

The role teachers play in providing a brighter tomorrow

By Dr Muki Mbeng

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The role of teachers has always been pivotal to the success of our children and our nation's growth and prosperity.



Source: Katerina Holmes from [Pexels](#)

“Education is the most powerful weapon with which you can use to change the world.” – Nelson Mandela.

The role of teachers has always been pivotal to the success of our children and our nation's growth and prosperity. As we celebrate World Teacher's Day on 5 October, we can all take inspiration from how Madiba valued education and the importance of our teachers in creating a better future for our youth.

If there ever was a time that underscored the value of teachers in society, it is now. In the wake of Covid-19, teachers faced and continue to face the uphill task of finding innovative ways and transitioning to new methods of teaching, to continue to meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of learners in a hybrid learning environment.

The disruptive setbacks of the pandemic and the lockdown restrictions highlighted that being a teacher goes beyond simply putting together worksheets, delivering lessons and marking tests. With the uneven distribution of educational resources across the nation's schooling system, teachers have had to inspire learners to engage and grasp what is being taught, and ultimately, ensure that they perform to the best of their ability. This, despite persistent challenges like high student-to-teacher ratios, insufficient and outdated educational equipment, violent school and community cultures, minimal support and relatively low remuneration provided by a government department that severely squanders resources.

Burden of responsibility

Teachers carry an unenviable burden of responsibility that goes beyond the classroom. Today, parents have less time to spend on their child's development, so teachers are increasingly expected to play the role of mentor, counsellor, therapist, after-school caregiver and coach, all at the same time. A teacher's actions impact learners' futures, so they are incredibly influential change agents in empowering learners. Many children live in impoverished communities and come from homes

that are run by grandparents or elder siblings. Learners often have to walk kilometres and arrive at school on empty stomachs, and when the bell rings for class, language barriers limit their comprehension of learning content. Against this background, teachers often need to show empathy and give undivided attention to these learners, which can be physically, mentally and emotionally draining.

Factors such as these can discourage people from pursuing teaching as a profession, but people who are passionate about education could see them as a challenge and the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of learners. Students who study education for the first time are the foundation of South Africa's future, and undergraduate study provides the foundation to enable them to succeed in their careers.

If the future of our children lies in the hands of our teachers, then shouldn't we be doing more as a nation to excite young people about education as a worthwhile career choice?

According to statistics, the average age of teachers in South Africa is 47. This should be a pull factor for young people to enter the teaching profession. But South Africa has a low retention rate of young teachers, many of whom point to a lack of support as one of the major factors for leaving the profession. However, studying further or specialising in a particular teaching field through postgraduate study, can provide reflective and practical opportunities for qualified professionals to improve their skills and experience in operating in diverse and challenging environments.

Empowerment and support

As we move into a post-pandemic world, the responsibility of educating children shouldn't sit squarely on the shoulders of our teachers. Teachers should be equipped with the training and tools to harness technology in hybrid learning environments and to provide solutions to real-world challenges. However, we know that the upskilling of teachers cannot happen in classrooms that are falling apart and without the necessary teaching and learning equipment. As parents, guardians, governing bodies, higher educational institutions, government and civil society, we can do more to provide greater support for our teachers and encourage people to pursue education as a career – after all, it takes a village to raise a child.

At Nelson Mandela University, education is our number one priority – particularly in the communities and regions surrounding our campuses in the Eastern Cape. Our vision is to produce qualified educators who are passionate about changing the world in practical, people-centred ways. With intensive support provided in these 'problem areas', teachers can be empowered to focus their time, resources and energy doing what they're most passionate about: educating the next generation of South Africans.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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