

Interview with

Vasiliki Viki Mpompolas

Winner of the 2023 African Union
Continental Best Teacher Award

October 2023

Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

Interview series in collaboration
with the ESTI Department of the
African Union Commission



IICBA: Could you please tell us a bit about yourself?

My name is Vasiliki Viki Mpompolas. I am a teacher from Technical High School situated in a small mining town called Kimberley in the Northern Cape Province. I began teaching at this wonderful school 11 years ago and I am happy to say that I am still here, thriving and flourishing. I was appointed as the Departmental Head for English Home and First Additional Language in 2022 and thus far it has been equally a challenging and rewarding experience. I am obsessed with my learners who I refer to as “my babies.”

IICBA: What do you teach, at what level, and where?

I teach English Home and First Additional Language at Technical High School Kimberley and have taught in both the GET (General Education and Training – Grades 8 and 9) and FET (Further Education and Training – Grade 10, 11 and 12) phase. I am currently teaching Grades 10 through 12.

IICBA: For how long have you been a teacher, and what motivated you to become one?

I have been a teacher for 12 years. My teaching journey has been interesting to say the least. It has not been without its fair share of trials and tribulations. After completing a degree in Public Administration at The University of the Free State, (after many degree changes along the way) I was ready to enter the “real world”, but something was missing. My heart was just not in it and after many

Background: Best Teacher Awards recognize outstanding teachers. These awards can raise the appreciation of teachers in society while demonstrating that hard work and innovation by teachers makes a difference. The African Union Commission instituted the Continental Best Teacher Award in 2019. Winners receive cash gifts and are celebrated. The Award is important to celebrate the unique contribution that teachers make to their students, their communities, and societies. The African Union Commission and UNESCO IICBA, the coordinating agency for the Teacher Development Cluster under the African Union’s Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016-2025, encourage countries that have not yet done so to create national (as well as regional and local) teacher awards. This series of interviews shares insights from the winners of the 2023 Continental Best Teacher Award.



living a life of passion and purpose was more important than anything else in the world. With the support of my incredibly brave, amazing, strong mother, I embarked on my teaching journey and applied to complete my Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). It has been one of the best decisions I have ever made. Upon stepping into my first lecture on the first day of the first semester, I knew that I was finally exactly where I was meant to be. Everything just “clicked” and this is where my love affair with teaching began. After completing my PGCE, I decided to continue with my studies and completed my Honors degree in Educational Psychology specializing in Remedial Teaching with distinction.

IICBA: What are you most passionate about in your teaching?

Without a shadow of a doubt – my learners, they are my life. They teach me way more than I can ever teach them. Coming in at a very close second is language, as I believe that it not only forms the basis of a learner’s academic success, but it is also imperative to ensuring that well-rounded, insightful, articulate, open-minded, competent, and contributing South African citizens are produced. Language is a vital part of human connection. It is an important tool used to shape our thoughts, ideas, and emotions and reveal them to others in a manner that everyone can understand and relate to. A common language is a symbol of social solidarity. It helps to create cultural ties, friendships, and relationships. It has the power to build societies and is what makes us human. Much of what learners learn is language. They learn to read and write, and they learn the discourse of academic disciplines in all their respective subjects as well. As a third-generation South African Greek citizen and the daughter and granddaughter of Greek immigrants, the appreciation and preservation of culture and tradition is something very near and dear to my heart. I am a firm believer that one of the chief ways to truly value our own unique cultures and identities is through language. I encourage my learners daily to embrace their cultures and traditions and to be proud of them.

IICBA: What are some of the challenges teachers face today, and what can be done to overcome these challenges?

On a personal level, being a language teacher at a technical school to learners whose Home Language is not English comes with a plethora of challenges. Most of the learners I teach also have a much greater interest and affinity for the technical field than they do for language, which involves poetry and literature, every technical child’s worst nightmare! Therefore, to not only gain but sustain their interest and get them excited about English, I have to regularly employ a variety of often “unorthodox” techniques.

years, the quiet voice within me subtly urging me to follow my passion and become a teacher grew to a thunderous roar, making it almost impossible to ignore. I was hesitant to admit that I always wanted to become a teacher due to a plethora of reasons ranging from societal and school pressures to the unfortunate stereotypical views which sadly, always seem to accompany the teaching profession (such as “there is no future in teaching,” “you have so much more potential than this” and the most common “there is no money in teaching”).

Before I could begin this journey however, tragedy struck on January 31, 2007, a date that will forever be etched in my memory and which changed the entire trajectory of my life. My beloved father, my biggest supporter and the one true love of my life, was brutally murdered. Life as I knew it ceased to exist and my world was completely wrenched. The plans and dreams I had, were shattered. After this devastating loss and much introspection, the brevity of life became vividly clear to me. I decided that there was no point in settling for a life that was less than I deserved and that being truly happy and content and



On a general level, in South Africa, many of our teachers are truly struggling. Lack of knowledge and training for educators, inadequate infrastructure of the country, lack of resources and funding, unrealistic expectations and pressure from school administrators, socio-economic issues such as poverty, gender-based violence, HIV/AIDS, and lawlessness to name but a few, are just some of the challenges faced by teachers on a daily basis. Sadly, it is very difficult to provide solutions to these problems. We have to be realistic. In a perfect world, assistance and support from the government in every aspect is required to alleviate these issues. However, it is easier said than done. Teachers need to support one another and school principals and management teams also have a responsibility to support their teachers where the government is found lacking.

IICBA: What are some of the opportunities that teachers could seize and what could be done to empower them to do so?

