

# Conversations about teachers

## Factors that inhibit/support teacher wellness



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 7th Conversations About Teachers webinar focusing on “Factors that inhibit/support teacher wellness.”

The teacher conversation on teacher wellness was facilitated by the esteemed academic and an NRF-rated education researcher, Prof Jace Pillay. The teacher conversation unpacked the theme, **Factors that inhibit/support teacher wellness in schools**, and featured a diverse group of teachers as discussants. The participants shared their views on, experiences and interests in teacher wellness. The discussion also featured a Department of Basic Education (DBE) official in her capacity as Director in the Psychosocial Support Unit. Prof Pillay opened the session with an emphasis on the need to address teacher wellness in South Africa, highlighting the conversation as an opportunity to deepen understanding of the factors that inhibit/support teacher wellness. Prof Pillay welcomed all speakers and requested that they think of a word that comes to mind when they think about teacher wellness. He further introduced Prof Sarah Gravett as the lead of the *Teacher Conversations Series* as well as the Acting Deputy Vice Chancellor for Research and Innovation and a former dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Johannesburg.

Prof Gravett provided insights into the context of the *Teacher Conversations Series*, which is hosted by the ESC of UNESCO NATCOM South Africa, in collaboration with the University of Johannesburg (UJ) and JET Education Services (JET). Prof Gravett mentioned that the DBE and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) also play a supporting role. The conversations are a series of discussions designed and executed to talk about teachers, but also importantly, to give teachers a voice and a platform on which to share their perceptions and experiences relating to key questions on pertinent topics in the education sector in South Africa. Seven conversations have been held to date. For example, the first conversation unpacked the question, “**What kind of a teacher does South Africa need?**” This was followed by a conversation in response to the criticism often lodged about the adequacy of initial teacher education to answer the question, “**What type of pre-service teacher education do we need and why?**” Another conversation (conversation #4) responded to the question, “**What does it mean to be a good teacher?**” This conversation revealed that the system demands a

lot from teachers, hence the current conversation about teacher wellness. One of the conversations (conversation #5) featured three teachers who were finalists in the Varkey Foundation Global Educational Awards and who shared information about their journeys and career trajectories. Yet another conversation (conversation #6) addressed “**The type of school management and leadership that is enabling good teaching and professional growth**”, which also, to some extent, connects with the current conversation on “**The factors that inhibit/support teacher wellness**”.

## Biographies of the panellists

- **Mr. Sibusiso Masombuka:** An award-winning educator and the deputy-principal of Greenside Secondary School. Mr Masombuka was recognised as a South African Local Hero by MTN and included in the 2022 *Mail & Guardian* 200 Young South Africans Awards (Education category).
- **Mrs Gontse Langman:** A committed educator and researcher whose focus is on holistic education and mental well-being. Mrs Langman holds Honours and Master’s degrees and is pursuing a PhD in Leadership and Policy. Currently, she serves as a Grade 3 teacher, student-teacher mentor and head of house at St John’s College.
- **Mrs Thandeka Thusi:** An English teacher at Marist Inanda with a Master’s degree in Education from Wits University. Mrs Thusi is dedicated to quality education and the holistic development of learners. She founded the Kasi Fundi programme in Soweto to provide academic support to and empower children in township areas. She is also a fellow of and facilitator in the Teachers Change Agent Network and actively participates in mentorship programmes.
- **Ms Bianca Castle:** An FET English and Life Orientation teacher pursuing a Master’s degree in Psychology at Wits University. A member of the South African Sexual Health Association, Ms Castle focuses on sexuality education in schools, striving to empower the oppressed and educate the privileged with sensitivity and openness.
- **Mrs Sibongile Monareng:** Director of Psychosocial Support Services in the Department of Basic Education (DBE). Mrs Monareng specialises in education enrichment services, and her work focuses on improving systems and policies to ensure quality, inclusivity, safety and the well-being of learners and teachers. She has a background in Occupational Therapy and holds a Graduate Diploma in Public Management.

During the conversation, the teachers shared words and phrases they associate with teacher wellness, which guided the discussion exploring the factors that influence teacher well-being.

For Ms Castle, teacher wellness is closely tied to self-care and relationships, highlighting the importance of teachers maintaining a stable presence for their learners. She emphasised that a mindful, non-judgmental and effective teacher can cultivate healthy relationships in staff rooms and classrooms and positively impact the home lives of both learners and teachers. Such an environment would encourage learners to confidently embrace their identities, including aspects of sexuality, race and individuality, fostering meaningful teacher-learner and peer interactions. Mrs Langman aligned teacher wellness with the holistic well-being of educators, encompassing physical, mental, emotional and social dimensions. Mrs Thusi associated teacher wellness with values and empowerment, reflecting the significance of nurturing a sense of purpose and self-worth among educators. Mr Masombuka summed it up succinctly, stating that a happy teacher creates happy learners, which leads to happy classrooms and, ultimately, a happy community.

The conversation was treated as a panel discussion, with each panel member asked to share their observations and experiences of teacher wellness within specific contexts.

