

# THE TEACHER

# 50

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Critical  
Questions *for*  
Inspiring  
Classroom  
Excellence

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**ASCD**



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## **Q:** Are My Students at an Advantage *Because I Am Their Teacher?*

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An ongoing debate in the world of education revolves around the question of who or what has the biggest influence on a child's potential for classroom success. Some argue that students' home environments make the biggest difference; others argue for students' socioeconomic status, the overall school environment, or the classroom teacher. I contend that all these variables have a significant influence on students—but none more so than students' teachers.

The amount of influence that classroom teachers have on student success can't be overstated. They are the ultimate difference-makers—the game-changers who can either make or break their students. It's pivotal to understand this influence. When you walk into your classroom every day, confident that you are the number-one determinant of the success or failure of your students, you are ready to ensure that optimal student learning will occur. When you take it a step further and internalize the idea that your students *will* be successful *because* you are their teacher, your students are in the best possible position to achieve success. I'm not promoting egotism here—I'm promoting the willful, inspiring attitude necessary for your students to experience classroom excellence.

## **Q:** Why Do I Teach, Anyway?

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One day, it occurred to me that every single word in the dictionary has a meaning—or, you might say, a *purpose*. And as

with words in the dictionary, all teachers should also be able to define the purpose of their work. Teachers who come to class every day with no purpose are like words in the dictionary with a blank space where the definitions should be.

What is your definition of your work's meaning and purpose? Go beyond generalizations like making a difference in the lives of children or preparing them for the future. What is your *specific* purpose for teaching your students? What drives you to get up in the morning and report to your classroom every day? What drives you to continue to do the work that you do despite the challenges that you face every day?

When I worked as a classroom teacher I was driven by many different factors, but at my core, my ultimate *purpose* was *to motivate, educate, and empower children*—with an emphasis on *empower*. To empower children is to make them stronger, more confident, and better able to control their lives (and to turn the corner if they're on the wrong track). Far too many students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, don't feel empowered to take charge of the direction of their lives.

Now think about *your* specific purpose for the work that you do—your personal definition of teaching. Let this purpose drive everything that you say and do from now on as you work to inspire classroom excellence.

## **Q: How Badly Do I Want to See My Students Succeed?**

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When I conduct professional development workshops with educators, I typically begin by asking attendees, “What are

the challenges, obstacles, pressures, demands, and adversities that you face in your classrooms daily? Put another way: What keeps you up at night?” The teachers’ responses can sometimes be overwhelmingly emotional. I recall several times having to hold back tears as I listened to teachers with tears in their own eyes. At one workshop not too long ago, a teacher confided to me that what kept her up at night was knowing that one of her students lived in a rat-infested apartment. She told me that this knowledge made her particularly determined to ensure that her student would become a success. These moments speak volumes to me: They are glimpses into the hearts of teachers who take the pressures and demands of their jobs home and to bed every evening.

My point in asking teachers to share during workshops is to gauge how badly they want to see their students succeed in the face of sometimes overwhelming odds. How badly do *you* want to see *your* students succeed? How badly do you want to be prepared to surmount all the obstacles that you’ll face, day in and day out, in your classroom? Are you up to the challenge of meeting the needs of a diverse group of learners? Do you have the will to be a great teacher for all your students? Are you willing to learn all you have to know to connect with every student in your classroom? What adjustments can you make on a daily basis to meet all your students’ academic, social, and emotional needs? How do you ensure that your students remain fired up for success in life?

You have got to want your kids to succeed at a gut level. You have got to be practically obsessed with helping them discover and exploit their potential for greatness, and you have got to be passionate about their success.