

TEACH LIKE YOUR HEART IS ON FIRE

How Great Teachers Ignite the
Hearts and Minds of Young People

CHRISTIAN MBA

JOHN CATT

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THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF
YOUNG PEOPLE

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*To my late mother, Celestina Ifemjika Mba,
My first and best teacher.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christian Mba is a vice principal working in secondary education in England. Born and raised in London, he taught in the capital for over a decade before moving into senior leadership, with experience spanning a range of complex and high-challenge school contexts.

His leadership work has included responsibility for teaching and learning, behaviour, personal development, inclusion, character education and professional development. Alongside his school-based role, Christian is a programme lead for a middle leadership development programme within a large multi-academy trust and serves as a school governor in a local secondary school.

Christian's professional interests sit at the intersection of evidence-informed practice, character education and strategic leadership. He is particularly focused on how research, theory and leadership frameworks can be translated into practical systems that improve outcomes and life chances for young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

He holds a master's degree in Educational Leadership and has completed the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH). He is known for his clarity of thought, strong moral purpose and ability to communicate complex ideas with precision and conviction.

Alongside his leadership work, Christian speaks to young people across the UK, delivering revision workshops and motivational talks. He is also a digital content creator, sharing insights on education, leadership and personal development, and can be found on social media as [@iammistermba](#).

Christian lives in the UK with his wife and family, and continues to write and speak about leadership, education and making a difference to the lives of others.

REVIEWS

The title says it all really. Christian strongly encourages teachers to teach with passion to promote excellence and love of learning. Teaching is not a job – it is a vocation – and, as he so clearly says, teachers can change lives.

This book is full of inspiration, but also many practical tips and is written by one of the best practitioners I have ever met. Strongly recommend it.

*Dame Sally Coates
Executive Principal, Holland Park School*

Teach Like Your Heart Is On Fire is a highly recommended and refreshingly beautifully written piece about the central role great teachers play in firing both the hearts and minds of the next generation. As Christian rightly points out, ‘your credibility to lead learning is that you yourself continue to be a learner’. This book provides a rich set of ideas around the key themes of character, capacity and culture, which are very important in fostering an environment of growth for all staff. If you are a school leader or teacher looking for a stimulating book about why teaching is a great profession, then this book provides exactly what you need.

*Dr Jeffery Quaye OBE
Director of Education and Quality, Aspirations Academies Trust*

I loved this book. It had me at the title but then proved to be a brilliant, punchy read. Christian writes with the authentic voice of a long-serving committed pro teacher and leader, bringing together all his experience to convey a wonderful passion for teaching as a craft, fuelled by a desire for excellence. It’s hugely informative as well as inspiring and useful as a reflective tool for anyone making their way through their career. Each chapter invites you to ‘spark something’ – and that ‘on fire’ energy permeates the whole book. Amongst all the books on classroom techniques, it’s refreshing to read a book that’s such a powerful celebration of teaching, grounded in realities but reminding us we are ‘part of something great’. Bravo!

*Tom Sherrington
Director of Teaching WalkThrus*

Having known Christian for over ten years, I read this book with eager anticipation and was not disappointed. His passion, enthusiasm, and deep understanding of how schools bring out the best in pupils jumps from every page. If you are looking for a read that relights your passion for the profession or you just want to learn some great new stuff about teaching and leadership, then this is the book for you!

Andy Buck

Author of Leadership Matters and the BASIC book series

Teach Like Your Heart is on Fire is a timely reminder of what sits at the heart of great teaching: *purpose, mindset and craft*. At a moment when workload pressures and wellbeing challenges weigh heavily on the education workforce, this book reconnects teachers with their 'why', blending research, evidence, and practical ideas with the deeply human endeavour of teaching. It champions trust, professional agency and both self and collective efficacy as the foundations on which teachers grow, as individuals and as a profession. Above all, it reminds us of a simple truth: **nobody comes to work to do a bad job**. The final chapter reminds us that when teachers are trusted, supported, and inspired, they flourish, and so do the pupils and communities they serve.

