

Interview with

James Zimba

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?

I am James Kamuzgange Zimba from Malawi. I am 54 years old. I work with the Ministry of Education as a lecturer at Karonga Teacher Training College. I have a Bachelor of Education (Primary) which I got in 2008 at Domasi College of Education within Malawi. I got employment with the Malawi Government in the Ministry of Education as a Primary School Teacher. I taught in Primary School until 2004 then I upgraded to become a lecturer in 2008, and since then I have been training primary school teachers.

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

I teach Mathematics, Science and Technology, and Education Foundation Studies at Karonga Teacher Training College.

IICBA: For how long have you been a teacher, and what motivated you to become one? What are you most passionate about in your teaching?

I have been a teacher since 1995. At first I joined teaching as one would wish to be employed, but gradually I started getting motivated by the value of being a teacher. The major motivation is the contribution a teacher makes towards any profession in the world. As a teacher, I am passionate in a number of areas but I would like to share four: (i) The subject matter: I am interested in and knowledgeable about the subject I am teaching – I am able to share my enthusiasm for the subjects I teach with my students; (ii)

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.



Africa - this can create a hostile learning environment for students and teachers alike. In addition to these general challenges, teachers in Africa may also face specific challenges depending on the country or region in which they work. For example, teachers in conflict-affected areas may have to deal with the additional challenges of teaching in a dangerous environment.

To overcome these challenges, we need to: (i) reduce class sizes – this would allow teachers to give more individual attention to students; (ii) Increase investment in education – this would provide schools with the resources they need to provide effective instruction; (iii) Improve working conditions for teachers – this includes paying teachers a fair salary and providing them with adequate support; (iv) Provide professional development opportunities for teachers – this would help teachers to stay up-to-date on the latest teaching methods and research; and (v) Address violence in schools – this includes creating a safe and supportive learning environment for students and teachers alike.

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

I could mention a few opportunities: (i) Teach at international schools: International schools are growing in popularity in Africa, as many parents are looking for a high-quality education for their children. Teachers at international schools often earn competitive salaries and have access to professional development opportunities; (ii) Start their own teaching business: Teachers can start their own teaching business by tutoring students, teaching online courses, or developing educational materials. This can be a great way to earn extra income or even build a full-time business; (iii) Get involved in educational reform: Teachers can play a leading role in educational reform in Africa. They can advocate for better pay and working conditions, develop new teaching methods, and support teachers in underserved areas.

How to empower teachers in Africa? Several options related to what I already said come to mind: (i) Provide professional development opportunities: teachers need access to professional development opportunities to stay up to date on the latest teaching methods and technologies. Governments and educational organizations can provide these opportunities through workshops, conferences, and online courses; (ii) Invest in educational resources: schools need to have adequate resources, such as textbooks, computers, and other teaching materials, for teachers to be effective. Governments and educational organizations can invest in these resources to ensure that all students have access to a quality education; (iii) Pay teachers a fair salary: teachers deserve to be paid a fair salary for their work. Governments and educational

The students: I care about my students' success and well-being – I invest in helping my students learn and grow; (iii) Learning: I am passionate about the learning process – I am constantly looking for new ways to help my students learn effectively; (iv) Making a difference: I am passionate about making a difference in the lives of my students – I want to help my students reach their full potential.

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

There are many challenges teachers face today in Africa: (i) Class sizes in Africa are often very large, making it difficult for teachers to give individual attention to students; (ii) Schools often lack basic resources such as textbooks, pens, and paper – This can make it difficult for teachers to provide effective instruction; (iii) Teachers in Africa are often underpaid and overworked – they may also have to work in difficult conditions, such as classrooms without electricity or running water; (iv) Teachers in Africa also often have limited access to professional development opportunities – this can make it difficult for them to stay up-to-date on the latest teaching methods and research; (v) Violence in schools is another problem in many parts of

organizations need to invest in teacher salaries to attract and retain qualified teachers; and (iv) Reduce teacher workload: teachers often must work long hours and juggle multiple tasks. Governments and educational organizations can reduce teacher workload by providing them with more support staff and by streamlining administrative tasks.

