teachers so we don't quite understand. We kind of do, but it's disappointing. But if there are any students listening to this interview now who aren't keen on English, what advice would you give them?

**Gabi Zolezzi** [00:12:27] I think that's such a great conversation to have, So such a great question. I think that for students who don't see the point in studying English, I think they may have walked past the point in a way, because English isn't a study of finding techniques in a sentence. It's not about annotating Shakespeare, it's not about reading texts that you don't like. And then or even reading texts that you do like that you hate by the end of it because you've picked apart every single word. English is the study of the world around us and how we come to find our place within it. And I really, really do try and emphasise in all of my lessons, purpose and really try and make sure to draw authentic connections between what students are learning and their world. Because I do say that disengagement, and I think that's a really genuine reflection of a lot of students’ experiences, especially if you say the word Shakespeare, you'll hear groans across the school. And I think it speaks to how we need to actually frame the teaching of English, because if they don't see the point, we might not be framing it correctly because how could it not be relevant? How could the study of a text and looking at how an individual character grows up and comes to see their place in the world not resonate with the experience of a young person?

**Don Carter** [00:14:19] You mentioned Shakespeare and you mentioned how a lot of students switch off as soon as they hear that word in Florida, in the United States, at the moment, they're passing laws where whole Shakespearean texts won't be taught in schools. They're taking excerpts from the plays because overall there's too much raunchiness in Shakespeare. What's your view about this type of censorship?

**Gabi Zolezzi** [00:14:45] Well, I would have to agree Shakespeare is incredibly raunchy, but I don't think that's a reason to censor him. So currently I'm I'm teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which is also one of those incredibly contentious texts. And I think as teachers, we'd be doing a disservice to our students to not lean into that controversy because students love controversy. If you were to ask them now, this is a text that's been banned in multiple places across the world, let's see if we can figure out why. And then at the end of it, I want you to tell me why you think it should or shouldn't be banned. What an engaging way to think about a text. And I think that it's important for us to have those discussions with students about the values of texts, about who composes a text. If they have the right to tell that story, why they're telling that story, and also to consider and break down the reception of a text, because all of that goes into the reading of a text. It's not just what? In it, but it's that context that surrounds it. I think controversy is a great talking point for any text in the classroom.

**Jane Hunter** [00:16:01] So I just want to take a couple of the things that you said a little bit further. To hear you speak with such passion and clarity is just fortifying Gabi. Now, what about in schools where and households and I'm thinking about low schools now because many English teachers I speak to say that they simply can't get their classes to read. And so how how is a classroom teacher? Can you try to switch that around? And is that a big challenge that you're perhaps seeing glimpses of? And what have you done to alleviate and inspire?

**Gabi Zolezzi** [00:16:50] Yes. So we're constantly having discussions at the moment in my faculty because we've observed a real decline in reading stamina. So what that means is students will kind of pick up a text, but you'll notice that they weren't actually read it for any extended period of time. Sometimes it's about 7 minutes maximum that a student can kind of sit there and digest a text. For most, it's actually just a couple of minutes before they start wondering or thinking about the weekend and doing other things. And I don't think that's necessarily always a reflection of the text choice itself. And if the text is something that they're not interested in, I think that what we're really working with in some ways is a generation of young people who find that sitting and waiting for an extended period of time, quite an unfamiliar experience. And so it's not just about considering text choices, but we've also been focusing on actually bringing even into our secondary classrooms, reading aloud to students back into our practice, because who doesn't love to be read to even as an adult? It's such a beautiful experience. And for a student who struggles with vocabulary or sentence structure to hear someone read it aloud with intonation, with exclamation, with passion and enthusiasm, it's far more engaging for them than those words on the page. So I think reading aloud is a very simple and great tool to engage some of those disengaged readers that you were describing. But beyond that, I do think it's really important for us to consider in our text selection as an English faculty and even as a school more broadly, the texts that we stock in our library, whether there's a diversity of voices represented in those text selection. So whether the kids in your class will feel like they actually see their story represented in the texts that they're studying, because that can be a really strong point of disengagement or just total misunderstanding. If there's cultural content in a story that's totally unfamiliar to them, it can be really jarring and disengaging. So considering whether those perspectives are reflected in the texts that we choose is also something I think is really important. We want to make sure there's a huge diversity and that in our selection of texts, there's a way that it can apply and relate to the world of the students in either discussion or in content.

