

THE TEACHER

50

Critical
Questions for
Inspiring
Classroom
Excellence

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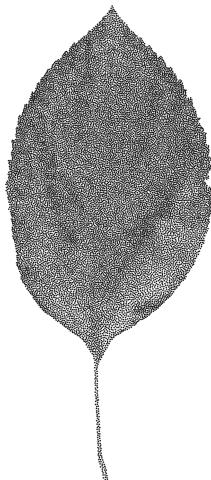
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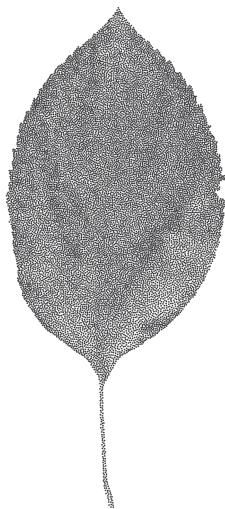


To the teachers who read this book: In this age of criticizing, blaming, scrutinizing, and bashing teachers, I want to remind you all that YOU make the difference in students' lives. Your students will soar as high as you take them. Stay encouraged and stay inspired. YOU MATTER!

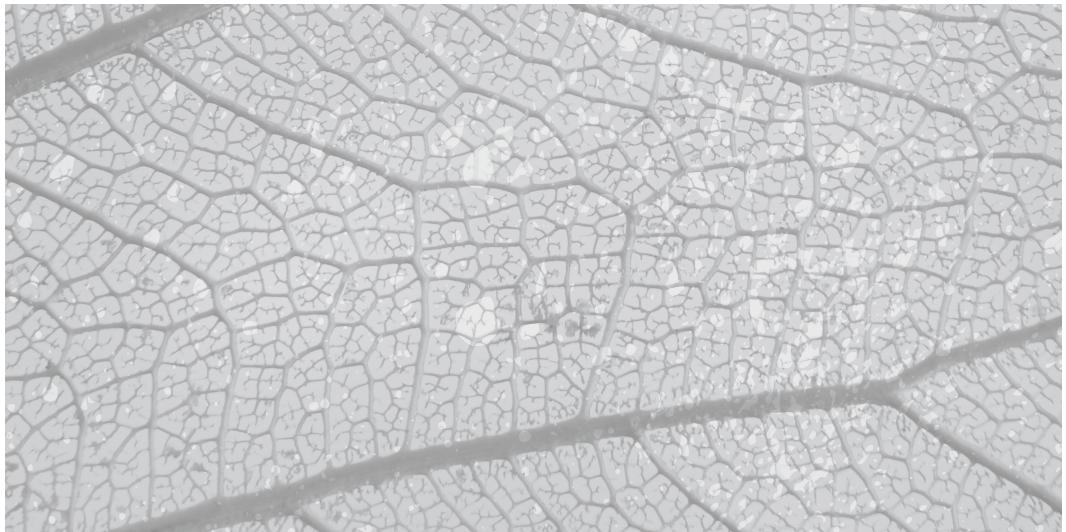


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INTRODUCTION



Ever since I entered the ranks of teaching in 1988 as a 5th grade teacher in Brooklyn, New York, the word *dream* has been a major part of my lexicon. For years, I would tell my students that they must dare to dream and they must dream big. This made perfectly good sense to me: After all, how can we expect youngsters to strive for excellence if they don't have a dream of excellence first? In addition to dreaming, I liked to encourage students to *imagine*—to imagine excellence, to imagine greatness, to imagine doing extraordinary things with the education they are receiving.

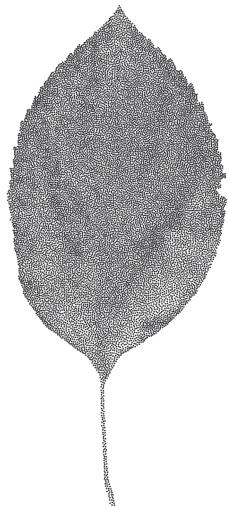
Several years into my teaching career, it occurred to me that my encouragements were probably falling on deaf ears. I concluded that I was speaking to students in a language that they didn't understand. The overwhelming majority of my students had grown up in economically disadvantaged communities where opportunities for success were grossly limited. How could they dream of or imagine a successful life when poverty was all around them?

When my students did dare to dream big, their dreams were almost always confined to the worlds of sports and music. Year after year I would survey my students, and year after year the overwhelming majority of them aspired to become superstar athletes or entertainers because these were the only successful types of people they saw in the media who “looked just like them.” In their minds, sports and entertainment were the only

ways out of lives of grinding poverty—but the likelihood that they had the talents and predispositions necessary to make it in those highly competitive fields was always going to be slim. If they didn't become professional athletes or entertainers, what kind of alternatives did they have? And how could I inspire them to work toward classroom excellence regardless?

