

Interview with

Bismark Kwame Tunu

Winner of the 2023 African Union
Continental Best Teacher Award

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Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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

My name is Bismark Kwame Tunu from Abesewa in the Ashanti region of Ghana. I was born and brought up in Kumasi. I went to school at Martyrs of Uganda Preparatory School and proceeded to Ghana Armed Forces Senior High Technical School (SHTS) where I read General Science. All three of my degrees were earned in Ghana: A Bachelor of Science in Biochemistry from the University of Cape Coast, a Master of Philosophy in Chemical Pathology from Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, and a Post Graduate Diploma in Education from Valley View University. I currently serve as a Chemistry teacher at Opoku Ware School where I help my learners grasp abstract concepts by connecting them to their local surroundings. In 2021, I was awarded as the National Best Senior High School (SHS) teacher at the Ghana Teacher Prize Awards. I have made contributions beyond the classroom. My love of experiential learning led me to assist my former school, Bosome SHTS, to establish a science laboratory, which has reduced the burden of teachers and students travelling to other schools for practical lessons. As a biomedical scientist who volunteers on the weekends, I have also contributed to improving healthcare delivery in the Bosome Freho area by utilizing my understanding of laboratory science to help the health directorate set up the first medical laboratory unit at the district's health center. My hobbies include reading, farming, and research especially in simple projects that can have a contribution into chemistry.

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.



During my mandatory national service, I was posted to South Suntreso Government Hospital in Kumasi as an intern biomedical scientist, but I took up the task to explain the concepts and principles of the various tests to students who came on attachment. This helped bridge the gap between what was taught in school and how to link this practically in the laboratory. I decided to join the profession I so much admire just before I finished my post-graduate studies. So, I sat for a recruitment examination conducted by Ghana Education Service in 2016, passed the exams and was posted to Nsawkaw State SHS where I started teaching. I have enjoyed teaching ever since.

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

I am passionate about the practical application of concepts with the use of project-based learning. It is my passion that SHS graduates will have employable skills that can contribute to the economy of the nation. My philosophy in life is “See it big, keep it simple.” So, I plan to integrate at least one simple project of production into my lessons which can be replicated by students when they go home on vacation. So far, I have been able to use simple projects like the production of candles, powdered soap, liquid soap, shower gel, disinfectants, and fresh yoghurt in my lessons. I am still researching on other projects that can conveniently fit into the contents of the syllabus.

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

There are challenges everywhere but teachers believe in the value of philanthropism. Good teachers are not merely motivated by external incentives. They care mostly about their core duty of imparting knowledge. Our values are to see others do good and climb up the academic ladder into great professions. Yet in chasing excellence for our students’, some issues get in our way. These include inadequate laboratory infrastructure in our schools. Some schools do not have a permanent building dedicated as a laboratory. Others use one laboratory for all the elective science subjects. Some have separate laboratories for different subjects but are not adequately resourced. Almost all schools have outgrown their capacity over the years in their quest of fulfilling SDG goal 4 and the establishment of the free SHS policy. Voluntary donations

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

I teach Chemistry at the Senior High School (SHS). I have taught all levels in SHS (that is year 1, 2, and 3). My teaching career has taken me to two regions in Ghana. I was first posted to Nsawkaw State SHS which is found in a predominantly rural district in the Bono region where a majority of the population are farmers. The school had a population of about 1,000 students with a high incidence of absenteeism. I was later transferred to Bosome SHTS which is also found in a predominantly rural district in the Ashanti region. The student population within the school was about 1,200 with less than 100 students reading General Science. I was later transferred to Opoku Ware School within the urban centers of Ashanti region. The current population of the school is around 4,000 students with a majority reading General Science.

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

I have seven years of imparting knowledge as a professional teacher. My love for teaching started when I was nine years old when my mom who is a teacher explained the purpose of a marking scheme to me. I love to lead group discussions on challenging concepts.





from well-meaning individuals and organizations would help. Teachers can also learn some simple ways of improvisation that can compensate for shortages. To reduce shortage of apparatuses made of glass because of breakages, manufacturers could think about making similar apparatuses in plastic.

Another challenge has to do with accommodation issues in most of our schools. The ratio of teachers on campus to students is very low, which prevents proper supervision, leading some students and community members to indulge in deviant behaviors. Successive governments have done well in putting up infrastructures (like classrooms, assembly halls, dining halls, etc.) in our schools but I will plead with them as well as philanthropists to pay attention to getting more teachers on our campuses (through teacher housing) for proper supervision and to keep our future leaders in check.