**Don Carter** [00:19:40] Gabi, Jane and I have been talking recently about Australian research, and we were lamenting the fact that there's not enough research money being allocated to education in Australia. For example, in the most recent round of the Australian Research Council's Discovery Project grants, education received actually less than 1% of the funding. Some $2.5 million out of the $258 million allocated. I mean we find this really disappointing. I wonder if you've been involved in any research projects since you've been teaching. If not, what would you like to do if you had some research money?

**Gabi Zolezzi** [00:20:20] I would love some research money if you're handing any out done. So it is quite shocking to hear it in those statistics how little kind of research is valued when we consider our profession to be one that we would hope is steeped in research. Because how do we know what to do, what to teach if it's not informed by data research and then practice? So I do think that it's incredibly important that research plays a role in teaching. Education. I feel really lucky to have been given money to research in my own area of interest because I do see education in its current state right now really moving into a new era. And I think as a result of things like AI, the experiences of COVID that our students have gone through, there's a huge new set of demands that our students are coming to the classroom with different experiences that are shaping the way that they learn and the way that they think in their expectations of education and learning. That I think is quite different to what we've kind of dealt with before. And so it's so crucial that as we're dealing with these new challenges that it's research informed.

**Don Carter** [00:21:48] So just give us a couple of examples of what changed pre-COVID, post-COVID.

**Gabi Zolezzi** [00:21:54] So in terms of COVID, I think that we're still working on reintegrating students into classrooms and we're still working with filling gaps in knowledge from that time spent learning from home. Because as much as we tried to replicate the classroom experience online, as any teacher will tell you, it was not the same. And in fact, it was a really challenging time for a lot of our students, some of whom were studying at home at a kitchen table alongside their three other siblings and their parents at the same time. So just some really challenging environments to try and learning. And this was over a two-year period of time. And so we're still acknowledging and figuring out the gaps in knowledge that have occurred over that time. So things like analytical structures for writing some sentence structure, things that because we wanted to make learning, engaging positive for that period while students were at home, it kind of meant that we couldn't go into the same level of depth around some of our literacy and our technical skills, because that's really hard to do online for a student at home. And so I think that gaps in knowledge is is the really key area that we're still kind of working through.

**Jane Hunter** [00:23:26] You would be aware that the teacher shortage is very real. We also, in teacher education in universities have decreasing enrolments and decreasing numbers of students that leave school that are interested in being a teacher. So how do you think we need to focus our energies now in terms of attracting more young people or more people? Because there is a lot of career changes, mature age teachers that are part of our workforce now and in an increasing number of enrolments. But thinking about school leavers, people such as yourself, I mean how, how do we do that, Gabi, do you think?

**Gabi Zolezzi** [00:24:17] I think it's a really big challenge at the moment for all of those reasons. You were kind of mentioning. I think it's really important to build the profile of teachers in the public. I do think that continuing to emphasise that teaching is a career steeped in research, it's academic, it's a really challenging career in a number of ways. I think that's really important to raise the profile of teaching because I think there's a huge number of misconceptions about teaching that are out there in the community and in the public. And I think that anyone who knows a teacher or lives with a teacher will say that it's not a job that starts at 9 a.m. and they clock off at 3 and they're done, and then they go off on holidays and never think about the children for, you know, 10 weeks of the year. It's just not true. And so I think it's really important to address those misconceptions in the public that are unfortunately sometimes repeated or proliferated in the media at different moments because teachers are incredibly hard working academic. We really are working as hard as we can. And particularly my colleagues from working in the public sector are really giving their entire selves to make sure that those kids have extra curricular. It is available that they can go on campus, that they can make sure that every opportunity is available for those students, mostly out of their own time and their own efforts and their own just passion to make sure that opportunity is available. And so in terms of attracting new teachers into the profession as they come out of school, I don't know if I have an answer. But I know that for me, the reason I wanted to come into teaching is to work with students. And if we can make sure that that stays the real focus of the teaching profession. And I don't think that's something that universities can address. I don't think that's something individual teachers can address. It really needs to be a systemic shift to what's important in teaching and education because the relationship with students is really the driver.

