

Teacher: One Woman's Struggle to Keep the Heart in Teaching

An interview with Australian author Gabbie Stroud

Sue Phillips
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Teacher: One Woman's Struggle to Keep the Heart in Teaching is a thought-provoking memoir by a humane and gifted teacher. After committing to her profession for 15 years, in both primary and secondary schools, however, Gabbie Stroud finally resigned out of sheer frustration and despair.

Stroud had dreamed of becoming a teacher since primary school. Her childhood dream led her to university, where she gained the qualifications and opportunity to teach in Britain, Canada and throughout rural New South Wales in Australia.

The power of Stroud's story lies in her highly evocative descriptions of both classrooms and staffrooms, which are heart-warming and heart-breaking at the same time; sometimes humorous, but, above all else, highly critical of the crisis-ridden state of public education.

Stroud reveals what it is like to be a teacher in a disadvantaged community—the ever-increasing workload; the mind-numbing regime of standardised testing; inadequate funding, resources and educational support staff.

With great sensitivity, she describes some of the children in her classes, and the difficult circumstances that many of them confront beyond the classroom. Stressing the critical role of the relationship between educator and learner, Stroud exposes the negative impact of a data-driven approach on student learning and well-being.

While no longer a teacher, Stroud's book is clearly resonating with teachers across Australia. And this coincides with an eruption of strike action by educators around the world, opposing the same conditions that forced her resignation.

Early this year, Gabbie Stroud agreed to an interview with Sue Phillips, convenor of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), established by the Socialist Equality Party to unify teachers in Australia and internationally against the global assault on public education.

Sue Phillips: Your book begins by describing five- and six-year-old students returning to class after a lunch break. It's a 40-degree Celsius summer day, week two of the school year. You are fumbling with your key to open the door; two students have run off chasing insects; one child is having shoe lace problems and demanding your immediate attention, and another has a nose bleed. Why did you start the book in this way?

GS: There are two reasons. When I tried to find my way into the book, I realised the story I wanted to tell was how teaching left me. It didn't just happen on the last day, when I walked out of the classroom. It had been happening for a really long time. That particular day, when I was just trying to get the key into the lock and children into the classroom, a little boy called Grayson threw his shoe at me. It hit me in my chest, and I responded in a way that was not typical.

I lost my cool and threw his shoe out the door. It was the first conscious moment of my unravelling: the moment when my story and identity as a

teacher started to unravel.

But there was another element. For too long now, the reality of the classroom has been missing from discussion around education. I think our voice, the character of students and teachers, has been absent. So chapter one of the book was my attempt to take readers into the classroom. To show what it is like to be a teacher, the sort of things children and teachers are experiencing every day.

SP: What has been the response to your book?

GS: The response has been absolutely amazing. The book keeps selling out and they keep reprinting it. When you write a book, it can be a very lonely process. I had many days when I thought, "Who's going to read this anyway?"

It's turned out that thousands and thousands are reading it. People find themselves in this story. My inbox and my Facebook message box are literally 'choc a bloc.' At a conservative guess, I'd have three or four thousand messages from people who have read my book and taken the time to message me.

I looked at some of them today. I've got a message that says: "I am a 27-year-old teacher who has just become a statistic. It's my fourth year out of university. They say that up to 50 percent of teachers drop out in the first five years. This year, that was me." Another: "I changed my career to become a teacher and ended up teaching part-time for 12 years at a very challenging school, where I squeezed in library, learning support, computer coordinator, all in two to three days per week." She ends by saying: "There is no respect for teachers in Australia."

I have thousands of messages like that. One of the most powerful things my voice is doing is giving teachers the language to talk about their experiences. For a long-time each individual teacher thought: "Oh gee, it is just me. It is only me that is not coping."

My book gives permission to say: "No! Like Gabbie, I am not coping, I am struggling; finding it hard; I'm having very bad days alongside the very good days."

SP: Your book describes your experiences in Australia, but also teaching in London and Canada, where you spent several years. Would you say there is a commonality in the experiences of public school teachers internationally?

GS: Yes, definitely. We all face policy makers, politicians, government departments who look to theory and particular research, trying to inform teachers how best to do their job. This just doesn't work. They are not practitioners, who are trained or have experience in education.

Even independent and Catholic school in regional and rural Australia are experiencing similar problems to those in public education.

SP: Governments and the Departments of Education claim that class size, funding, resources and school staffing are not critical. What do you think?

GS: I have read research that class size doesn't matter and it is about the quality of the teachers, blah, blah, blah. But let me tell you, as the teacher who is out the front, my stress levels and potential for having a heart attack go up every time a new student enrolls and is put in my classroom. That has got to count for something. Where's the research on that?

