

Interview with

# Adeola Adefemi

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 a public school teacher known for my contributions to advancing quality education and creating safe learning environments. As the founder of Girls Allowed Hub, Every Child Counts Club, and the convener of the Secure Your Future Campaign, I am committed to empowering students and fostering their success. My mentorship has resulted in students excelling in over 150 local and international competitions. I have been listed as one of the 100 Change Makers in Nigeria and recognized as a multi-award-winning educator, honored with the JCI Outstanding Young Person in Nigeria Award and currently holding the title of Overall Best Teacher in Lagos and Nigeria. I also received the Inspirational Teacher of the Year Award and was distinguished in 2021 as one of the Top 50 Teachers in the World by the Global Teacher Prize. I have also contributed to academic discourse and presented papers at conferences and summits. Additionally, I am an avid reader and scriptwriter, having written and directed over 50 plays and poems. One of my works was performed during the Lagos at 50 celebrations. I have a thirst for knowledge and an unwavering commitment to continuous professional growth and expertise in my field.

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

I teach English as a second language to secondary senior school students in Nigeria, primarily focusing on language.

**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.



**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 teaching for over 10 years. About twelve years ago, while on a national youth service in a school in the Northern part of Nigeria, I was almost lynched by school children between the age of seven and ten for dressing against their religious belief. Growing up in a multiethnic and multi-religious country like Nigeria, I had viewed violence as a norm, having witnessed numerous cases of tribal-cleansings, insurgencies, and general state of unrest, but I had never seen children act so violently. It was at that point and during my remaining months in the school that I realized how inequalities and poorly designed educational policies in a diverse country can lead to the escalation of crises. Childhood can be a site for peace or violence, it is only dependent on the seeds we choose to water. I choose the side of the promotion of peace through education and that was what motivated me to go back to school to earn my PGD because I knew there was a gap for me to fill and fill it fast.

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

Teachers encounter numerous challenges that hinder the quality of education. One of these challenges is

overpopulated classrooms which are now prevalent, with too many students for a single teacher to manage effectively. This overcrowding limits personalized attention to students, impacting the overall quality of education. Moreover, the teaching profession is experiencing a brain drain, as talented educators seek opportunities abroad due to low salaries and limited career prospects within the education sector. This brain drain results in a shortage of experienced and motivated teachers, further compromising education quality as those left are demoralized. In addition, insufficient funding for education leads to a lack of teaching materials, outdated facilities, and inadequate teacher training programs, hindering both teachers' effectiveness and students' learning experiences.

To address these challenges comprehensively, the government should take several key steps. First, policies should be enacted to reduce class sizes, ensuring a better student-teacher ratio for improved individualized attention. Second, increasing teacher salaries can make the teaching profession more appealing and help retain talented educators. Third, a crucial step is allocating more funding to the education sector to enhance infrastructure, provide modern teaching materials, and support teacher training and professional development. By prioritizing these measures, Nigeria can strengthen its education system, retain skilled teachers, and ensure a high-quality education for its students.

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

Teachers have several opportunities they can seize to enhance their impact in the education sector. Firstly, professional development is crucial; teachers should engage in ongoing training to stay updated with the latest teaching methods, technologies, and educational trends. This includes attending workshops and conferences to gain new insights and skills. Also, specialization is a valuable avenue for teachers. Becoming subject matter experts in specific areas can lead to opportunities for consulting, writing textbooks, or offering specialized online courses. Moreover, teachers should consider seizing virtual and onsite scholarships for educators, which can support their expertise development. Participating in international teacher exchange programs or collaborating with educators from different parts of the world can bring global perspectives to the classroom, enhancing their teaching methods and broadening their horizons.

To empower teachers to seize these opportunities, several steps can be taken. Firstly, the government and ministries should invest in professional development, providing funding and support for continuous teacher training



and development programs, including scholarships and opportunities for attending workshops and conferences. In addition, recognizing and rewarding outstanding teachers with incentives, awards, or promotions can motivate them and inspire others. Besides, ensuring that teachers have access to necessary teaching materials, technology, and resources is crucial to facilitate innovation in the classroom. Lastly, offering leadership training and mentorship programs can prepare teachers for leadership roles within the education system, while promoting international collaboration and exchanges can broaden their horizons and bring diverse perspectives to their teaching. By providing teachers with the support, resources, recognition, and opportunities for professional development, they can seize these various avenues for growth and play a more influential role in shaping the future of education.

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

I would advise fellow educators to maintain a deep passion for their students. It is crucial to keep that genuine care for their growth and well-being as the driving force behind your teaching. Focus on your passion for teaching, and accolades will naturally follow as a result of your dedication. Furthermore, I recommend fostering a spirit of collaboration. Work closely with your fellow teachers and, equally importantly, with your students. Learning often thrives in a collaborative environment, and sharing insights and experiences can lead to innovative teaching methods and heightened student engagement. Additionally, I believe in the importance of being a

problem solver rather than a complainer. Challenges are inevitable, but they also present opportunities for success. Address these challenges proactively, seeking creative solutions that benefit both you and your students. Lastly, commit to never stopping your own learning journey. The educational landscape is constantly evolving, and staying updated with new teaching techniques, technologies, and educational trends is vital for providing the best learning experiences for your students.

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

If I could reflect on my teaching career and make one change, it would be to adapt and integrate technology into my teaching methods earlier. Embracing educational technology can enhance the learning experience, engage students on different levels, and better prepare them for the digital world. By incorporating technology sooner, I could have made my teaching more dynamic and prepared my students even more effectively for the challenges of the 21st century. However, I also recognize the importance of continually evolving and adapting, and I am committed to staying at the forefront of educational technology to provide the best possible learning experiences for my students in the future.

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

Being recognized for the African Union Continental Best Teacher Award holds immense significance to me. It is a testament to the dedication, passion, and hard work I have invested in the field of education. This recognition

validates my commitment to providing quality education and underscores the importance of the work educators do in shaping the future of our continent. It is not just a personal achievement but also a recognition of the collective efforts of educators striving to make a positive impact on the lives of African students.

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

As for my plans following this recognition, I am deeply motivated to use it as a platform to further promote quality education. This Award serves as a powerful tool to raise awareness about the importance of education, particularly in underserved communities. I intend to collaborate with educational organizations, policymakers, and fellow educators to advocate for improved resources, teacher training, and innovative teaching methods. Moreover, I aim to inspire other educators to continue their pursuit of excellence and to empower students to become lifelong learners who contribute positively to their communities and the continent as a whole. This recognition is a responsibility I gladly embrace in the ongoing mission to enhance the educational landscape in Africa.

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

I vividly recall a time in my life when I had reservations about becoming a teacher. Initially, I held the misconception that teaching might not be as

professionally respected as other career paths. I hesitated, questioning whether it would offer the intellectual challenge and recognition that I sought in my chosen profession. However, as I embarked on my teaching journey and spent time in the classroom, my perspective underwent a profound transformation. I realized the immense impact that educators can have on shaping young minds, inspiring curiosity, and fostering a love for learning. Witnessing the growth of my students and the positive changes I could bring to their lives became incredibly rewarding. Over time, my initial doubts gave way to a deep passion for teaching, an unwavering commitment to my students' success, and a profound appreciation for the invaluable role of educators in society. In the classroom, I found not just a profession, but a purpose, and in teaching, I discovered that the greatest achievements are the ones etched in the minds and hearts of students.

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