In responding to the prompt “What have you observed about teacher wellness, and what are the risks and possible support systems for teacher wellness?” Mr Masombuka referenced his teaching journey and mentioned that teacher self-efficacy (teacher perceptions and beliefs about themselves in relation to the roles they play in school), their duties, the school environment and school systems all play a crucial role in teacher wellness. He mentioned that sometimes a lack of confidence in the ability to deliver or perform in the role creeps in, especially for a young teacher in a not so understanding or supportive context. Moreover, the type of school context in alignment with resources and expectations also impacts teacher wellness. A well-resourced school with good parental involvement exerts expectations of high performance, achievement of goals and the creation of a conducive learning environment for learners, which co-exist with many other factors. A not so well-resourced school exerts its own kind of expectations, where teachers tend to be expected to provide learners with emotional and sometimes financial support, leading to high pressure, stress, burnout and emotional fatigue, which affect teachers’ work-life balance. Mr Masombuka termed this “emotional labour”.

In response to the prompt about her observations and experiences of factors affecting teacher wellness for pre-service interns hosted at her school, Mrs Langman shared valuable insights, emphasising that her experiences are deeply rooted in her school’s context. She identified key challenges faced by student teacher interns, including high expectations, performance pressures, limited support in balancing work and studies, classroom management difficulties and restricted autonomy. In private schools, the demand to meet high academic and extracurricular standards often results in stress and burnout. Interns and pre-service teachers face the dual challenge of managing teaching responsibilities, extracurricular coaching and academic performance

requirements, leaving them feeling unsupported. Their limited roles as assistant teachers, often operating under close supervision, further restrict their autonomy and affect their self-efficacy. Mrs Langman highlighted strategies that support teacher wellness in her school, including one-on-one mentorship and coaching for interns, regular feedback from mentor teachers, clear communication of expectations and opportunities for professional development. Additionally, her school organises a celebratory event specifically for pre-service interns, providing recognition of and appreciation for their contributions. These initiatives help create a supportive environment that fosters growth and well-being among student teachers.

Ms Thusi, drawing on her role as a fellow of and facilitator at the Teacher Change Agent Network, shared her insights on the factors that impact teacher wellness and the essential steps needed for educators to become change agents within schools and their local communities. She highlighted the critical role of mentorship and community support in fostering teacher well-being and empowering educators. According to Ms Thusi, significant barriers to teacher wellness include poor working conditions such as overcrowded classrooms, socio-economic challenges faced by students such as hunger and lack of resources, and toxic work environments. These challenges are compounded by the additional stress teachers endure from their own personal struggles, while trying to support learners with limited institutional resources. Ms Thusi emphasised that fostering teacher wellness requires networks and communities that provide safe spaces for reflection, sharing frustrations and receiving validation. Opportunities for teachers to connect with peers, exchange ideas and collaboratively identify solutions are essential. Being part of such a supportive community would allow educators to focus on actionable steps, however small, that could lead to meaningful and positive change.

Ms Castle shared her observations on teachers' mental health and the factors that either hinder or support their well-being. She highlighted the complex interplay between teacher wellness, classroom dynamics and broader socio-cultural influences, particularly focusing on the relationships between home and learners, among learners, and between teachers and learners. She advocated for creating classroom environments where learners feel comfortable to express themselves without fear of dismissal or rejection. Such non-hierarchical spaces, where teachers and learners interact as equals, are crucial for promoting both teacher and learner wellness. She also stressed the role of values like respect, empathy and tolerance in building inclusive educational spaces that embrace diverse perspectives. For Ms Castle, emotional support is a vital pillar of teacher wellness. Simple, humane gestures such as listening, acknowledging feelings and fostering meaningful connections can profoundly impact educators' mental health. Teachers who feel supported

and valued are better equipped to extend similar care and empathy to their students, creating a positive and nurturing learning environment.

Mrs Monareng shared her reflections on the teachers' presentations and outlined initiatives from her directorate in the DBE. She emphasised the vital importance of educator wellness and the diverse challenges teachers face, particularly in the South African context. She stressed the need for collaboration among teachers, learners, communities, the department, and parents to address the factors impacting teacher well-being in schools. Mrs Monareng highlighted the interconnected nature of teacher wellness, encompassing physical, emotional, spiritual and financial dimensions. Mental wellness, in particular, requires greater focus, as many teachers are hesitant to seek help due to limited awareness of mental health issues and the available support services. Mrs Monareng advocated for balancing educational demands with the unique contexts of private, public and rural schools, emphasising that the factors that impact teacher wellness differ in different contexts; for example, in the private school, teachers have to deal with the over-involvement of parents and in public schools, with the lack of parental involvement. She emphasised the role of stakeholder engagement and collaboration and outlined existing and upcoming DBE initiatives to support teacher wellness including a psychosocial support strategy and a pilot programme on social-emotional learning for 4 800 teachers. These programmes of the DBE's Psychosocial Support Services Directorate aim to address teacher wellness issues in the public schools at national, provincial and district levels.

The audience in the chat also mentioned the importance of strengthening teacher resilience and the need to promote a culture of care and support in education. Prof Pillay thanked the panellists, the organisers as well as the audience for being part of and participating in the 7th in the *Teachers in Conversation Series*.

In conclusion, the 7th conversation shed light on the multifaceted challenges educators face and that impact on tier well-being, ranging from systemic pressures and socio-economic disparities to mental health stigma and toxic workplace environments. At the same time, the discussions highlighted the importance of supportive interventions, mentorship, stakeholder collaboration and fostering a culture of care within schools and communities. Key insights included the significance of emotional and relational support, the necessity of addressing unique contextual challenges in different school environments, and the potential for targeted programmes like the DBE's Psychosocial Support Strategy to enhance educator well-being. The diverse perspectives of the panellists underscored that teacher wellness is not just a professional concern but a critical determinant of learner success and community development.