



**Provincial Winner**

## National Best Teacher Award

**Name:** Wedaad Esau

**School:** Bridgeville Primary School, Bridgetown, Athlone

**District:** Metro Central

### Passionate About Teaching in South Africa

Mrs Wedaad Esau, a dedicated Grade 1 teacher and now Foundation Phase departmental head at Bridgeville Primary School in Bridgetown, Athlone, is a worthy winner for the 2025 National Best Teacher Award, recognising her outstanding contribution to literacy and values-driven education in the Western Cape.

Beyond being a teacher, Mrs Esau is a woman with vision, purpose, and an unwavering drive to ensure that every child's first steps into formal education are filled with joy, curiosity, and confidence. Her teaching is rooted in the internationally recognised Science of Reading; a comprehensive, research-based methodology focused on how children learn to read.

Her journey began as a Grade 2 teacher at Jamaica Weg Primary School in Mitchell's Plain, a vibrant but often under-resourced community shaped by the legacies of apartheid and ongoing social challenges. But, where others saw obstacles, Mrs Esau saw opportunity: the opportunity to ignite a love for reading, to build self-worth through literacy, and to invest in the cognitive and emotional development of every child who entered her classroom.

The Science of Reading, which forms the foundation of her pedagogy, centres on five pillars: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Since 2020, she has integrated these principles with remarkable success, fostering measurable gains in learner confidence, decoding skills, and reading comprehension.

Her expertise extends far beyond the classroom. A true advocate for literacy, she has presented at the WCED Foundation Phase Conference, mentored BEd Foundation Phase students, and participated in teacher development workshops across the province. Her message is clear: reading is not just a skill — it's a right, a gift, and a bridge to opportunity.

Colleagues describe her as a mentor and change-maker, someone who uplifts others by generously sharing her resources, methods, and encouragement. Learners experience her as warm, fair, and an inspiring teacher who makes learning meaningful. In the words of a former learner, now in Grade 9 — *"Your words of encouragement and the way you celebrated small victories made me feel capable and confident."*

At the heart of Mrs Esau's teaching is kindness. She leads with it in everything she does, creating a classroom culture where empathy, respect, and compassion guide behaviour and learning. A dedicated space in her classroom celebrates acts of kindness, inspiring learners to repeat and recognise these moments. Through consistent modelling and joyful initiatives like the Kindness Party, she nurtures an environment where kindness is not just encouraged — it is lived daily by every learner.

In January 2025, Mrs Esau was promoted to departmental head at Bridgeville Primary, where she continues to drive innovation and excellence in early literacy education. Her principal, in nominating her for this honour, praised her "relentless commitment to building readers for life" and

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described her leadership as “visionary and grounded in care.”

From the heart of Mitchell’s Plain to the broader Cape Flats and beyond, Mrs Wedaad Esau’s work reminds us that great teaching can transform communities, and that literacy — when nurtured with both love and science — can change the world.

Her journey into education is deeply personal. Growing up as the youngest of four siblings, she struggled with reading while her siblings excelled. Diagnosed with dyslexia at the age of 9 and forced to repeat Grade 3, she received little support from her teachers and was left feeling discouraged. But, instead of breaking her spirit, that experience ignited a lifelong passion for reading and a personal mission to become the very support system she never had, helping learners overcome challenges and thrive.

In August 2024, Mrs Esau played a key role as co-presenter at the Pan African Literacy for All Summit, hosted in Cape Town. This landmark event, the first of its kind on the continent, brought together over 100 delegates from 14 African countries to focus on

the transformative power of *Jolly Phonics* and how systematic synthetic phonics can be applied in both English and African languages to address the continent’s reading crisis. As a lead teacher and representative of the WCED, Mrs Esau shared practical insights, challenges, and lessons learned from her own classroom.

In recognition of her expertise, she was invited by the Minister of Basic Education, Siviwe Gwarube, to serve on the National Reading Panel, contributing to the development of South Africa’s new National Reading Strategy. The summit concluded with bold pledges to strengthen literacy across Africa and Mrs Esau’s voice helped shape the path forward.

In a world where inequality threatens to dim the light of young potential, Mrs Wedaad Esau stands as a beacon of hope. Turning her own childhood struggles into a driving force for change, she has created a classroom that is not just a place of learning, but a sanctuary of possibility. Through her compassion, leadership, and unwavering belief in her learners, she continues to shape lives and inspire change.

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