**Don Carter** [00:26:52] Okay. Well, Gabi, we've come to that time of the interview where we're going to give you the chance to do a 30-Second Rant on a topic of your own choice, something that perhaps makes your blood boil or you're just really passionate about. But it's 30 seconds only, not 30 minutes or so. So just 30 seconds will stop you if it goes too long. But over to you, right? For the bill. Yeah. 30 seconds when you're ready.

**Gabi Zolezzi** [00:27:18] Thank you. So something that I'm really passionate about in education is thinking about where we're moving to in the future and where the students that we're teaching are going to end up. And so something I've been spending a lot of time thinking about is and it pains me sometimes as an English teacher, why do we teach students This is how you think in English, this is how you think in maths. Over here is where the logical brain students sit. And over here are the creative students. I think that that structure is something that we really need to start reflecting on quite critically, because I see so many students who learn something in history or they learn something in art and they have no idea that it can relate entirely to the topic that we're just talking about in English. There's this rigidity of thinking that we're encouraging and students by enforcing this siloed thinking onto them in the way that we structure our schools. I think it's something we really need to critically address as to how can we make sure that we are teaching students who are adaptable, who can think flexibly, but can also think deeply. And that depth, I think, comes from explicitly teaching this idea that knowledge and information can be applied in multiple contexts, in new and interesting ways to come to interesting conclusions. And how are we going to teach our students that flexible and deep thinking if we're constantly telling them? All you need to be able to do is write under timed pressure and this is exactly how you do it. For this one subject, how can we make sure that they are thinking critically and that they're able to move into the world and solve problems and be global citizens and actually be change makers if we don't explicitly teach students that flexible thinking.

**Don Carter** [00:29:25] Thanks, Gabi. I think that was over 30 seconds, but I was so interested in what you were saying. I forgot the time you spent that. Thank you very much. That was really, really interesting and insightful.

**Jane Hunter** [00:29:36] Thank you, Gabi. And look, it's been an absolute treat to have you in the studio with us today and to just hear how deeply you're understanding what it means to teach and to hear the articulation of a whole range of different experiences to date. And I think that any school that has you on their staff is very fortunate. And I just see that there are so many hallmarks at this point in time of the potential that you have. We need great leaders in our schools and I just want to wish you well and thank you for the work that you're doing in our schools right now.

**Gabi Zolezzi** [00:30:19] Thank you very much for having me.

**Don Carter** [00:30:21] A real pleasure. Thank you, Gabi.

**Jane Hunter** [00:30:34] Don, I really enjoyed that interview. Gabi is shining out there in schools and such an inspiration for pre-service teachers, for teachers. Currently in schools, what's possible. And it was really a pleasure to hear her talk. And I especially liked her rant. And the rant, I guess, was touching on the idea of, you know, almost taking a transdisciplinary approach and this idea of the siloed thinking. And that's something that she's already starting to think about and hopefully as a vision for the future will be provide her with opportunities to really take a subject like a discipline, like English into the other domains and allow young people to see how interconnected learning and subject matter needs to be.

**Don Carter** [00:31:30] I agree totally, Jane. And there's so much that Gabi said that's worthy of further discussion. And one point that I really liked was the metaphor of the both sides of the door and the classroom side of the door when she emphasised and talked about that is so important because that's why teachers become teachers, so that can go in the classroom and teach that aren't going there to do all the administration and all the regulatory compliance paperwork that they have to do these days that's sucking up so much time they go to become teachers. So let's let them be teachers. And it sounds like Gabi's doing a great job.

**Jane Hunter** [00:32:07] Let's focus on that other side of the door, the right side, as we would suggest. So thank you so much. Don, really enjoyed the conversation.

**Don Carter** [00:32:17] Thank you, Jane. Great interview.

**Jane Hunter** [00:32:26] Thank you for listening to this episode of Talking Teachers. If you'd like to know more about Don and me, you can look at the UTS website, simply Google UTS Teacher Education, where you'll also find show notes for this podcast. The podcast was produced by William Verity for Impact Studios at UTS, which specialises in turning research into quality audio. We wish to acknowledge that the series is being recorded on Gadigal Land of the Eora Nation. We thank and pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging.