

Conversations about teachers

What type of
development and
support do teachers
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their career?



The third conversation in a series of webinars hosted by the Education Sector Committee of the South African National Commission (SA NATCOM) 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 1 November 2022. The theme of the discussion was, “What type of development and support do teachers need throughout their career?” This conversation was built upon two previous discussions: “What kind of teacher does South Africa need and why?”, held on 19 May 2022; “What type of pre-service teacher education do we need in South Africa and why?”, held on 4 August 2022.

The third discussion was moderated by Professor Nadine Petersen - Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Johannesburg (UJ). On the panel were Ms. Nombulelo Yeni, a Chief Education Specialist (CES) in the Umlazi District; Ms. Janet Unterslak, an experienced high school teacher, who prepares and produces DSTV lessons; Ms. Tarren Smith, a newly qualified teacher, who graduated from the Foundation Phase (FP) programme at UJ; Professor Muki Moeng, the Dean of Education at Nelson Mandela University (NMU); and Mr. Theo Toolo, Continuing Professional Teacher Development (CPTD) Coordinator of the South African Council for Educators (SACE). The panellists are experienced in different aspects of the education system - both from the teaching and management side - and therefore expressed varying points of view. For the first time during these conversations, there was a sign language interpreter courtesy of the Education Sector Committee of SA NATCOM.

The first speaker, Ms. Nombulelo Yeni explained that her work involves several activities that deal with teacher development and training. She expressed concern that a number of activities for the development of teachers become ‘checkbox exercises’. She felt that there should be a system in place so that teachers go through specific training over a period of three to five years to help them improve skills for better delivery in the classroom. She raised three pertinent issues: Firstly, ethical practice and professionalism, noting that, “teachers need to be developed in a new mindset which says, ‘I’m a professional and my behaviour should follow that.”

Secondly, she cited that curriculum planning, preparation, execution, and monitoring are changing every day, and argued that the complexity and difficulty of the content warrants teachers to be involved in very strict and specific content training, including the use of information and communications technology in teaching. Lastly, she noted the diverse needs of learners, particularly around different psychosocial barriers, and

expressed concern that there is insufficient development for teachers in supporting these needs. There are additional skills teachers need to develop in order to identify barriers to learning and access the systems and tools to resolve or support learners who face them.

The second speaker, Janet Unterslak has taught for over 40 years from primary to high school as well as in higher education, giving her a different perspective from the other speakers on the panel. She elaborated on recent conversations with a colleague in her first year of teaching, who looked back at her university training to reflect on what she thought was missing. Areas cited included not having enough practical experience in the classroom, as well as “not enough help with lesson planning, especially how to implement the CAPS document, no guidance with time management, academic or extramural, administrative activities, very little guidance on setting tests and exams and creating memos. No guidance on marking or how to mediate a memo”. The question then becomes how to support a teacher who enters the field with these kinds of gaps. Ms. Unterslak cited the importance of the assistance of a department and an active and engaged Head of Department (HOD). As an HOD herself, Ms. Unterslak arranged workshops on a particular topic and grade and let a member of staff who felt confident mediate the material, then facilitated discussions to decide on the focus of lessons, assessment, and interpretation. She also elaborated on the importance of development in moderating assessments and tests. Janet also expressed that teachers need support in their own career paths, as “there is no manual for how to become an HOD”. Other areas of support required include liaising with parents and government officials, and the development of 21st-century skills learners are expected to master.

The next speaker, Ms. Tarren Smith, is a newly qualified teacher from a foundation phase programme at the University of Johannesburg. She started off by acknowledging that the points made by Ms. Unterslak were also relevant to her. She expressed that her first year of teaching was very “traumatic and discouraging because of the lack of support I get from my HOD and SMT”. She further talked about discipline, moderation, and exams, particularly emphasising the lack of support again, expressing how proactive support which helped new teachers understand what was going to happen and how they should handle, it would be better than being told what they should have done. She felt that although they were qualified teachers, they were not really trained for real class situations, and there were still gaps in practice. Discipline was one of her biggest challenges, and she expressed that she needs the most support in this area. She explained, “most learners can see that we are new and young so there’s this lack of discipline in our classroom, and we don’t know how to deal with it, especially in diverse classrooms.” She also

suggested that dealing with parents is also an area of need in terms of support. In discussing how the situation could be improved, Ms. Smith first suggested that teachers need to be trained adequately and that they need support before school events or undertaking tasks for the first time. “We need to be told what is expected of us, before the exam, before moderation, before marking,” she said. She pointed out that although there were workshops for learning skills, the topics covered are very broad and it is taken for granted that teachers already know the content and jargon of teaching and the districts, but that new teachers do not.

