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Dedicated to producing top quality teachers

BY NOMUSA CEMBI

His imposing figure, both in education and build, is no obstacle when it comes to children. Professor Jonathan Jansen, Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria, has become best friend to Motheoneng Primary School pupils in Atteridgeville, where he recently addressed them.

He bounces around the room, does handclaps with the pupils, plays the piano, dispenses hugs and shares jokes while encouraging them to rise above their circumstances.

Jansen tells them he wants them to be students at the University of Pretoria one day. And when his visit is over, they have one thing firmly stuck in their minds – their potential.

He also commands respect in the teaching fraternity. During a discussion about the challenges in the profession, high-profile members of two big teacher unions, Sadtu and Naptosa, hold his name in high esteem.

He is focused on the challenge of producing good quality teachers at tertiary level and on addressing the looming crisis of teacher shortages.

Jansen says South Africa loses more than 15 000 teachers annually due to the closure of education colleges, unattractive working conditions, death mainly from HIV/Aids and retirement.

He agrees with a decision by former education minister Kader Asmal to close the colleges of education, but what is now needed, he argues, is the ability of universities to produce better quality educators.

In the big universities that offer teacher education, the majority of the students are white women with few choosing to teach in black schools.

Jansen visits several previously disadvantaged schools weekly to motivate and encourage the pupils to consider a career in teaching.

“Getting black students to agree is not easy. They have had 12 years of mediocre

schooling and cannot wait to get away from it. If we do not get their schooling right, we have no chance of drawing the best and brightest recruits to the teaching profession,” he insists.

The University of Pretoria has created some special projects with outside funding, to attract high-school graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds with strong potential, to the teaching profession.

Bursaries, loans and additional financial support have been made available by the university to enable poor, but bright students to become teachers free of financial pressures. They are also offered intensive counselling and training programmes.

The project is in its fourth year and has started bearing fruit, with some top students in the faculty drawn from the project.

One of the first graduates, who hails from rural KwaZulu Natal was tops in mathematics and won a scholarship at Nottingham University later this year to study towards a masters degree in mathematics.

“There are many such students in my undergraduate class on whom the schools gave up, but who are turning out to be promising students,” Jansen says.

“They are often sought after by former white schools and the faculty also creates postgraduate opportunities for them in other countries. I hope some of them will return to become professors of teacher education at this university after considering our offers.”

Enrolment in pre-service teaching in the faculty has increased by about 5%, despite a downward trend nationally in education enrolments.

Jansen says there is such a big demand for teachers from principals that his third-year students are offered jobs before completing their four-year BEd.

Jansen is sometimes portrayed as a fierce critic of the government. “It is the vocation of university thinkers to be critical, but constructive. I work closely with the government. Half the students in my

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PhD policy class work for the government," he says.

But he adds that the government should allocate more funding to the training of teachers on the same level as science, engineering and medicine.

Jansen believes that the government is sincere in its efforts to solve the problems in education.

"There is commitment but no planning; good intentions but no strategy," he observes.

He may not be the kind of face you would expect to find at this institution with its conservative Afrikaner history.

Jansen grew up on the Cape Flats. In the seventies he was a young, apolitical teacher exposed to riots and police brutality in the townships.

His political views were shaped by Black Consciousness leader, Steve Biko.

"I always said that I would never work in a white institution, but because of my spiritual background, I knew deep down that such a response was mean-spirited.

"I came to realise that pain and poverty were not the prerogative of back people only," Jansen says.

Working in the youth ministry on the Cape Flats, shaped his spiritual views.

Jansen obtained a BSc from the University of the Western Cape and then taught science in rural Vredenburg and District Six.

Later he obtained an overseas scholarship for an MSc at Cornell University and a PhD at Stanford University in the US.

Jansen was acting deputy vice-chancellor at Durban-Westville University before taking up a post at Pretoria University. While at Durban-Westville, he was approached by a former vice-chancellor of Wits University

"Just before I gave Wits a yes, Johan van Zyl who now heads Sanlam, called me. We met and he explained his plans for the university. His vision was in line with what I believed could be a truly world-class university and I was inspired by his leadership and the chance of making a difference at Tukkies," Jansen explains.

"If we cannot create places right here, where black and white can learn and love and live together, then we will never get it right elsewhere. I did not come to Pretoria to waste time. I am here to make a contribution to the building of a strong nation and a great university," he adds.

"My job is to make sure we present positive models to the youth of what is possible in a bright future as South Africans."