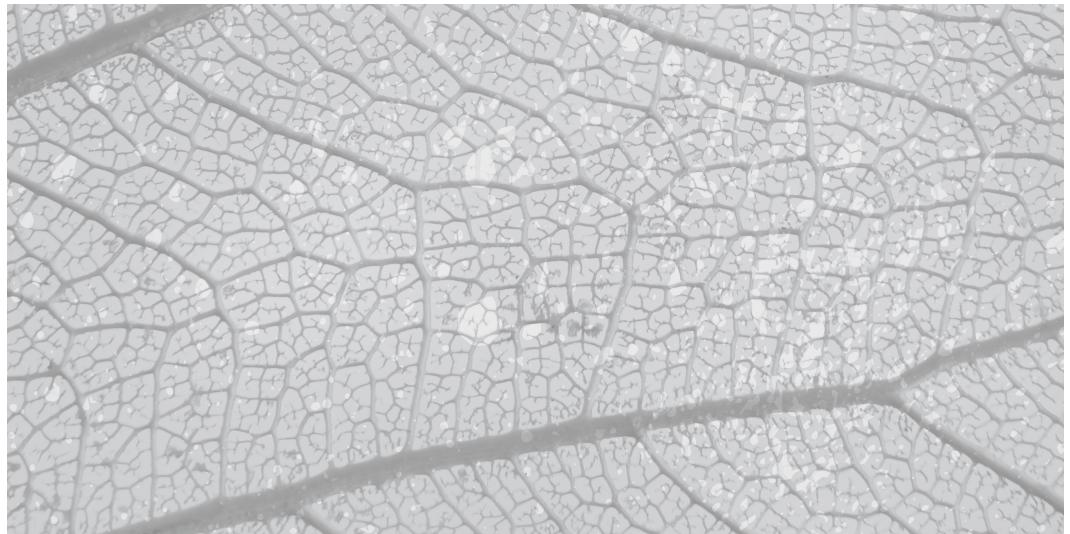
The challenges I faced trying to inspire my students to dream big despite their circumstances was my motivation for writing *The Teacher 50: Critical Questions for Inspiring Classroom Excellence*. I want you to reflect upon your teaching practices and the overall learning environment you have created: how have these elements succeeded or failed to inspire your students?

The Teacher 50 complements my previous book, *The Principal 50*. It is intentionally short out of respect for classroom teachers' extremely busy schedules. The 50 reflective questions in this book are offshoots of one essential, overarching query: *How can I inspire excellence in my classroom?* This is the fundamental question that I want you to keep in the back of your mind at all times. After you've read *The Teacher 50* for the first time, I encourage you to regularly ask yourself the 50 questions as they relate to your daily practice. Remember: The more inspired your classroom, the greater the chances that your students will achieve excellence.



CHAPTER 3

Classroom Climate and Culture



Q: Is My Classroom a “Bam!” Classroom?

A “Bam!” classroom is one that provides students with an overwhelmingly magical and memorable experience. In my capacity as a consultant, I eagerly seek out the “Bam!” classrooms in every building I visit. They’re not hard to notice—they’re the ones that give you that “Bam!” feeling as soon as you walk in the door. Is yours a “Bam!” classroom? Is the learning environment you provide for your students magical and memorable? “Bam!” classrooms nurture excellence so that learning can occur at the highest levels. They make students feel good about themselves and comfortable within the overall environment.

When I worked as a principal, I spent the bulk of my days going in and out of classrooms, and I was always especially conscious of the feeling I got when I walked in each door. I wanted to ensure that every classroom provided students with a sense of positivity and well-being—and each one did—but some felt truly magical. In these classrooms, students were valued and free to be themselves without having to conform to peer pressure; relationships abounded, and I could actually sense the caring and compassion in the air; and standards and expectations were set sky-high. In short, these were “Bam!” classrooms.

Q: What Is My Classroom’s Way of Life?

Schools are microcosms of the outside world, with each classroom affording a glimpse at a unique culture. As in the world at large, classrooms are densely populated environments where

people have to learn how to live together—how to communicate, relate, and resolve conflicts. All the people in a school are bound together by a particular vision and an overall structure of community.

When I worked as a classroom teacher, the culture of my classroom was a key and nonnegotiable element. I knew what I needed it to be at all times and it could not be dictated by the students—at least not until they internalized the culture that I had predetermined. You too must consider the culture of your classroom from the outset. You must walk in there on Day 1 already knowing what it will evolve into. You, the teacher, must be in control of the learning environment rather than letting it control you.

