

Conversations about teachers

The type of school leadership and management that is enabling good teaching and professional growth



In collaboration with the University of Johannesburg and JET Education Services, the Education Sector Committee of the National Commission for UNESCO in South Africa hosted the 6th Conversations About Teachers webinar focusing on “The type of school leadership and management that is enabling good teaching and professional growth.”

The webinar marks the 6th session of the teacher conversations where teachers of different ranks and with different specializations and other stakeholders in the sector meet to discuss the work that teachers do. Mrs Palesa Tyobeka welcomed all in attendance, both those who joined via Zoom and Facebook. Mrs Tyobeka emphasized that the Conversations About Teachers webinars are aimed at giving a voice to teachers. The webinars always feature practicing teachers, sometimes retired teachers and teachers in training, to talk and share their experiences and learnings in the profession. In her welcome statement, Mrs Tyobeka welcomed the uMlambo Foundation and Dr Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, along with the teachers and school leaders from the schools which have joined the collaboration with the Education Sector Committee of the National Commission for UNESCO in South Africa.

Prof Sarah Gravett, Acting Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research and Innovation and a Professor of Teacher Education and Development at the University of Johannesburg, facilitated the conversation. Prof Gravett, who refers to herself as “a teacher at heart,” guided a panel of teachers and school leaders from various schools across South Africa. They shared their perspectives, practices, and experiences on the type of school leadership and management that enable teacher professional

growth and good teaching in the classroom. The panel included Celeste Wentzel, a grade one teacher with 20 years of experience from Laerskool Rapportryer. Celeste obtained a B.Ed. degree in the Foundation Phase from the University of the Northwest, two honors degrees in Psychology and Inclusive Education respectively from UNISA, and a Master’s of Education from the University of Johannesburg. Jeffas Bilankulu, an Electrical Technology teacher from Thekganang Secondary School in Limpopo, obtained a Mechanical Engineering degree and a PGCE from the University of Johannesburg. Meriam Matsaung, a Foundation Phase multigrade (Grade 2 & 3) teacher with nine years of teaching experience from Modespruit Farm School in Limpopo, obtained her B.Ed. degree from the University of Limpopo and a B.Ed. Honors from the University of Pretoria. Rakubu Sokana (PGCE), a Mathematics teacher and learning area head from St. Mary’s Schools in Gauteng, is a Mindset Learn and Open Channel presenter, a Grade 12 IEB examiner for Mathematics, and a member of the Editorial Board of *Mathematics Education*. Dr Gwen Barry, a Deputy Principal from Greenside High School in Gauteng, is a professional ballet dancer who holds a PGCE and an Honors degree from the University of Johannesburg, a Master’s of Education from Wits University, and a Ph.D. in Education from the University of Johannesburg. Also on the panel was Neelan Pillay, a principal at Northern

Park Primary School in Kwazulu-Natal with over 32 years of experience in teaching. Neelan obtained a Master's of Education in Leadership, Law, and Policy from the University of Pretoria.

The teachers and school leaders shared their perspectives and experiences of the different leadership and management approaches that either foster or hinder a thriving teaching environment. A key point emphasized by all panelists was the importance of a well-established school leadership structure, which typically includes the principal, deputy principal(s), middle management, and teachers in a cascading order. The panelists highlighted that these structures are not uniform across South African schools. For example, not all schools have a deputy principal, which is particularly true for Meriam's small school, where she is one of only five staff members, including the principal. What was mentioned as fundamental is the key leadership role that the principal has to play. The principal is responsible for setting and communicating the school's vision and goals. The principal's role is to lead the school's vision alongside other members of the school management team (SMT) and the teachers, guiding them through what needs to be done to achieve their goals.

For teachers, leadership style is paramount to their growth and participation in the school. They commended the democratic leadership style, which they have experienced from their leaders. This style emphasizes consultation and collaboration, which teachers value highly. They appreciate being listened to and heard, being included in planning, having a platform to share their ideas, and being consulted on certain decisions, all of which create a conducive environment for them to thrive. The teachers are opposed to the autocratic leadership style, where they are not consulted or informed about things that happen in the schools. The school leaders, on the other hand, shared that while the democratic leadership style is ideal and being implemented, it is important to always remember that a decision must be made, and this responsibility always lies with the SMT. What is clear from the conversation is that teachers experience both these leadership styles. For Meriam, the school governing body (SGB) demonstrated democratic and supportive leadership, especially for extracurricular activities. For Neelan, a school principal, consultation is fundamental to having teachers' voices included in the management team: He said, "there is value in a meeting before a meeting" where teachers are consulted for feedback before the management meeting for decision-making. And for Jeffas, teachers and the SGB are involved in the processes and decision-making in their school, and they feel like they are part of the organization and therefore support the vision alongside the school leadership.

The panelists emphasized motivation, capacity-building, and mentorship as some of the key fundamental roles of leadership. The emphasis is really on helping others grow. Rakubu stated that "as a leader you need to be growing, and you need to be growing others." Dr Gwen mentioned that one thing they are practicing in her school is servant leadership; the leadership believes in taking care of their people. Their leadership understands that teachers are independent in their own right, self-sufficient, capacitated, and they are "mini

managers." For Rakubu, Celeste, and Neelan, it is important to know the people and take them where they wouldn't go on their own. For Rakubu, this is developing and growing the next head of department or learning area head. For Celeste, it is for the leaders to help the teachers know themselves, both their strengths and weaknesses. Neelan also highlighted that a leader must be authentic, understanding their strengths and weaknesses, so that they may know how to collaborate with their staff. In being authentic, there is a platform to build trust with the staff, where you are able to take calculated risks and you are able to let others lead tasks where possible.

Moreover, the school leaders commented on a leadership and management context where the situation is not ideal or is difficult. They highlighted that enabling leadership is one that understands and offers emotional support for the teachers to thrive. Meriam also mentioned that while the leadership focuses on curriculum and assessment and stresses timely curriculum coverage, it is important to not lose sight that the learners need to have learned and understood what was taught. Neelan mentioned that amidst any kind of problem or challenge in the school, there needs to be an attitude of problem-solving, either with the teacher or with the management team. Dr Gwen highlighted that there needs to be consistency in following policies and procedures when dealing with situations, also considering the system as a whole. In line with the collaborative and consultative leadership style, Jeffas and Dr Gwen mentioned that there need to be clear expectations and predictability in the events happening in the school, with no surprises for the teachers. This is the notion that teachers must be informed, and they must know the planned daily, monthly, or yearly events that involve learners. School leaders need to create a platform where teachers have one voice with the learners so that there is consistency in their participation in school events and communication with the learners.

The conversation was closed with views on inclusion and issues of inclusive education. Dr Gwen highlighted that inclusion is a challenging area, particularly regarding the implementation of policies. She pointed out that the protocol for inclusive education can be cumbersome, with slow response times from the Inclusive Support Services (ISS) Unit, which complicates addressing immediate needs. While inclusive education aims to support those with various limitations, it can also be subject to misuse. As a leader, Dr Gwen emphasized the importance of finding a balance amidst these complexities. Prof Gravett in her closing remarks mentioned that the above views really highlight that school leaders do not work alone, but they work with teachers and district officials as well as policies.

Prof Sarah Gravett and Mrs Palesa Tyobeka concluded the discussion by expressing their gratitude to the panelists and attendees for their participation. Mrs Tyobeka specifically acknowledged the valuable conversation on inclusive education and the contributions of the sign language interpreter. She also pointed out that the webinar format, due to its limited time, does not allow for more extensive group discussions. However, she encouraged participants to share their thoughts for upcoming webinars in the chatbox.