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

Several priorities come to mind: (i) Build relationships with your students. This is the foundation for a successful classroom environment. They need to get to know their students' interests, strengths, and weaknesses. Show them that they care about them and that they are there to help them succeed; (ii) Create a positive and supportive learning environment. This means creating a space where students feel safe to take risks, ask questions, and make mistakes. It also means fostering a sense of community and respect in the classroom; (iii) Differentiate your instruction. Not all students learn in the same way. Outstanding teachers use a variety of teaching methods and materials to reach all learners; (iv) Provide clear and concise instructions. Students need to know what is expected of them. Make sure the instructions are easy to understand and follow; (v) Give timely and specific feedback. Feedback is essential for student learning. Outstanding teachers provide students with regular feedback on their progress and help them to identify areas where students need to improve; (vi) Be flexible and adaptable. Things don't always go according to plan in the

classroom. Outstanding teachers can adapt their lessons and teaching methods on the fly; (vii) Take care of yourself. Teaching can be a demanding job. It is important to take care of your own physical and mental health. Make sure you are getting enough sleep, eating healthy foods, and exercising regularly; (viii) Don't be afraid to ask for help. There are many resources available to teachers, including colleagues, administrators, and professional development workshops; (ix) Celebrate your successes. Teaching is a challenging but rewarding profession. Take the time to celebrate your accomplishments, both big and small; and (x) Never give up on your students. All students deserve the opportunity to succeed. Outstanding teachers believe in their students and never give up on them, no matter what.

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

I would have put even more emphasis on (i) Getting to know my students. This includes understanding their individual learning styles, needs, and interests. I can use this information to create more effective and engaging lessons; (ii) Using a variety of teaching methods. Students learn in different ways, so it is important to use a variety of teaching methods to reach all learners. This could include lectures, discussions, group work, hands-on activities, and projects and any additional new methods; (iii) Providing opportunities for feedback. Students need to know how they are doing to improve. I would provide feedback through written comments, one-on-one meetings, and class discussions; (iv) Creating a positive



learning environment. Students are more likely to learn in a classroom where they feel safe and respected. I would try to create a positive learning environment by being supportive, encouraging, and respectful of all students; and (v) Using technology to enhance learning. There are many ways to use technology to enhance learning, such as using educational apps and websites, creating online learning experiences, and using technology to facilitate collaboration and communication. This opportunity is coming late in my professional life.

IICBA: What does being recognized for the Award mean to you?

To me it is an opportunity to realize that what I may feel as little, others have acknowledged to be a great contribution to my students and the education system in my country. In addition to that, the recognition is giving me more enthusiasm in my profession. I have also noted the importance of dedication and consultation in terms of knowledge sharing with my fellow teachers.

IICBA: Do you plan to use this recognition to further promote quality education?

The recognition to me is an opportunity to encourage my colleagues in the college and my students to keep on improving our teaching skills to make many learners benefit from us. I am passionate to promote hands-on learning for my students. This will make them acquire firsthand knowledge and skills from my lessons.

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

I am from a poor family background. I attended my primary school in the rural setting with no possible motivating exposure to role models apart from my teachers and other civil servants working in my home area. No wonder I am a teacher! I went to a school that was critically understaffed almost all the years I went to

primary school. I never made it to a secondary school. Instead, I joined a correspondence school where I got my Junior Secondary School Certificate and Senior Secondary School Certificates.

I again never made it to university. I joined teaching and I thought of upgrading as a teacher. I sat again for one course which I did not learn during the time I was studying my Junior and Senior secondary course because the correspondence school was not offering the course. This was the Physics and Chemistry course. But my best subjects were skewed towards sciences in the university. So I did the course through correspondence mode again, and I managed to pass with a credit. After this I applied for upgrading where I was considered to do Mathematics Education under Bachelor of Education Primary at Domasi College of Education. When I joined the college, I had a lot of fear knowing that my secondary school background was not good as compared to those who went to conventional secondary schools. By the time we were completing first year, I realized that our performance was equally the same. From this time, I built my courage. By the time I finished the course, I was one of the five students who got their degrees with credit.

When I joined Teacher Education, I had one thing in focus. This was to ensure that my student benefit from my experience of a poor background but making it possible to achieve high in education. My teaching practices mostly focus on helping my students to realize their potential.

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