Your classroom's culture represents the way you and your students are living when you're together. It is your classroom's *way of life*. What is the culture—the way of life—of your classroom? Have your students contributed to it? Did the culture evolve organically, or did you have a preexisting idea that you worked toward realizing?

Q: What Is It About My Classroom That My Students Can't Wait to Come Back in the Morning?

I consider *intentionality* to be the most potent word in my professional lexicon. It is what gets us from striving for something to actually manifesting it. Virtually everything you do related to the social, emotional, and academic growth of your students is something that you must do on purpose; this intentionality must be more than evident to your students. You

cannot wait for your classroom climate and culture to develop on their own—you must shape and mold them *intentionally*.

Imagine transcending traditional models to create an experience that is so stimulating and engaging for students that they are eager to return to your classroom day after day. When you believe that you can achieve these results and focus on doing so, you will be working with intentionality to inspire student excellence.

Are you intentional about the climate and culture—the mood and the way of life—of your classroom? Do you regularly and intentionally celebrate your students' achievements? Do you build strong intentional relationships with students and exhibit as much compassion as you can at all times? All these factors are essential to consider if you want to create a climate and a culture that enable your students to soar.

Q: Do I Teach *Math* or Do I Teach *Mathew*?

What is the real priority in your classroom: the subject matter or your students? Far too often, teachers get so caught up in the normal pressures of teaching to the test and covering the whole curriculum on time that they forget what truly matters: the children. You can never lose sight of your students being your priority. Ensuring your students' social, emotional, and academic growth is the reason you report to school every day; everything else is secondary.

So, do you teach *math*, or do you teach *Mathew*? You teach *math* to *Mathew*, of course, but is *Mathew's* well-being your foremost priority?

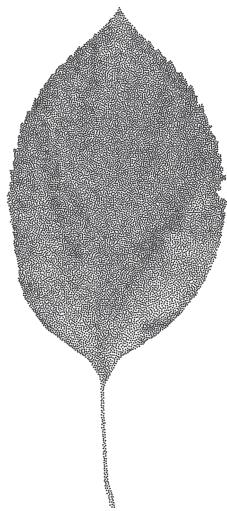
Q: Is My Classroom's Brand Identity Conducive to Learning at the Highest Levels?

Just as marketers and advertisers work hard to create a *brand identity* to sell their products, you too must work to develop and maintain a brand identity for your classroom. What distinguishes your learning space from all the others in your school? To what extent did you create your classroom's brand identity, and to what extent are you in control of it?

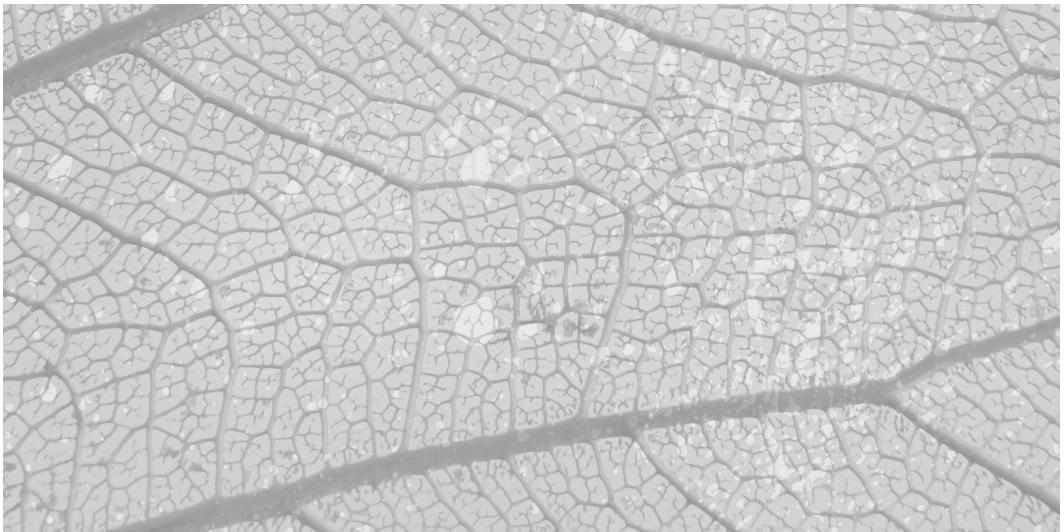
At a minimum, your classroom's brand identity is composed of

- Your *core beliefs* about both the practice of teaching and the process of learning;
- Your *core values* and *guiding principles* about what matters most for your students; and
- Your classroom's *purpose, mission, and vision*.