Kathryn Morgan

ASCL Leadership & Workforce Specialist

I am passionate that schools need to be great places to work in order to be great places to learn and the focus of this work often falls on the shoulders of the senior leadership team. Christian's book is a timely reminder that **everyone** in a school shapes the culture and every teacher can make a huge difference every day. I love his simple 3Cs model, which is so simple yet really encapsulates the art of being the very best you can be in the classroom. The book is packed with wonderful stories and anecdotes and I can imagine any teacher, whatever stage of their career, will get so much from the content. A wonderful reminder from a credible teacher and leader of the importance of the heart in teaching and a reminder of the 'why' educators do what they do.

Mandy Coalter

Founder of Talent Architects

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INTRODUCTION

Excellence is habit

To be excellent at any craft requires a number of active ingredients, including effort, commitment and tenacity, but I also believe it requires the desire to be excellent. As Aristotle wrote, ‘We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit’ (Durant, 1926). For somebody to reject average and seek to be the best in their field, they will naturally stand out from their peers. In workplaces everywhere, there are people content with being average; not because they lack the capacity to be more, but because they have been enchanted by the siren song of mediocrity.

In his book *Die Empty*, Todd Henry (2013) writes:

early in our career ... we at first feel stretched by the new tasks in front of us, but we gradually adapt to expectations and develop the capacity to deal with them. This growth cycle is rapid and steep in our career, when we are constantly facing unfamiliar challenges and in need of developing new skills to deal with them. However, as we progress in our career and accumulate more knowledge, there are fewer experiences that instinctively spark our curiosity and challenge us to rise to the occasion. We quickly grow stagnant, relying on our existing skills to perform our work. These skills may be sufficient, and, depending on how innately talented we are, may even earn us a great amount of respect in our industry, but deep down we know that we’re not doing our best work. We know that we’re coasting. We’ve succumbed to mediocrity.

There may be some jobs where being mediocre is OK. Perhaps it isn’t that big a deal that my barista was not exceptional at serving me my flat white. Maybe it doesn’t matter that the bus driver provided a standard service. There are clearly some jobs where excellence matters (I think it matters everywhere, but that’s a different conversation). You would sincerely hope that your surgeon did not slack off in her studies before she performs surgery on you. You would probably pray that your pilot is proficient in navigating planes safely to their destination.

There are some professions where excellence is paramount: I believe teaching is one of them. While we might not be charged with saving lives like a surgeon or preserving lives like a pilot, teachers certainly shape lives.

Everybody should be able to recall a teacher who left an indelible mark on their life, perhaps because of how they made a subject come alive or their example as a role model or their passion and thirst for learning. The more, the merrier. Every young person should encounter an exceptional teacher in their life. Great teachers change lives. And yet, I know there are schools where teachers fall short of being great – not necessarily because they lack the ability, but perhaps because they have adopted attitudes that accept mediocrity.

As Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) write, ‘nobody seriously argues that we should fill our schools with low-quality, unmotivated teachers who don’t like children, don’t know their material, and can’t get it across’. On the contrary, we want teachers who desire to be excellent at what they do. What teachers *do* is shape lives, positively or negatively, whether they accept it or not. More than ever, the young people and communities we serve need teachers who ignite the best in themselves and others; those who are determined to be great.

Why I am writing now

In 2019, Grammy award winning rapper J. Cole released the song ‘Middle Child’. He raps about being between two generations, like being a big brother and little brother at the same time. That resonated with me.

For me, it describes how I see myself as a teacher and school leader, between two generations: two very distinct eras of education. I feel like a little brother and big brother at the same time. Some of the colleagues who trained, coached and mentored me as a new teacher have retired or are nearing retirement age. At the same time, I am working and leading a new generation of teachers who seek me out for advice, looking to me as a professional role model and example. On the one hand, I have much more room to grow as a teacher and leader, yet on the other I have earned enough experience and expertise to share with others: expertise and experience I have gleaned from others.

I have worked with some amazing people throughout my career – people who have mentored me, coached me, encouraged me, motivated me – but one person who stands out as a colleague is Georgina Watson (née Stevenson). She was a lead practitioner / second-in-department when I joined my first school as a cover supervisor, fresh out of university. She saw my potential – potential I didn’t see – and took me under her wing. She bought me a book called *Teach Like Your Hair’s on Fire* by Rafe Esquith (2007).

