**World Teachers’ Day 2023**

**Paul Neilsen – Sophia College**

**Announcer:** This is a Queensland Department of Education podcast.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** In Queensland, World Teachers’ Day is celebrated annually, on the last Friday of October.

In recognition of the hard work and dedication of our teachers, we talk to three teachers from diverse backgrounds in very different teaching settings about their teaching journey.

I’m Virginia from the Department of Education, and joining me is Paul Neilsen from Sophia College at Plainland.

Hi Paul, thanks for joining me.

**Paul Neilsen:** Hi Virginia, thank you for this opportunity.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Now Paul, how long have you been a teacher and what inspired you to choose teaching as a career?

**Paul Neilsen:** I’ve been teaching now for just over 16 years. I feel that my inspiration came from my readings that I had as a young adult and in particular, a statement from the Dalai Lama who said that ‘*teaching is the most noble profession’.* And I think that really resounded with me and my empathic and caring nature, that this is the profession, that this is the calling that I was meant to be a part of.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Did you go straight into teaching from school?

**Paul Neilsen:** No, certainly, I had a roundabout journey to this. My first degree was with Marine Biology. After years of trying to crack it in that field. I actually ended up as a labourer for a number of years and realised, after that, I just wasn’t fore- filling my passion, my dreams, and so teaching emerged as a field or a profession that I wanted to be involved in.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Have you enjoyed the past 16 years?

**Paul Neilsen:** Certainly, teaching comes definitely with its ups and downs but the best part of this profession is, I guess almost every day is a new day. When you’re dealing with young adults, and adolescents, you just never quite know what’s going to happen next. They lead such complex lives, and I’ve certainly see their needs change significantly over the past 16 years. I think what I like so much about it is, continual change but also seeing them on their journey. Typically, I’ve taught high school and seeing them from their journey from the 11 and 12 year olds through to adulthood, really brings great joy to me.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** That would be really quite an incredible thing to witness.

**Paul Neilsen:** Certainly, and they can change so significantly for the better is which I’ve always seemed to experience. So, they may have difficulties with their learning or their personal lives and just being part of that journey and guiding them and supporting them. I guess, being there beside them, you know, we as teachers we may spend more time, sometimes than their own parents do with them, and so, I think it’s that whole guiding and supportive parts of the role that I really enjoy.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** What do you think your main goal as an educator is?

**Paul Neilsen:** My main goal certainly is to get students to love their learning. It’s about them, wanting to continue to learn past school. So, whether that’s in higher education, or in trade or just in life in general, just to, really want them to keep on learning, to know that the learning journey never ends. To be passionate about always wanting to learn more. That’s really part of my role. The other big part for me is, I love seeing the ones that just go beyond. The way I like to think of it is, you know they’re smarter than you. You do. You’ve got to embrace that. You’ve got to guide them and support them and direct them to use those talents.

One really clear example for me, is I knew this young girl was highly intelligent. We did senior sciences together for a number of years. She was always checking me and questioning me and identifying my mistakes and I had to accept that. Upon accepting that, I think she saw that I was a real person. But she’s gone on now to work for CSIRO, in stem cell research and is doing some amazing work there. And work that I can’t even get my head around. It just makes me so proud that I was in some way a part of her journey.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Yeah, that’s just fantastic. So, you are a math and science teacher?

**Paul Neilsen:** Yes, maths and science so that’s my passion areas. Biology is my main focus in the sciences, but I really have over the last few years developed as a mathematics teacher. I think there is a new wave of thought in mathematics in terms of, whilst students need to master the skills, there’s area for them to enquire and actually understand their world through mathematics.

So, I’ve actually been recently trying to get students to understand that mathematics, is almost like, it is its own language. It is an interpretation of English into a new form, and I feel taking that a view of the subject area has helped me broaden the way I teach it.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** And it’s probably made it more interesting for some students who probably were not that interested in it.

**Paul Neilsen:** Certainly, I guess I’m really trying to step away from the classic, as we call it, ‘*chalk and talk*’, that always seems to occur in mathematics and the way I was certainly taught mathematics. Whilst there’s definitely a need for that in places, just the chance to enquire about their world and the mathematics of the real world has really made it far more enjoyable to teach.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Are there any memorable moments in your career that have helped to shape the teacher you are today?

**Paul Neilsen:** I think the biggest moments for myself have been the students who go on to become teachers. So, there’s a few examples. One main one was a student who, she ended up studying vet nursing actually. She worked in the industry for a few years and then, was probably closer to 10 years after I had taught her, I got a message from her and she said to me, ‘Sir you inspired me to become a teacher’. She felt she wasn’t full filling her life’s passion in the field that she was in and that she could always remember those moments that we’d had together, those inspirational moments and that’s what she wanted to be able to give to others. I think that one really stands out to me. She went on the same journey as I did. She went into a profession and then discovered that it wasn’t for her and that she really wanted to help others and so that’s probably my most happiest moment in my career.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** What advice would you give students thinking of studying, teaching or career changers moving into teaching?

**Paul Neilsen:** I think career changers are really invaluable to this profession. I believe that the best educators are educators who have had experience in other professions. They can bring that world alive to their students. You don’t lose I guess the passion for your profession, you are able to share it more deeply with students through the role of a teacher. So, I think it is really a valuable to have had those experiences. For those who move from school into education, I think it’s important to bring your passion for learning and share it and to instil that with your students so that they too realise that learning is a life journey and that we should always challenge ourselves to continue to learn.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** What excites you most about the future of the teaching profession?

**Paul Neilsen:** That’s a very difficult question. I think what excites me the most is that we have within students today, we do have the answers for the future. We just need to support and guide them and inspire them to really challenge themselves to look for those unique solutions so that our world can prosper. I think for me it’s about that idea of creating students who want to make change, positive change in their world and if we can inspire them to do that, I think that’s the joy of the job.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** So after 16 years as a teacher, does the words of the Dalai Lama still ring true for you?

**Paul Neilsen:** Certainly, I still feel that this is the noble path. It is a place where each day we, as educators, as teachers, can actually make a difference in individuals lives and communities’ lives. It’s a job that provides great joy. Certainly, provides moments of sadness and frustration, but certainly makes you feel that, you are making a difference in this world.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Well, thank you Paul, and congratulations on finding a career that you love.

**Paul Neilsen:** Thank you very much, yes, I think that’s the number one key to all of this, is that after 16 years I can still wake up each day and be happy to be driving to work.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Yeah, not everyone can say that.

**Paul Neilsen:** No.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Well, thank you for your time.

**Paul Neilsen:** Wonderful,thank you very much Virginia.

**Announcer** You have been listening to a Queensland Department of Education podcast.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** The Department of Education acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands from across Queensland. We pay our respects to the Elders, past and present, for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture, and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.