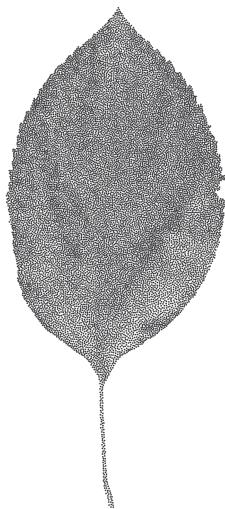
Your classroom's brand identity dictates your students' academic outcomes, their classroom behaviors, and their perceptions of the learning environment. At the same time, what's actually happening in the classroom is what ends up *defining* the brand identity—not simply what the teacher *says* or *hopes* is happening. It is incumbent upon you to ensure that you have in place a classroom brand identity that embraces nothing less than excellence for your students.



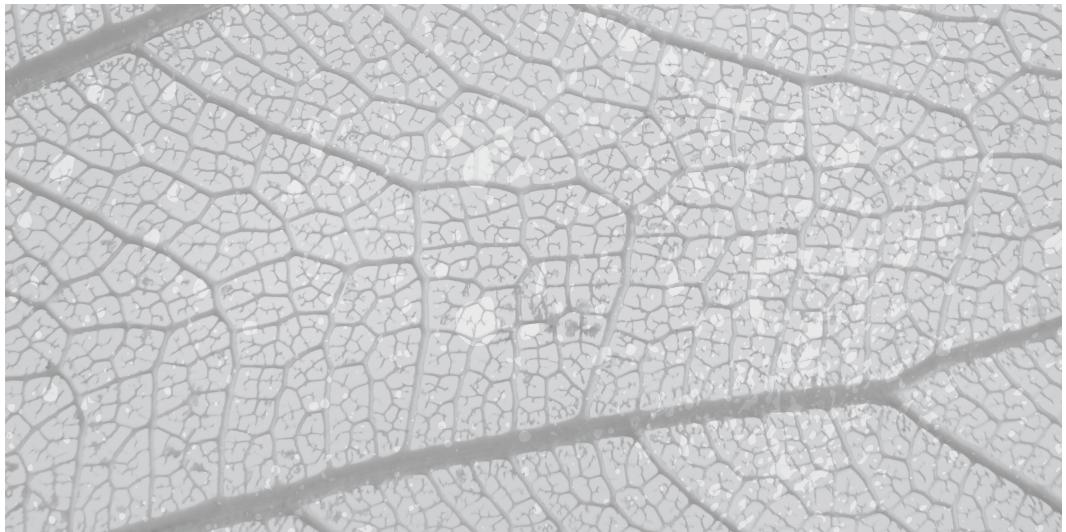
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR





A highly regarded urban public school educator in New Jersey for nearly 30 years, Baruti K. Kafele has distinguished himself both as a classroom teacher and as a school principal. As an elementary school teacher in East Orange, New Jersey, he was selected as the East Orange School District and Essex County Public Schools' Teacher of the Year. As a principal, he led the transformation of four different schools, including Newark Tech, which went from being a low-performing school in need of improvement to being recognized by *U.S. News and World Report* as one of the best high schools in the United States.

Currently, Kafele is one of the most sought-after speakers on the topic of transforming the attitudes of at-risk student populations in North America. He is the author of seven books on this topic, including three ASCD best-sellers *The Principal 50: Critical Leadership Questions for Inspiring Schoolwide Excellence*, *Closing the Attitude Gap: How to Fire Up Your Students to Strive for Success*, and *Motivating Black Males to Achieve in School and in Life*. He is also the recipient of more than 100 educational, professional, and community awards, including the National Alliance of Black School Educators Hall of Fame Award, the Milken National Educator Award, and the New Jersey Education Association Award for Excellence. Kafele can be reached via his website, www.principalkafele.com.

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The Principal 50: Critical Leadership Questions for Inspiring Schoolwide Excellence by Baruti K. Kafele (#115050)

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ASCD's Whole Child approach is an effort to transition from a focus on narrowly defined academic achievement to one that promotes the long-term development and success of all children. Through this approach, ASCD supports educators, families, community members, and policymakers as they move from a vision about educating the whole child to sustainable, collaborative actions.

The Teacher 50: Critical Questions for Inspiring Classroom Excellence relates to the **supported** and engaged **tenets**.

WHOLE CHILD TENETS

1 HEALTHY

Each student enters school healthy and learns about and practices a healthy lifestyle.

2 SAFE

Each student learns in an environment that is physically and emotionally safe for students and adults.

3 ENGAGED

Each student is actively engaged in learning and is connected to the school and broader community.

4 SUPPORTED

Each student has access to personalized learning and is supported by qualified, caring adults.

5 CHALLENGED

Each student is challenged academically and prepared for success in college or further study and for employment and participation in a global environment.

For more about the Whole Child approach, visit
www.wholechildeducation.org.