

Based on the book *Where Light Shines Through* and drafted by the author, Kimon Phitidis

ABOUT THE BOOK

Our role here is to give these kids a vision. I say 'study for university,' but mom or dad back home say 'pass my child' – those are two different messages. Wilton Phillips, Gansbaai Academia

Two generations after democracy, South Africa's public schooling system continues to underperform. Despite some gains, many South African children still don't achieve basic academic milestones, and teachers are often blamed.

Where Light Shines Through allows glimmers of light to shine through the darkness of the public education story and reveals *can-do* teachers who are excelling despite the odds. It explores what we can learn from these teachers to build the quality of the schooling sector and the public sector more broadly – and turns our gaze momentarily away from public officials who are in power, towards those who are in service.

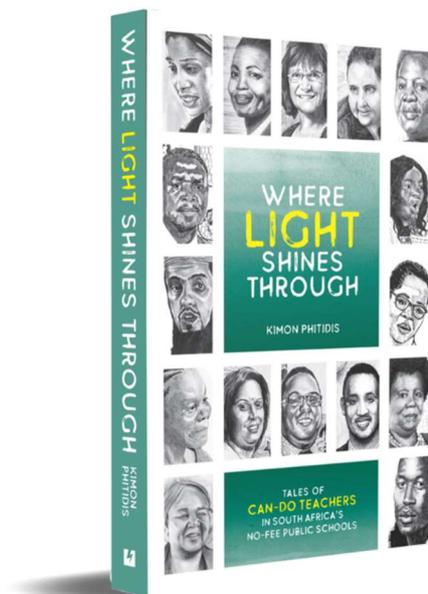
The remarkable stories of sixteen South African teachers from all over the country, illustrated with portraits from the Artists Proof Studio, show that while our attitude to life is often informed by our lived experiences, our attitude nevertheless remains our choice.

WHY IS THIS BOOK IMPORTANT FOR FUTURE TEACHERS?

"Why are schools not doing what we expect of them? Is it because they won't or because they can't? The implications for school improvement are very different, depending on how this question is answered."

This quote, from a National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) suggests that *won't do* is a question of attitude. *Can't do* is a question of aptitude and is easier to remedy. It sparked my curiosity. *Can do* had never been in the toolbox of my professional vocabulary, but that was about to change.

It got me thinking: How can we characterise a *can-do* teacher? What inspires and motivates her? What is her attitude to her life and work? What brings meaning and purpose to her life? Most importantly, what can we learn from her to improve the performance of public schooling?



The book is available at bookstores and on-line retailers. It is also available as an e-book from Amazon. Funded copies have been made available to some schools and education forums thanks to



CHARACTERISING A CAN-DO TEACHER

In the novel *Machines Like Me*, British author Ian McEwan tells the story of a batch of synthetic factory-made humans designed to have near-perfect personalities. Things don't turn out well for any of them or the people who buy them, but that's another story. It made me think, if we were able to create a near-perfect, *can-do* teacher in a no-fee, public school, what would we be able to observe about her?

In search of the answer I turned to four more *can-do* teachers who think deeply about the public schooling system and asked them to read the sixteen teacher stories. I asked them what they believe the traits of a *can-do* teacher are and what we can learn from them to inform a better system.

First I travelled to Rustenburg to meet Olga Motshwanedi-Marimo, principal of Matale Secondary, who was awarded the honour of being South Africa's top high school principal in 2018. The spirit of a *can-do* attitude is built into her DNA. "You have to push to make things happen," she told me when we spoke of the challenges she has faced as a principal. "You push every day, and every day is different."

Olga talks about the teachers in these stories who are willing to evolve in an evolving world. She sees teachers who "go where the light is, who get there through study, who read up new ways of teaching", and who do so fuelled by their own sense of agency.

In Johannesburg, I shared the profiles with Linda Vilakazi, a teacher, education activist and managing director of the Zanele Mbeki Development Trust. Linda aspired to become a doctor, but fate had other plans for her. She has held many roles in the education sector and the development sector more broadly. "My teaching qualification became my strong base," she told me. "Whatever I have done it has informed my work."