To seize opportunities, more opportunities need to be created and provided for teachers to flourish and empower themselves, which I believe is not happening at the rate that it should be. In South Africa, I was fortunate enough to be nominated for the National Teachers Awards last year and was blessed to have attained first position in the category “Excellence in Secondary School Teaching.” This was an incredible opportunity for me to network and meet incredible teachers from across the country who I learned so much from. I truly wish this opportunity could be given to all teachers who are equally if not more deserving than I am. It truly opens so many doors for you and enhances your teaching and confidence. More of these types of initiatives should be developed and introduced, including workshops, studying opportunities to enhance skills, etc. to elevate the status of teachers.



IICBA: You have been recognized as an outstanding teacher. What practical advice do you have for other teachers?

Take it one breath at a time. This is a thankless job, yes, but at the same time, the most rewarding. Do not let the bad days overshadow the good and remember why you started in the first place. Despite all the challenges faced by teachers every day, I still believe that this is the best profession in the world. Very few people have the opportunity to touch so many lives in their lifetime. It is a true blessing and a privilege that we too often overlook due to the endless administration, politics, and bureaucratic red tape, parental involvement (or lack thereof), unruly learners... The list is endless.

Ultimately, when you go home, unwind and assess your day. You can almost always recall a moment in the day when one of your learners came up to you and gave you a hug, or a sweet, or a “I love you, Ma’am,” “Thank you for the lesson, Ma’am,” “Thank you for seeing me, Ma’am,” “Thank you listening, Ma’am” or, “You’re the best, Ma’am.” We often overlook these moments and shrug them off as trivial, but I can guarantee you, not many other professions are blessed enough to experience unconditional love like we do.

Rest! Easier said than done, I know. Trust me, I know! Ask for help: you do not have to do everything on your own. Do not take on too much, get comfortable and be confident with saying “no” when you feel overwhelmed. Find your school tribe and lean on them in times of strife and be their support during their difficult times. You cannot do this alone. As far as you can, make sure your planning and preparation is done well in advance to avoid added stress and pressure.

IICBA: Looking back, if there is something you could do differently in your career as a teacher, what would that be?

I have very few regrets and honestly do not think I would do anything differently. Every challenge and obstacle has made me the teacher I am today. I do not believe I would be where I am today without these difficulties. I only wish I had the courage to follow my dreams earlier so that I could have had much more time with even more incredible kids. I would also be kinder and gentler to myself.

IICBA: What does being recognized for the Award mean to you? Do you plan to use this recognition to further promote quality education?

Words will never be adequate to describe what this award means to me. I am so thankful for this wonderful opportunity. It is an experience of a lifetime and an incredible honor to even be nominated among these wonderful teachers who are doing such fantastic, inspiring

work in their communities. This is truly one of the greatest highlights of my career thus far. To be recognized for the work I do has just given me more confidence, belief, passion, drive, and encouragement to continue “fighting the good fight,” to elevate the status of teachers in Africa and to create so much more awareness and recognition of the indispensable role they play in shaping the continent and society as a whole. I honestly do not know how I will do this yet, but I truly hope that this will open doors for me to assist in promoting the teaching profession in some way and to encourage and support teachers and remind them of their value and worth. I am ready for a new challenge. I know that I am still a relatively young teacher, with so much more to learn and that there are incredible teachers out there, with so much more experience and expertise and so many more amazing awards and impressive accolades to their name. But what I might lack in experience, I make up for in passion, drive, ambition, resilience, tenacity, and a hunger to learn and know more, and most importantly, an absolute obsession for my children.

IICTBA: Finally, could you please share a personal anecdote about yourself?

If I may, I would like to share two anecdotes with you.

One of my most special achievements is Mr. Raymond Mophosho. This amazing gentleman will always hold the most special place in my heart as he is one of my “original babies.” He was in my class the first year I ever started teaching and today, Mr. Mophosho is my colleague and neighbor at Technical High School where he is currently teaching Mathematics and Natural Sciences and it must be noted that he has also made it through to the Provincial Round of the National Teaching Awards for 2023! I would like to believe that the bond we created from the time he was a young boy assisted him in some way in becoming the wonderful man he is today. His potential was so evident that I made it my mission to push him and provide him with as many opportunities as I could to stimulate him intellectually and challenge him academically and

creatively – but also, to instill in him the gift of being of service to others and giving back to his community. I was honored to be the guest speaker at the District Awards Ceremony of the National Teaching Awards in June this year where my darling Raymond took home Top Honors. Raymond came first in the category “Excellence in Natural Science GET Phase.” I was also so thrilled that I could hand over his award to him. Talk about a “full circle moment!” He later went on to win the Provincial round and represented the Northern Cape Province at Nationals. I am a proud Mama indeed!

Secondly, as mentioned earlier, I am a South African Greek citizen and my culture and its warm, rich traditions and customs as well as my mother tongue are something that I am immensely proud of. Sharing this with my learners and instilling a love and pride for their own beautifully diverse and unique cultures and languages is something that I value the most. I am equally as proud of being a South African and I feel that it is my duty and obligation to promote, elevate, and champion children of color who historically were marginalized in the most cruel, reprehensible ways. I have a responsibility to learn from them and foster mutual respect and understanding. To illustrate this, I have included a picture of a gift given to me by one of my learners for my birthday – the Greek national anthem, written in almost perfect Greek. To say this moved me to tears would be an understatement. The fact that he took the time to research it and meticulously write it out is something I will never forget – this kind and thoughtful gesture meant so much to me.

Disclaimer & Acknowledgment

The opinions expressed in this interview are those of the individual interviewed only and need not reflect the views of The African Union or UNESCO, its Executive Directors, of the countries they represent, nor do they necessarily represent the views of the UNESCO International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa.