Research shows one of the greatest things to reduce teacher stress is simply to have another adult in the room, who provides support. Someone reliable you can go to when a blood nose happens, or when the interactive whiteboard won't work, or when students like Grayson are having a meltdown, and throwing things across the room. Governments need to talk to the people who do the work, teachers' voices need to be heard.

SP: Many of the children you taught were from disadvantaged backgrounds. What do you think about the fact that the OECD has described Australia's education system as one of the most unequal systems in the world?

GS: It actually disgusts me; it's absolutely disgraceful. When I grew up and went to primary school, I thought this was the greatest country on the planet, so clever, and well-resourced.

But as I have grown older and seen how governments act, I have become so disenfranchised and so disillusioned. The fact that our indigenous children still suffer because of lack of government funding, that kids in regional and rural schools are at a disadvantage—this is just not good enough.

We keep talking about "Gonski needs-based funding." We are now up to the second "Gonski" review, but things are not changing for the better. It's almost as if our system doesn't need a reformation, it needs a re-creation. It's like we need to dismantle it and start again from the ground up.

SP: The book highlights the transformation wrought since the Rudd Labor government's imposition of NAPLAN (standardised tests) and My School (national school rankings). In your book you say NAPLAN, has "infiltrated" and "transformed" schools. Could you explain?

GS: The most damaging thing about NAPLAN and school standardisation is that it has totally changed how we think about education. We've got parents and students, and even some teachers, who believe that learning is something that must be measured, quantified, weighed, scored and ranked. Anyone who has been teaching for a few years knows that true learning, growth and progress is something that you cannot really quantify, measure and rank.

The belief we can shop for schools like we shop for insurance is a great disservice to both the learner and the teacher ... that once you pass the test and you get an 'A', then you're done.

We need serious and creative young people who see learning as worthwhile, just because it makes them a better human being. Not because you get a better score or mark.

SP: The book describes the business model being imposed on public education.

GS: The business model is the idea of making everything standard—a standardised curriculum, professional teaching standards, and standardised tests. It's almost this formulaic idea of, the way to teach is to do this, administer these activities in this way, then test for that, and this outcome should be reached.

Teaching does not work like that! It isn't an exact science. It is both science and an art, and so much of the art of teaching comes from teachable moments, arising from the relationship you build with the learner. They come from the time spent engaging with students, in activities and conversations together. We are losing that.

There is nothing standard about the journey of learning. Everyone's journey is very different, and it's not fair to try and make schools into businesses. Schools are not like hospitals and they're not like businesses. A school is a school. They're just unique places where extraordinary things should be happening.

SP: In one chapter you explain your attempt to implement a new assessment tool (rubrics) imposed by the education department. You applied the assessment tool in an art lesson. Can you describe the outcome and impact on the students?

GS: It was a lesson with little ones, years one and two, and it was about self-portraits. I normally would have started by bringing in a set of mirrors, and pulling funny faces in mirrors and things like that. Having fun, and also looking at self-portraits by Van Gogh and Picasso. Instead, I started with the rubric—it was a massive grid that took up the whole of an A4 page. Some kids didn't even have the literacy skills to hold the piece of paper around the right way.

A typical rubric is: if you want to get ticked in the column 'excellent,' you'd have a complete self-portrait. It would represent the entire face and things would be in proportion and so on. Then certain things for a tick in the 'good' column and then 'satisfactory,' and so it went.

Some of them were doing their self-portraits with the rubric by their side, and going through it like a check list, "I've done this and now I'm going to do that." Other kids just went at the task with wild abandon, and forgot all about the rubric.

When I graded the art work, it was an awful moment. I love looking at their self-portraits, they are on the wall like this series of "wanted" posters. They're just beautiful. They say so much about those children, where they are up to in their learning, and yet I had to grade them and quantify them and put a little check mark in each of the boxes on the grid. When those children came in and got those results it was as though they were receiving their year 12 results. They were anxious and nervous about it. Some of them cried.

Kids should feel proud of their work. Some wanted to rip their work off the wall. One said, "I'll go home and do it again better with my own paints at home. I just need more time."

When the kids look at their work on the wall, many understand that they didn't work fast enough and finish their self-portrait. They don't need their teacher to consolidate that with a nail in the coffin, and a tick on a sheet that said you didn't get this finished.

There's something that happens to the relationship between the learner and the teacher when we grade kids in this way. It felt really uncomfortable. It didn't impact their learning; it didn't improve what they were doing; some were oblivious to it because they were just too little and didn't understand.

A parent rang and wanted to know why their child got a 'C'. What qualifications did I have in teaching art and art appreciation to give me the skills to know when a child deserved a 'C' over a 'B.' One parent requested a meeting with the principal. It went on and on. Interestingly, the principal, who was so gung-ho and ready to support rubrics, became quickly worn down, almost wishing we hadn't implemented rubrics.

