

Conversations about teachers

What kind of
teacher does
South Africa
need and why?



Stakeholders in education met virtually on the 19th of May 2022 for the first of a series of online conversations about teachers. The conversations are hosted by the Education Sector Committee of the National Commission for UNESCO, in collaboration with the Faculty of Education at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), the Library at UJ and JET Education Services (JET). Ms. Palesa Tyobeka, chairperson of the Education Sector Committee of the National Commission for UNESCO in South Africa (who is also a senior executive, change management specialist and policy practitioner with extensive knowledge in the management of education, policy development and implementation) introduced the event by underlining the importance of having public debates on key issues in education, and she invited wide participation.

The first conversation asked the crucial question: What type of teacher does South Africa need and why? The panel held various stakeholders in the education system, representing a wide range of views. This resulted in a rich discussion. The panellists were: Rehana Jardine, principal of UJ Metropolitan Academy; Mr. Enoch Rabotapi, Chief Director of the National Institute of Curriculum and Development; Thabiso Mathipa, Deputy Principal in Deputy Principal of S.J. Van der Merwe Technical High School; Dr. Morgan Maphutha, Deputy Director of Post-School Teacher Education in the Department of Higher Education and Training; and Prof Nadine Petersen, Executive Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Johannesburg. Prof Sarah Gravett, Professor of Teacher Education and Development at the University of Johannesburg, moderated the discussion.

The conversation was robust and engaging. Teachers are clearly an important subject, considering the crucial role they play in ensuring positive outcomes for learners. As expected, diverse views were expressed and each speaker added an additional dimension concerning the type of teacher South Africa needs.

Panellists depicted the South African educational landscape as rapidly transforming. Teachers and schools must continually try to remain relevant in the face of the ever-changing world. Mrs. Jardine, Mr. Mathipa and Prof. Petersen pointed to the “shifting demographic” in classrooms and “fast changing world” as reasons for teachers to actively update their knowledge as life-long learners. Mr. Rabotapi and Dr. Maphutha noted the potential impact of the fourth industrial revolution and uncontrollable events like COVID on policy and instructional

needs in the classroom. Professor Gravett posited that we can “deliver a certain type of teacher to the system now, but this same teacher must be able to teach in ten years’ time, in twenty years’ time – must be flexible enough – must have adaptive expertise”.

Another common theme was the importance of maintaining high professional standards and teachers’ commitment to teaching. Expertise in knowledge, inclusive practice, and collaboration all reappeared as key elements of the discussion. Mr. Mathipa most strongly articulated a common frustration of the panel that professional standards are not always upheld by teachers, while Mr. Rabotapi directly questioned the ability of teacher education institutions to produce teachers that meet the standards defined by education policy. The view of teacher preparation as a basis for raising the standard of teaching was a theme that resurfaced regularly in the conversation.

Mr. Mathipa asked, “Can we really have teachers who when the bell rings and it’s their time to go to class they sit in their staff rooms and they don’t see a problem with it? How do we correct this?” He asked if teachers are prepared to uphold the core values of being a South African teacher, namely the pursuit of creativity, instructional innovation, passion, life-long learning, and long-term motivation to model the professional values. As one would expect with multi-dimensional discussions, questions are raised even in the attempt to answer the one already on the table.

Mrs. Jardine, Dr. Maphutha and Prof. Petersen all described the heavy burden teachers carry. Mrs. Jardine started by defining the South African teacher through the needs of its learners. She compared the teacher to a superhero armed with subject knowledge, creative expertise, collaborative initiative, and optimism in the pursuit of inclusivity in the classroom. She suggested balance and reflection as necessary tools for teachers to manage the numerous roles they must play. Prof. Petersen pinpointed the expertise that makes teaching a highly skilled profession: the ability to respond to novel situations, modelling a growth mindset and fostering life-long learning, and the deep knowledge of content and pedagogy necessary to support meaningful learning. She places in the hands of the teacher the responsibility to be “models of professionalism and social justice,” and “set the tone for how others perceive the work of teachers”.

Panellists asked and asked how we might better support teachers as they do their work.

Mr. Rabotapi asked, “Have we not defined well enough, or have we not been able to actualize the policy?” He proposed updating policies to meet the rapidly changing educational landscape, as well as improving accountability and compliance measures on teachers and teacher education institutions.

The point was also raised that teachers are at different levels in their careers and bring different strengths. The question ‘What kind of teacher’ applies to those new teachers as well as those who are veterans. Those who are still studying to become teachers must also be factored in. This broad view inevitably raises that generational gap of experience. Some have been in the profession for some time and might need to learn new things. The young upcoming cohort may bring something new in terms of pedagogy and 21st century skills and add a jolt of energy.

The public comments displayed an emotional response to the panel’s problematization of teachers. “Where are the successes?” one viewer asked. “It seems as if teachers are not doing anything right,” says another. The audience was sympathetic to the teacher experience, pointing to examples of “the fast paced curriculum” and “multi-grade subject teaching,” and noting that teachers “are only responsible for a portion of a whole when it comes to impacting learners”. Audience participation showed both concern for improving teaching standards and appreciating the work teachers do.

Dr. Maphutha demanded teachers who exercise professionalism, content and pedagogical expertise, flexibility, and inclusivity in response to South Africa’s educational needs. He identified the upskilling of pre-service and in-service teachers, particularly in response to the unique experiences of rural contexts, where now, more than ever, we should ground “teaching within the philosophy of ubuntu, where no child is left behind”.

A member of the audience asked: “Where do we go from here to prevent the knowledge shared from evaporating into thin air? What is the way forward?” Professor Gravett answered that a summary of each conversation will be disseminated in writing, and it is also videoed. She asked participants to spread the word about the conversations and the issues raised.

THE NEXT CONVERSATION TAKES PLACE ON: 4 August 2022

A RECORDING OF THE CONVERSATION CAN BE ACCESSED AT: <https://youtu.be/iCavN36OQsc>

COMMENTS CAN BE SENT TO: Ms Prudence Mohau: pmohau@uj.ac.za