It's the first piece of literature about teaching that I ever read. It details the experiences of Esquith, a classroom teacher teaching fifth-graders (Year 6) in a Los Angeles neighbourhood plagued by poverty and violence. And yet, he managed to teach the unabridged works of Shakespeare to children living in poverty and with English as an additional language.

Before qualifying as a teacher was a twinkle in my eye, that book inspired me and left an indelible mark on my beliefs about what teaching has the power to do. The title of this book pays homage to the book that inspired me.

Perhaps there's somebody out in the world reading this book who would benefit from somebody coming alongside them, putting their arm around them and encouraging them, like Georgina Watson did for me. Well, this is me paying that act of kindness forward. Schön (1995) argues 'reflection-in-action occurs in the medium of words' and so, at the midway point of my career, this book is that medium.

While much has changed in English education, and continues to do so, the principles that underpin what schools do hasn't. Fullan (2003) argues that:

... the quality of the public education system relates directly to the quality of life that people enjoy (whether as parents, employers, or citizens), with a strong public education system as the cornerstone of a civil, prosperous, and democratic society.

Teachers build lives. Schools shape society. At least, they should. I strongly believe this. I have seen this happen firsthand, both personally and professionally. My schooling changed the trajectory of my life. I have seen how education has done the same for the lives of thousands of students across my career to date. The impact that a good education can have on a life is unfathomable, and I have found the greatest advocates of this maxim are often those who have lived experiences of the transformative effect of learning.

Lingard et al. (2003) argue that education can 'build upon' and 'reconstitute the habitus', so that those who have been 'socially mobile through education take on a new habitus ... they become the embodiment of the professional positions they take on'. J. Cole wrote 'Middle Child' because he recognised he was at a key juncture in his career and sought to capture his observations about the music industry, namely the hip-hop scene. In a similar way, in this book, I hope to capture my observations about education and how teachers and educational leaders can ensure that schools continue to shape the lives of young people.

How to read this book

Cover to cover

It is totally up to you how you read this book. You can read it from cover to cover, working through the contours of what I believe make a great teacher in the order I have written them. It is my belief that there are three key factors that influence the ability of schools and the teachers who fill them to improve the outcomes of their students:

- Character
- Capacity
- Culture.

These three Cs serve as the sections of this book. Firstly, we have **character**, which focuses on the personal qualities that make up the character of the adults we place in front of our children and young people. The second section addresses the **capacity** of teachers and leaders to continue to develop, grow and adapt to the changing demands of education. Finally, the third section on **culture** explores how teachers and leaders can shape the type of working environments that successfully facilitate the first two sections.

Jump straight in

You could, however, jump to a chapter that resonates with you. I am conscious that, if you are reading this book, you may be looking for some inspiration, so feel free to make a beeline for what you think will serve you best. At the close of each chapter, there is a summary and an activity that I hope will spark something in you. I have tried to provide a practical takeaway for each chapter that you can apply immediately.

Teaching can be a really tough gig. At the time of writing, I have worked in education for almost two decades, and I think it has got harder. In my mind, it is still the best job in the world, but there are so many aspects inside and outside the classroom that can douse the flames of enthusiasm and motivation necessary to facilitate a long career in education. My hope is that what is written here will be an encouragement to you, wherever you are in your career; however you feel about the job; whoever you are. My sincere desire is that, having read this short book, something will spark in you and you will go and *teach like your heart is on fire*.

PART 1 **CHARACTER**

CHAPTER 1

START WITH WHY

Great teachers know their origin story

Peter Parker's origin story

Peter Parker failed. When he is bitten by a radioactive spider, instead of selflessly devoting his new superpowers to fighting crime or improving the human condition, Spider-Man uses his gift to establish himself as a television star. After his first performance, he has the opportunity to stop a thief, but fails to do so and allows the criminal to escape. Subsequently, his Uncle Ben is murdered by a burglar – who turns out to be the exact same criminal he failed to apprehend. Grief-stricken, his realisation that *with great power comes great responsibility* shifts his venal motivations towards the altruistic task of serving his local community as a friendly neighbourhood spiderman.

