

## AWARDS, HONOURS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- Honorary Doctorate in Education, awarded by the University of Eastern Finland (2014)
- Stellenbosch University (SU) Vice-Chancellor's Award for outstanding research in faculties, awarded for the first time in 1999
- Elected Member of the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns (1991)

## DEFINING MOMENTS

Getting to grips with research and the theory and practice of cognitive control therapy of children and adolescents at Harvard Medical School in Boston changed the trajectory of her life towards research in 1989. A few years later, her research focus shifted again to inclusive education after meeting a young boy who challenged her ideas about the rights of all children to have access to quality mainstream education.

## WHAT PEOPLE MIGHT NOT KNOW

She loves her grandchildren, reading, classical music – especially opera – her dogs and gardening.

## A RIGHT TO QUALITY EDUCATION

In the 1990s, a member of Down Syndrome South Africa asked to visit Petra Engelbrecht at her home. "She arrived with her little boy. We had tea," recalls Engelbrecht. "I had a Labrador dog – I love dogs – and I saw the little boy, Kosie Schoeman, following the dog outside. I had a swimming pool without a fence, so, worried about his safety, I joined them outside. Within ten minutes I wasn't seeing Down syndrome; I was seeing a wonderful child playing spontaneously with a wonderful dog."

At the time of Schoeman's visit, Engelbrecht, an educational psychologist by training, had been doing research in the field of interventions on critical thinking skills for children. She had worked her way up the academic ladder at the University of Pretoria (UP) to become associate professor of Educational Psychology by 1995, and Down Syndrome South Africa saw her as an expert who could potentially help them forward their cause.

"The parents of children with Down syndrome were the first group to say, 'yes, our kids do have specific educational needs, but we want them to go to school in our neighbourhood'." Children like Schoeman had been excluded from mainstream schooling because of their special needs. Engelbrecht shifted her research focus to developing 'inclusive education' and she is still at the forefront of the field today. "I regard quality education for every child, in their neighbourhood school, as their human right. Inclusive education is about recognising the rights of children to be included in mainstream schools," she says.

Today there are many schools in South Africa that are partially or totally inclusive, thanks in large part to the work done by Engelbrecht and her colleagues after 1996, when she moved to SU to take up a professorship in Educational Psychology and Specialised Education.

She began researching in earnest the state of inclusive education in South Africa and elsewhere, investigating teachers' attitudes and training, and how they cope with the stress of teaching children with diverse educational needs. She also looked into the role of educational psychologists as well as policy reform at a national level. Engelbrecht helped develop inclusive education standards and support programmes for South African teachers and she took up advisory and executive roles in several professional bodies, including the South African Association of Educational Psychology and the Professional Board for Psychology.

In 2007, she became the first female Dean of Education Sciences at North-West University (NWU), Potchefstroom campus, and after 2010 she focused solely on research, first at Canterbury Christ Church University and then again at NWU after 2015. Her work locally made waves abroad and created opportunities for collaboration with several countries, including Finland, which is widely seen as having an almost 'perfect' schooling model.

"During my time co-leading the project on teachers' roles in inclusive education in Finland and South Africa, I once again became aware that understanding local versions of inclusive education in diverse contexts is important in learning from each other, and that inclusive education is a continuous process," says



Engelbrecht. Whereas South Africa focused on bringing human rights into teacher education but struggled to provide practical support to teachers especially in rural areas, Finland had developed many practical solutions for dealing with children with diverse needs and so, despite their differences, the two countries could learn much from each other. “The approach of the Finnish government,” says Engelbrecht, “is that teachers are on the front line; teachers need to find solutions in the classroom first before referring children to specialists – otherwise it is not inclusive.”

Engelbrecht has helped take such insights straight into policies around teacher education for inclusion in countries like Malawi and Guatemala.

## PERSONAL IMPACT

Her time in the Palestinian West Bank and Gaza between 2011 and 2015 had the biggest impact on her personally, she says. “You can’t enter Gaza and exit the same person,” she explains, noting that the experience challenged her own views of human rights because of the complex geopolitical situation.

She led two development programmes funded by the World Bank and the Palestinian government for pre- and in-service teachers there. The first project was originally planned for a short period. “I was the only South African in the research team, and as a South African I soon realised just how important cultural sensitivity was in this context. Within a few weeks, we told the World Bank we needed to extend the first project by a year because we needed more time for people to get to know and trust us and to ensure sustainability.”

“It was a critical journey of self-reflection for me because I was so aware of the cultural competences needed for sustainable collaboration,” she says. “The Gaza and West Bank experience reminded me of the impact of my own work.” She recalls a reviewer of her published work once stating that her conclusions

were often that “attitudes need to change” or “teachers need to be trained” – an unfortunately pervasive trend in academia in general.

Her research on inclusive education and the training of teachers focuses strongly on sustainable solutions and some of the recommendations in research reports she co-authored were taken up in policy documents in Palestine and Malawi.

In 2018, the NRF rated her as an internationally acclaimed researcher, something she had never envisioned for herself when she completed her first degree back in 1969. “At that time, I married a farmer and gave him my full support,” she says. She raised children and took over the farm management for a time after her husband became terminally ill. “I was 34 when my husband died. I moved to Pretoria because I realised I had to create a new future to support my children financially.” Engelbrecht went back to university in 1985, relying on life-long family friend, Jeanet Modikwe, to help take care of her daughter and son.

“The trauma in my personal life gave me a different frame of reference,” she says. “I went into academics with life experience and I was very aware of the challenges for women in academia in the late 80s.” Although the first years back at university was a difficult journey of adaptation, she had worked her way up to PhD level by 1991 and she knew she had found her calling as a researcher.

“I wrote to Dr Sebastiano Santostefano at Harvard Medical School. He was working on a therapeutic technique that interested me. He invited me to spend several months at his clinic in Boston.” And so, with her children, she boarded a plane to Boston in 1989. This was where she first discovered what good research was really about. “It changed my life. I met amazing people and it changed my focus to who I would like to become.”

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# Legends of South African Science II

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