

# Conversations about teachers

## What does it mean to be a good teacher?



On 17 May 2023, the fourth in a series of conversations about teachers was 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). The theme of the discussion was, “What does it mean to be a good teacher?” This conversation was built upon three 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 and “What type of development and support do teachers need throughout their career?”, which was held on 1 November 2022.

**T**he discussion was moderated by Prof Sarah Gravett, Professor of Teacher Education and Development and Prof Jacqueline Batchelor, Vice Dean Teaching and Learning, both from the Faculty of Education at UJ. On the panel were: Mr Boikanyo Molefe, deputy principal at St Barnabas School of Specialisation in Mathematics, Sciences & ICT, Johannesburg; Ms Ingrid Parkin, from St Vincent’s School for the Deaf, supported by a sign language interpreter, Mr John Mayer; Mr Matsapola Moloko, a principal in the Limpopo Province; and Ms Amy Davids, a teacher at an all-girls school in Stellenbosch. Ms Ella Mokgalane, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the South African Council for Educators (SACE), acted as respondent. The sign language interpreter was supplied courtesy of SA NATCOM.

The panellists drew on their personal career experiences to inform their ideas of a good teacher. Mr Molefe began the conversation by describing his journey to becoming a teacher in the town of Mafikeng. He has taught at two schools over a 15-year period. In reflecting on his practice, he referenced a book titled *Surrounded by Idiots* by Thomas Erickson, noting that it pointed out a mistake he was making: communicating with people as if they shared the same thoughts and perspectives as he did, without realising that people are all different. By communicating in that way, he lost a lot of learners. He highlighted the concepts of *Botho*, which encompasses values of respect, compassion, empathy and social responsibility, and *Ditlhong*, which roughly translates as humility. He summarised that “You have to have that spirit

of Ubuntu. You actually have to have the empathy and understanding that we are all different, circumstances are different.”

The second contributor, Ms Parkin, has been a teacher for 13 years and has now moved into the role of principal. As an education practitioner working with deaf children, she stressed firstly the importance of a positive relationship between teachers and learners, especially in the context of vulnerable learners who live with disabilities. She noted that when the teacher-learner relationship is not good, learners fear rejection and isolation, and this creates barriers to learning. She also emphasised the importance of respecting the culture and religion of the learners. Before attending the seminar, she asked her school’s Grade 7 - 12 learners the same question: What makes a good teacher? The students confirmed her statements about the relationship, with answers such as “being friendly and understanding”.

The next speaker, Mr Moloko, has served in the education space for 37 years. He grew up in a poor household, and after completing high school, he went on to become a history teacher and then principal. For him, to be a good teacher takes planning. He noted that each lesson needs a purpose, and the teacher must walk in with the outcome in mind. A teacher with patience and love encourages the children to try harder to succeed in class, as they won’t want to disappoint such a teacher. Another crucial trait for good teachers is believing in the children’s ability to learn. During interviews of potential maths teachers, he would ask whether all children can do maths. “If the teacher says no, they have already failed,” he says. Lastly, he mentioned values as important, asserting, “Educating the head without educating the heart is no education at all.”

The last speaker was Ms Davids, a teacher at Rhenish Girls’ High School Stellenbosch, who has been teaching for 12 years. She started as a maths and science teacher, then moved to geography, life orientation, and technology and now teaches robotics. Ms Davids agreed with the points made by previous speakers and spoke about the importance of knowing learners’ backgrounds so that the teacher can relate to them and share examples that are relevant to the learners. She also emphasised the importance of reflective practice, noting that she had found she needed to turn

her focus inward and reflect on whether she was a good teacher according to her standards rather than comparing herself to others. She felt that the days when it was all about teacher awards and learner achievement are gone and that although those things are still important, they are not the only things that matter.

Important themes that emerged from the ensuing discussion included the uniqueness of the learners and the importance of a positive student-teacher relationship. Panellists defined a ‘good teacher’ primarily by their ability to build such relationships, including with vulnerable learners and learners living with disabilities. Good relationships with learners were seen as a critical enabler of learning, with Ms Davids noting, “I disliked history... However, I really enjoyed the teacher. And that made the subject slightly more bearable for me.” Other crucial points included the importance of continuous learning and the role of mentorship for teachers. A mentor was framed as an important resource, especially for new teachers, who could guide and help navigate the ins and outs of the profession.

Ms Mokgalane wrapped up the conversation with reflections on the panellists’ contributions from the perspective of policy and decision-making. She pointed out that good teachers continuously teach themselves and immerse themselves in the curriculum. She stressed that “one of the key elements of being a good teacher is to be a reflective practitioner”. She focused on the larger picture, asking, “How do we transition from being a novice teacher to a teacher that is grounded, a teacher that is experienced in terms of what he or she is doing in a classroom from an academic perspective?” She highlighted the pathway of teaching, from initial teacher education (ITE), through induction, to in-service support, to retirement, and noted that the programmes and policies available should be expanded to make the transitions easy for novice teachers.

Before closing the session, Prof Gravett noted that she had experimented by asking ChatGPT the same question: What makes a good teacher? The answer she received reflected the elements covered in the conversation, including positive student-teacher relationships, continuous learning, individuality, relatability and being a reflective practitioner. She thanked everyone for their participation and attendance.

**THE NEXT CONVERSATION TAKES PLACE ON: TBC**

**A RECORDING OF THE CONVERSATION CAN BE ACCESSED AT: : [https://fb.watch/kBPV\\_187zE/](https://fb.watch/kBPV_187zE/)**

**COMMENTS CAN BE SENT TO: Ms Prudence Mohau: [pmohau@uj.ac.za](mailto:pmohau@uj.ac.za)**