Professor Muki Moeng opened with a reference to UNESCO’s world teacher’s day, themed: The transformation of education begins with teachers. She explained that teachers need to be lifelong and professional learners, as learning does not stop with a university education. She expressed that teachers must be transformative and “[disrupt] the status quo”, reflect on their practices, and be willing to learn from their learners. She painted a picture of the teaching context, pointing out that teachers work in an evolving society with evolving needs, and gave an example of the introduction of coding and robotics as an evolving need that teachers must now begin to address. She elaborated on the situation in South Africa, particularly “the triple challenge of unemployment, inequality, and poverty” which also affects schools and schooling, and pointed out the “perennial problem of Mathematics and Science, the low levels of literacy from Grade R to Grade 12 including university”, raising the intense focus on learner performance, and the ease at which teachers are blamed for poor results. She noted that improving classroom practice must be done amid of societal challenges and that teachers are much more than pedagogists - they are psychologists, social workers, and nutritionists, and such multiple roles can be overwhelming. To respond to these various needs, she argued, training needs to be needs-based, context-based, and problem-centred. She suggested that communities of learning are one channel to allow collaboration and collective learning between teachers. She advocated that teachers attend conferences, noting that these are appropriate spaces to allow teachers to be reflective as well as engage new ideas about subject matter and pedagogy. She concluded by adding that it is ultimately the Department’s responsibility to ensure that people like Tarren have the foundations to be good educators, including knowledge of the laws that govern education as well as subject and pedagogical knowledge.

The last speaker on the panel was Mr. Theo Toolo, who spoke from the perspective of the South African Council for Educators (SACE). He began by stating that there are values embedded in the Professional Teaching Standards that all teachers in the country should live up to, which raised the question of whether these values and

standards are being emphasized in universities. He also questioned whether pre-service education fully prepared teachers for the world of work, particularly in terms of how schools operate, their roles, and the regulations and codes, and noted that even many practicing teachers do not understand regulations and codes, giving an example of the assessments from some schools which are not accepted by the regulatory body Umalusi. In terms of curriculum, he asked, “how far do we go in preparing them for the introduction of new subjects?” Mr. Toolo suggested that higher education institutions are positioned to give teachers a foundation so that they are “classroom ready”, but that preparation for content delivery was important for both pre-service and in-service teachers. He noted that over the history of South Africa teachers have attained different qualifications, which produced different teachers, and that this influences the need for in-service teacher training. Mr. Toolo asserted that the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) is too rigid and regulated, inhibiting the professional judgment and autonomy of teachers, saying, “we look at those aspects and ask, ‘why is the system so tight? Why is it not allowing this teacher to be able to go outside the script but still deliver the curriculum?’” He closed by speaking about education for sustainable development, which requires an education system that can empower, develop and train citizens. Mr. Toolo questioned whether the current system fully prepares teachers to contribute to this goal. He felt strongly that as part of a full teaching qualification, emotional intelligence and psychosocial support were required in addition to curriculum elements.

In subsequent discussions, one strong point confirmed by the discussion was that teachers cannot learn everything in school, and that is why continuing professional development is important. As one participant expressed in the chat, “thinking that universities can train teachers who are able to do everything, we forget that these are young people who came from the same schooling system which has many deficiencies.” Panellists thought that there were some skills and competencies teachers would only be able to gain in a classroom. The discussion emphasized that the role of school principals and mentors is crucial and that teachers require a lot of support in schools - to the point that one panellist suggested that the only solution to being placed in a school that did not offer support was to change schools.

The importance of structured teacher development and opportunities for conference participation was also reiterated. Panellists asserted that developmental support was necessary, but that most of what is currently offered is monitoring. The point was also made that teachers do not exist in isolation, they exist in society, and that schools exist in communities. Education is one but not the only part of reaching social goals such as ‘the Sustainable Development Goals’, and module training in areas such as human rights is not enough.

ICT emerged as a key theme of the discussion, particularly with the Covid-19 pandemic having accelerated the move towards integrating digital technology into the classroom. Ms. Unterslak made the point that technology is merely a tool that can be used for teaching and learning, but that the core of teaching and the role of the teacher remain important for the schooling system, asserting, “what we learned during the pandemic is that computers are not yet ready to replace humans.” Ms. Tarren Smith pointed out that although she had been trained with technology at University, the universities were vastly more equipped than the school she was now teaching in, creating a challenge for her in practice now that she found herself in a school without even printing facilities. She urged the Department of Basic Education to assist with providing required technologies to schools, in order to support teachers and quality education delivery. Panellists also emphasized the growing importance of 21st-century skills and competencies, including ‘soft skills’ such as resilience, people skills, compassion, communication, and critical thinking. Participants in the session also suggested that self-reflection and lifelong learning were also competencies of particular relevance to teachers. Adaptability, transferability, application, and integration were also expressed as important for teachers to assist them with managing the contextual realities of schools in South Africa.

In his closing remarks, Dr. James Keevy ended the session by thanking everyone for participating so openly. He noted that the idea behind the seminars, between the University of Johannesburg, UNESCO, and JET Education Services has been to allow the ecosystem to discuss matters that matter to all of us. He asserted that “none of us is a fountain of knowledge that knows everything”, but that if we talk to each other, we can create change.

A RECORDING OF THE CONVERSATION CAN BE ACCESSED AT:

<https://www.facebook.com/UJLibrary/videos/5461572447223629/> OR <https://bit.ly/3Jh6jft>

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

THE NEXT CONVERSATION TAKES PLACE ON: 25 April 2023