SP: Many teachers will relate to your descriptions of staff meetings. You raise that, over time, you became the person who "voiced what everyone was thinking." At one stage, you were banned from taking minutes. Why?

GS: I am one of those teachers who brings my whole self to the job, which means my personality comes with me. I think this is a great advantage. For some, my personality became a bit of a dangerous thing. The message in staff meetings, though not stated, was "sit down and shut up so we can all get out on time."

While colleagues may be sympathetic to my thoughts, the general consensus was that talking is not going to change anything, don't rise against the machine. But I'm a thinker and I have things to say.

It is not in my personality to sit there and not ask questions. When things were said in staff meetings that did not fit right with me, I had to say something. Some of my comments may have been confronting for teachers in leadership.

There was a time where I was banned from taking staff minutes, because I put my comments as an aside beside the minutes. For example, some

new program would be suggested in the meeting and I would write, “In three months’ time we won’t be running this program” or “There is no way this can work.” Or things like, “Where do we find the time for this?” My colleagues thought this was hilarious.

We sometimes shared the minutes at lunch break, reading them out loud and roaring with laughter. As a result of my minute taking, I was called into the principal’s office and told it was not on. I took that slap on the wrist, but was just so frustrated that my voice was not being heard. We weren’t being taken seriously, as professionals.

I have hundreds of messages from teachers saying how brave I am to speak out at staff meetings. This is the first port of call. We should all be speaking out at staff meetings. That is where the agitation first begins.

I know some teachers are paddling along like ducks on water; they need to pay their mortgages, they think ‘don’t rock the boat.’ The casualisation of the work force is a very real threat to them: ‘let’s keep going and don’t cause any disharmony.’ I am sensitive to that, too, like all those early career teachers trying to get a foot in the door, trying to get a permanent job. I think there are lots of reasons why teachers choose to be silent—it is a struggle to get your voice out there.

SP: In the book, you describe several incidents in which you assisted children who were suffering trauma, coming from difficult family backgrounds. How important is creating a safe and caring environment for student learning?

GS: I have heard it said that as children go through the school system and when they grow up, they won’t remember the skills and knowledge you taught them. They won’t say, ‘Oh that teacher taught me that.’

What students remember is how a teacher made them feel. This is critical work—showing students how to be in this world, another way of being, which might be different from how their parents respond to the world. A model of how you care and how to co-operate. We, as teachers, have disparate backgrounds, we create a community and we show our kids how to do that. The work of developing relationships is undervalued.

Testing and the narrowing of the curriculum impacts on those crucial relationships. It squeezes the time away. So, when we are focused on preparing for tests, and doing tasks that produce data, we don’t have time to talk about what happened on the weekend. Or “how is your dad is going, I know he is unwell, how are you? I know it’s hard with your mum in prison and so on.”

All these kids are in our classrooms, and they need teachers who can invest in them, not just invest in the teaching, but invest time in the relationship. If teachers cannot show empathy, care and interest towards their students, then we are losing a great deal of very important learning in our classrooms.

SP: Last year you addressed a meeting of teachers in Melbourne opposing NAPLAN. Many teachers spoke expressing their opposition to what is taking place. You seemed shocked at the pace of change. Could you comment?

GS: There are two things I always hear from teachers that are extremely alarming. Firstly, teacher observation procedures. Someone comes in, observes your lesson, and then reports on it, and that becomes how you are accredited. I can’t even fathom that. It seems so terrible!

The other thing I find equally alarming are “data walls,” the ranking of students. We’ve long known that a “sticker chart” doesn’t work, so what would compel us to think that creating mugshots of students, with students’ names, and ranking them would serve to improve learning?

What would be amazing is teacher mentoring, with experienced teachers. Teachers need to engage in discussions and develop relationships *between* colleagues. This is where amazing learning among professionals could take place. And yet, instead, we are putting teachers under the pressure of being observed and reviewed, and of being accountable for what we see in the classroom on this particular day. They take one snapshot of you, and use that to make a whole bunch of

judgements.

There is an obsession with data. Data is collected on those early career teachers, who leave. A lack of mentoring is the main reason they cite. It’s funny how we look at some data and not others.

SP: Right now, teachers are striking across the United States and internationally over wages, class sizes, and against privatisation. What would you like to say to these teachers?

GS: I feel sorry that this has happened, that they find themselves in that position. We need to apologise that we have treated these important professionals in such an appalling way. And then I would congratulate them. I would say “keep on keeping on. Keep on pushing against and raging against this machine that keeps on trying to tell us that we don’t matter; we’re not worth anything, and we should keep getting the job done, despite these horrific conditions we find ourselves in.”

So, I think keep putting your voice out there. Strike action speaks volumes, amplifies the volume of the voice, and I would encourage them to keep on doing that.



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