

# Conversations about teachers

What type of  
pre-service teacher  
education do we  
need in South Africa  
and why?



The second conversation in a series of webinars 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) was held on the 4th of August. This followed the first conversation on the 19th of May under the theme “What kind of teacher does South Africa need and why?” Find a recording of the first webinar [here](#).

**T**he conversation was opened by Professor Sarah Gravett, the session moderator from the University of Johannesburg. She briefly reflected on the previous session and the primary insights that led from that conversation to the current conversation. The topic of this second conversation was: “What type of pre-service teacher education do we need in South Africa and why?” On the panel were Ella Mokgalane, Chief Executive Officer of the South African Council for Educators (SACE), Dr Rika Kroon, Deputy principal of Rhenish Girls’ High School in Stellenbosch, Dr Whitfield Green, Chief Executive Officer of the Council on Higher Education (CHE), Lavenco Smith, Science and Mathematics teacher at St. Barnabas College and Professor Chika Sehoole, Dean of the Education Faculty at the University of Pretoria.

Panellists presented their opening statements and then held an interactive discussion on the topic of pre-service teacher education. The panellists have experience in different aspects of the education system and therefore

expressed varying points of departure in relation to the theme of the webinar.

The first speaker, Ella Mokgalane of SACE, argued that the kind of pre-service teacher education that South Africa requires is underscored by the ten SACE Professional Teaching Standards. The Standards outline the competencies expected of teachers and the professional values that are important in creating the kind of teachers that South Africa needs. She asserted that the Standards are central to equipping pre-service teachers with the skills to make critically informed decisions, an appropriate set of professional knowledge and a professional identity as a teacher. She emphasised that teacher education institutions should ensure that the programmes they offer support the development of teachers in line with the expected teaching standards and that, in doing so, they will produce an ethical and capable cohort of teachers for the profession.

Dr Rika Kroon, a deputy principal with 37 years of teaching experience, noted that the educational landscape is rapidly changing, and that this pressures schools and the system. She made the point that it takes many hours of teaching to become a skilful teacher and questioned whether this was possible through initial training alone. She provided an analogy between teaching and driving, saying, “Newly licensed drivers are rarely ever good drivers. They often have plenty of theoretical driving knowledge coupled with basic practical knowledge, and the same can be said about pre-service teachers.” South Africa, according to Dr Kroon, requires teachers that have good subject and pedagogical knowledge, appreciate lifelong learning and are aware of the unpredictable nature of the fourth industrial revolution. Pre-service programmes must create the type of student teachers who will understand the fluid nature of intelligence and teach teachers to embrace and learn through their mistakes.

Dr Whitfield Green of the CHE suggested that South Africa needs an initial teacher education (ITE) system that is of quality, which he defined through three dimensions he called the “iron triangle of ITE”, namely: size, shape and substance. Size refers to the number of teachers the system can produce, and shape refers to the alignment between the production of teachers and the needs of the schooling system, particularly with regard to grade and subject specialisations. Substance, which he considers the most important, “is the ability to function effectively and within the spread of diversity”, including geographic and student demographic diversity, and refers to the importance of the teacher education curriculum. He noted that the curriculum cannot serve all masters and claimed that non-negotiables are: content, transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge; knowledge of appropriate pedagogies and practices in the relevant discipline; drawing on the affordances of technology; and developing teachers who can teach. He stated, “If we fall short on one, the entire triangle of ITE is consequentially compromised.”

The fourth speaker, Science and Maths teacher Lavenco Smith, addressed the skills, knowledge and attitudes required to teach effectively and efficiently. He referred to SACE as providing the national standards and guidelines and the National Development Plan (NDP) as providing a more global image of where South Africa is going in terms of teaching and where “we are taking learners in terms of the future”. He drew from his personal experience and observation of novice teachers entering the profession, noting that they rely on the textbook to teach, possibly without engaging with the material or the students in the classroom. He stressed that pre-service teachers need to

understand the educational psyche of the children with whom they are entrusted as well as their prior and current knowledge.

The last speaker, Professor Chika Sehoole, Education Faculty Dean, reiterated that the faculties of education involved in pre-service teacher training must take responsibility for the needs of the education system and produce the kind of teachers that are needed, with a focus on Maths, Science and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. He stressed that to achieve this, the teacher education curriculum needs to centre these areas of need, and that students must also be equipped with the pedagogical skills necessary to teach effectively. He further added that disciplinary knowledge is needed to develop a professional identity as a teacher, and that teacher candidates need to be taught how to create an appropriate learning context. He viewed this last point as especially important in South Africa where there are so many inequalities.

After the presentations, Professor Gravett opened the floor for panellists to respond to questions expressed by the audience in the chat and add to the points made by fellow panellists.

One strong theme that emerged from the conversation was collaboration between schools and universities. Collaboration as a useful tool for learning was stressed, especially with regard to developing challenging areas such as pedagogy, integrating technology into classrooms, inclusivity and assisting learners with barriers. In response to Professor Gravett’s question about how this collaboration can be achieved, panellists suggested that collaboration between schools and education faculties can ensure that the education delivered to pre-service teachers is aligned to the true requirements of the profession, and that this collaboration could potentially extend beyond initial teacher education and into continuing professional development.

With the curriculum seen as an area for improvement, Dr Green drew from previous points to observe: “We need to be more sensitive to how the curriculum is being delivered, how that particular discipline is learnt by children, knowledge of the subject content, the context of barriers to learning, be it social or cognitive.” Panellists noted that teacher educators need to be able to make the links between the subject and the challenges associated with teaching that subject - in other words, theory must be integrated with practice. To this end, collaborations between schools and higher education institutions (HEIs) would make considerable transformations in the education sphere possible.

Teacher selection was also noted as a contributor to eventual teacher quality. Some panellists noted that many students apply to become teachers simply to secure jobs rather than being driven by passion for the profession. Teachers who are passionate are invested in perfecting their craft and honing their skills as well as those of their learners. The argument was made that the selection processes should be based on more than just matric results.

Mentorship was also brought up as an important theme during the course of the discussion. It was noted that purposeful and intentional mentoring and support advantages pre-service teachers, but that not all schools are doing this. One panellist acknowledged a number of comments around the need to counsel students on the kinds of challenges that prevail in schools, and noted that it is a challenge to prepare student teachers for those kinds of environments.

One comment from the audience responded to the notion that schools should play a more prominent role in pre-service teacher education: "Making schools the basis for teacher training implies that schools have the optimal environment to do this, and also that teachers are willing to serve as teacher educators." Others noted that even when schools are equipped to provide pre-service training components and adequate mentorship, schools and universities have different strengths, and that there is a need for theoretical and practical learning to complement each other.

The webinar concluded with Professor Gravett encouraging the audience by noting that while this conversation had come to an end, it could be the beginning of many more conversations.

**KEY THEMES:** Policy; teaching standards; understanding students; student selection; curriculum; mentorship; 21st century skills.

**A RECORDING OF THE CONVERSATION CAN BE ACCESSED AT:** [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7Gerkttwik&ab\\_channel=UniversityofJohannesburgofficialYoutube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7Gerkttwik&ab_channel=UniversityofJohannesburgofficialYoutube)

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**THE NEXT CONVERSATION TAKES PLACE ON:** 1 November 2022