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

As teachers in Ghana, there are enormous opportunities available to us. The first I would like to touch on is the possibility of professional development. Continuous learning is crucial for teachers. We need continuous learning through workshops, seminars, and online courses to enhance our teaching skills and stay abreast of educational trends (in terms of pedagogies, assessment strategies, and modes of delivery). I must commend the Ministry for the institution of Professional Learning Communities (PLC) sessions in schools. Various activities and knowledge that are mostly paid for as part of top-up courses in higher institutions are included in PLC sessions which are currently being enrolled in all SHS/SHTS nationwide. These PLC sessions provide a platform for all teachers in a particular school to meet and share best practices and brainstorm on innovative ways to improve teaching and learning that will drive student achievement.

Teachers serve as role models in the community in several ways, thereby influencing and shaping the lives of their students and even the broader society. In the course of executing our mandate we are provided with young and fragile students from different backgrounds. We have to inculcate values and virtues in those students aside from academics, for them to become responsible citizens in future. The spirit of hard work, passion for the job, innovation, empathy, and kindness should be well emulated in class. Mentorship programs can be established where experienced and successful teachers can mentor newer and inexperienced teachers. Such programs will help new teachers to learn and get answers to personal questions by engaging with experienced teachers and role models. New teachers can gain valuable insights into effective teaching practices and positive community involvement that way.

Last but not the least is the availability of free online resources at the fingertips of teachers. Teachers can seize the opportunity of free online resources to enhance their teaching and improve the learning experience for their students. Understanding the learning objectives and the diversity in the classroom helps teachers to effectively search for relevant online resources. To improve subsequent teaching, teachers can create and keep a collection of relevant educational websites, videos, animations, interactive simulations, and eBooks in an e-drive so they can access this material over and over at their convenience. Teachers can as well engage with online communities, for a, and social media groups where teachers and educational leaders interact to share ideas, opportunities, resources, and best practices. This can be made easier when the Ministry creates a national databank for the various subjects where teachers can access information using their credentials to enhance their teaching.



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

Effective planning of lessons is a fundamental aspect of successful teaching. This requires making room for diverse learning styles in the classroom and making frantic efforts to provide support for all students to achieve the learning objectives of lessons taught in class. Through effective planning of lessons, teachers should prepare and utilize appropriate teaching and learning materials to enhance their teaching. Hard work and determination pay.

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

Looking back, I wish I had collaborated more with other teachers and schools to help train a wider number of students in acquiring soft skills that could keep them at home while waiting for their results or during vacations. The lack of industrial visitation also made the lessons very abstract, so I wish to send my students to industry sites where they can relate what is being taught in the class to its practical application. Or better still, I wish I could have created even more of an environment to emulate the industrial application of concepts taught in class.

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

Being recognized across the continent as a Best Teacher means a lot to me. I plan to use this recognition to reach out to a wider number of students through interactive teaching pedagogies that demystifies the notion of the abstract nature of Chemistry.

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

In 2019 when I stepped into Bosome SHTS I had to replace a very hardworking teacher who was also going on transfer from the school. He was so dear to them that they didn't recognize the good in me. So, I told myself,

I am not here to prove myself or compete for attention but to do my best to lift the image of the school. In my first year in the school, I told my head of department that I would like to do all my practical lessons in the school. He was so excited with this revelation that he asked me to prepare a list of the apparatuses or instruments that I would need for a start. I told him that I would rather inspect the available instruments first and make do with them. Without a cost to the department, I introduced the few apparatuses to the students and started demonstrating to them how best they could use them. I then borrowed a few apparatuses from other schools to add up. I was subsequently asked to prepare the final year students for their exams. Within a very short time I did about twenty different practical lessons with them which really inspired and built their confidence for the exams. During the examination day, for the first time in the history of the school, WASSCE chemistry practical examination was written in the confines of the school. The Headmaster, Assistance Headmaster, Head of department and fellow teachers then congratulated me for the effort I had put into making such a turning point in the school. Even though the final year students were 13 in number, one person had A1 in chemistry which was also the first time the school recorded an A1 in Chemistry. With my knowledge in laboratory science, I then helped to the school to set up a science laboratory for practical lessons in the school, curtailing the need to travel to other schools for practical lessons. Subsequently all practical lessons and examinations have been conducted in the confines of the school, saving teachers, students, and management time for effective academic works.

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