"What I see in these stories are people who care about the other person's wellbeing," she told me. "Their joy is not when the paycheque comes around, the joy is in helping that one particular child, no matter what. The joy is when that child succeeds."

"What can we learn from *can-do* teachers to inform the work of teacher training?" is a question I asked Prof Sarah Gravett, executive dean of education at UJ. Besides heading up one of the country's leading education faculties, Sarah led the development of a teacher-education and research school alongside UJ's Soweto campus. "It took tenacity and resilience to get the school off the ground," she told me. And these are amongst the traits that she sees in *can-do* teachers.

"I see agency," says Sarah. "I see people who don't allow circumstances to dominate their decisions and their way of doing. I see people who may not be in full control, however they are controlling what they can to the best of their ability."

In Belgravia, Cape Town I met with Dr John Volmink, chairperson at Umalusi and DG Murray Trust. As a boy John's life was transformed when a man from the Lions Club mentored and supported him. "That

was a defining moment in my life. It allowed me to imagine my possible self.” Encouraging children to imagine their greatest possible selves is one of the most important roles of a can-do teacher he argues.

In these stories John sees resilience. “And not only in the personal lives of these teachers, but also in the context of low resources and poor working conditions. They’re not talking about leaving, and even when they do, they don’t.”

Based on the stories of the 16 teachers you will read about in *Where Light Shines Through*, together we developed this description of a can-do teacher.

More than anything, a can-do teacher cares; she harnesses her resilience and her willingness to evolve to make things happen despite the circumstances. This agency drives her to do the best for those in her care as she helps children imagine and realise their greatest possible selves.

DISCUSSION 1: TRAITS OF A CAN-DO TEACHER

These are the traits of a can-do teacher based on the description.

- What do you think of this description of a can-do teacher? Would you add any traits to this word cloud?
- Are you a can-do teacher? Which of these traits describe you?
- Which of these traits would you like to develop in yourself?

**WILLINGNESS
TO EVOLVE
CARE
RESILIENCE
AGENCY
DRIVE
BRINGING HOPE**

DISCUSSION 2: CASE STUDIES OF TWO CAN-DO TEACHERS

Read the stories of two can-do teachers, Wilton Phillips and Pertunia Luthuli. These teachers both bring a spirit of can-do to work each day, but the cultures of their schools are very different.

- Which can-do traits can you see in each of these teachers? Highlight with a marker pen each time you see evidence of can-do traits in their stories.
- Which of these schools would you rather be posted to? How important is the culture of the school for a can-do teacher?
- Some schools enable a can-do attitude, but many poorly performing schools wear down the enthusiasm of young can-do teachers. How will you maintain your can-do attitude if you are placed at such a school?



DISCUSSION THREE: YOUR SYMBOL

Each of the teachers featured in *Where Light Shines Through* was asked to think of a symbol that defines their approach to teaching.

Wilton Phillips is **a bird's eye**: he encourages his students to have a bird's eye view of the opportunities beyond the expectations of the small coastal town where they live.

Pertunia Luthuli is **a heart**: She cares deeply for her learners, she believes God has placed her there to care for those who are unruly and who don't have love in their families.

Tebogo Msibi is **a wolf**: leading his pack towards their matric exams and the future beyond that.

Ameera Khan is an **anchor**: many children in her classes come from difficult circumstances. She anchors them in her belief and trust.

- What symbol will you choose to characterise your approach to teaching? Draw your symbol!
- Imagine yourself as the teacher you are going to be. Write a short story about yourself that describes what kind of teacher you are. Use your symbol to bring creativity to the story.



For more about can-do teachers visit: <https://socialinnovations.co.za/where-light-shines-through/>

Art credits: Artist Proof Studio students.

Wilton Phillips portrait and bird's eye: Tumisang Kalipha; Pertunia Luthuli portrait: Bheki Sibiyi; Heart: Richard Mokgomme; Wolf: Alex Molokwane; Anchor: Reward Molezana