

Conversations about teachers

Award-winning
teachers share
their journeys



Stakeholders in education met On the 28th of August 2023, the fifth series of conversations about teachers was hosted by the Education Sector Committee of the South African 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 discussion theme was, “Why are teachers important?”

The Professor Sarah Gravett from the University of Johannesburg moderated the webinar discussion. In the discussion, three exceptional teacher panellists were called to share their input on the day’s theme. The teachers were Phuti Ragophala, Wendy Horn, and Marj Brown, who were recognised in the Varkey Foundation Global Educational Awards. Phuti Ragophala and Wendy Horn were in the top fifty, and Marj Brown placed in the top ten globally.

Palesa Tyobeka from the national commission opened the discussion. She welcomed everyone by emphasising the importance of having this conversation as it helps teachers and teaching in South Africa. She also emphasised the importance of the World Teacher’s Day theme: The transformation of education starts with teachers.

Knowledge and education are the basis for all things that can be accomplished in life. Teachers provide the power of education to today’s youth, thereby giving them the possibility of a better future.

Teachers simplify the complex, and make abstract concepts accessible to students.

– Palesa Tyobeka

Ms Tyobeka concluded by emphasising the importance of inclusion in education, noting the commitment of SA NATCOM, UJ and JET Education Services shown by including sign language interpreters in the webinars.

Prof Sarah Gravett introduced Puti Gladys Ragophala, a retired principal from Phulamalu Primary School, a top 50 finalists in the prestigious Varkey Foundation Global Education Awards who is currently a digital school facilitator at UJ. Puti comes from an impoverished background, where she attended her primary education under a tree and in a dilapidated farmer’s house in the rural area of Bogom, North of Limpopo. Her mother, a midwife, inspired her, and her father, an ordinary working dad in Johannesburg, visited once a year. After matric, she applied to the nursing college. After working as a private teacher while waiting years for the nursing call, her parents encouraged her to join a private college to get a qualification to become a teacher. She finished her degree and joined another public school, and noted she is still waiting until today for the call to come be a nurse. She teaches youth: “Do not rely on one option. If you want to become a doctor, have at least three options.”

Discussing her award, Puti highlighted that she met all the criteria, and showed evidence of adaptable, replicable, sustainable and scalable practices with tangible benefits. A key contribution she made to the education sector was to promote technological awareness and advancements nationally and internationally. She is embedded in the idea of service beyond serve. Even though teaching has not always been her passion, she is grateful to the advice of her parents in helping her move past early stumbling blocks into a fruitful career as a teacher.

The second contributor to the discussion was Wendy Horn, a qualified science teacher and now a district director. Wendy also placed in the top fifty in the Varkey Foundation Global Educational Awards, and believes that she was chosen because she performs her job professionally and passionately while promoting science for girls in rural schools. With an early passion for science, Wendy also fell into teaching almost by mistake. When she matriculated, she was from a low-income family that struggled financially. During a math class, she saw an opportunity for a Funza Lushaka teaching bursary, which has since become a popular way for teachers to enter university and start their careers. Wendy pursued and completed a PGCE, after which she taught at Parktown Girls School, where she received mentoring and coaching. The school provided opportunities for learning and growth, and the school was able to give her R600 000 for her to start a lab.

She encourages young teachers to engage in school activities, such as volunteering for choirs or driving buses, to grow their skills and learn about partnerships and collaboration. She emphasized that older teachers must support young teachers and not leave them behind. She related that her teaching journey could have been smoother, and that in her second year of teaching she faced challenges and was criticised by the deputy principal for making noise. This made her want to give up on teaching, but she found support from other teachers who helped lift her. She now serves as a district director, and tries to unblock the challenges teachers and principals face. As a director, she wants to contribute to education by providing learners access to the internet, online learning and opportunities, especially in under-resourced schools. She closed her speech by telling young teachers to learn the importance of teamwork, principles and respect, but also to be risk-takers and confident.

The last speaker was Marj Brown, a qualified Mathematics, English, and Science teacher and the South African Society for History Teaching president. She grew up in what was then the Western Transvaal. Her teaching focuses on critical thinking, social justice, analysis, discussions and debates. She also does not keep just to the classroom; she is involved in Olympics Games of Reading for grades 5-7, called the 'Kids' Lit Quiz' which is based on the last 2000 years of world literature, and South Africa has won four times in the last 20 years that it has been participating. She had no idea the teacher prize existed. Her headmaster had nominated her, and she could not believe it when she was awarded in the top ten internationally. She believes the award is less about her as an individual and more

to spotlight that teachers are important in society.

The daughter of a mechanic and stay-at-home mom, like other speakers Marj at first did not intend to become a teacher at all. She wanted to be a doctor and did not do history at school. Her cousin was working as a teacher and encouraged her to apply for the bursary, which she did. After finishing university, she got involved in a non-racial school with low-income children from the resettlement camps, which is where she began her social activism journey in which she helped to protect people in resettlement camps from forced removals.

Dr James Keevy wrapped up the conversation while reflecting on the three speakers and on his career. He also started as a teacher but soon left teaching. After hearing the three speakers he thinks he should have stayed due to the importance of teachers and education in South Africa. He described the similarities between the three speakers, noting the importance of being a social activist who works to make a real difference to the country. Dr Keevy also reflected on the ten Professional Teaching Standards of the South African Council of Educators (SACE), which can help government and universities to design curriculum and policy.

The SACE Professional Teaching Standards

1. Teaching is based on an ethical commitment to the learning and wellbeing of all learners.
2. Teachers collaborate with others to support teaching, learning and their professional development.
3. Teachers support social justice and the redress of inequalities within their educational institutions and society more broadly.
4. Teaching requires that well-managed and safe learning environments are created and maintained within reason.
5. Teaching is fundamentally connected to teachers' understanding of the subject/s they teach.
6. Teachers make thoughtful choices about their teaching that lead to learning goals for all learners.
7. Teachers understand that language plays an important role in teaching and learning.
8. Teachers are able to plan coherent sequences of learning experiences.
9. Teachers understand how their teaching methodologies are effectively applied.
10. Teaching involves monitoring and assessing learning.

Prof Sarah Gravett closed the conversation by reflecting on the similarities in the three journeys and what made each speaker stand out. She noted, "We are inspired by these teachers. It is not always smooth sailing, but if you are really committed and believe in education as a vocation, one deals with the stumbling blocks and can even use them and turn them into stepping blocks."

The fifth Conversation About Teachers was then formally closed.