The development of the arachnid superhero is instructive: everybody has an origin story, and these narratives are often a combination of both positive and negative influences. Peter Parker is endowed with superhuman strength and agility. (Yay!) It takes the avoidable loss of his paternal figure to understand how he might use those powers productively. (Boo!) Just as the exposition of the superhero narrative reveals seeds of who the protagonist may become, the lives lived before teaching bear some influence as we develop as education professionals: this is your origin story.

My origin story

I wasn't really able to articulate mine until I had been teaching for several years and completed a master's degree in Educational Leadership. One of my first assignments was to complete a pen portrait, which forced me to evaluate my academic, professional and personal experiences. I had to draw upon these to outline my professional beliefs succinctly. Here's what I wrote:

I believe that educational leadership is a vehicle for addressing some of the inequalities of our society, both at a micro level within the school community and

at a macro level within the wider community. Harris (2008) argues that school leaders have a 'moral imperative' to address the widening gap between the poorest and most affluent students, although it is my view that school leadership goes beyond this. Schools should not simply serve as a sorting system for the economic purposes of a nation; rather, schools are charged with contributing to the development of future citizens of a democratic society. Dempster (2009) contends that learning is 'the means through which individuals can change their lives'. The concept of learning being a powerful tool in transforming lives underpins my professional beliefs about education. It is my belief that schools should:

- improve the outcomes of students academically, personally and socially, adding value to the lives of young people*
- value and recognise individuals within the school community, providing the necessary support and challenge to develop all stakeholders*
- be centres of learning for all stakeholders and exercise a positive influence in and on the wider community.*

These beliefs were shaped by my own experiences. My education afforded me with both the qualifications and qualities I needed to build a life that made a positive contribution to society. I was given opportunities to make progress as a professional, realising and developing my potential capacity for leadership. My career as a teacher continues to provide me with opportunities for personal and academic growth, while potentially serving as a role model within the wider community.

I wish I could have articulated this as clearly when I first started teaching but, with hindsight, I recognise how my thinking was forged by the experiences I had had inside and outside of the classroom up until this point. I knew I wanted to help young people; that was the *what*. I knew I needed to be a great teacher and leader; that was the *how*. But if you had asked me *why* in 2006, I would have struggled to explain myself.

Back in 2006, I was a cover supervisor in a challenging school in South London. I had just graduated from university, and this was my first proper job. It was supposed to be just a stopgap until I could secure a job working in the media. My role entailed providing cover for classes where teachers were absent. And there was a lot of teacher absence. My line manager was a lovely Irish woman named Miriam Whittington; a kind and gentle soul who worked in the admin team, managing cover across the school. She would often have an apologetic look on her face each morning as she explained my cover for the day.

She knew behaviour was poor and absence was high, which meant the job was tough. The school was struggling to retain teachers, let alone cover staff, so I think she was conflicted giving me classes she knew would be challenging – but she had no option. She gave me a Year 10 science cover. Year 10 displayed notoriously bad behaviour, but were also, on paper, a bright cohort. I waited in the classroom for the end of break. I remember feeling a mix of excitement and raw terror at the prospect of being responsible for the class, but I soon learned that I thrived on the pressure.

I stood by the door and greeted students cheerfully as they entered the room. I asked them to take off their bags and to take their seats. Two particularly boisterous lads came to the door, and my spidey-sense tingled. I felt like these boys were influential, strolling in later than everyone else; louder than everyone else; a little more confident than everyone else. I asked them their names and directed them to sit at the front. Immediately they questioned why. I made some corny joke and they complied. I took the register and explained I had few rules: I will treat you with courtesy and respect and I expect the same. I explained the cover task, but I could tell from the questions I initially received that the students did not recognise the topic: they had never been taught it.

Internally, I wanted to scream. I felt like I had been set up to fail. How was I going to cover a class that didn't know what they were being asked to do? Surely, that would be a recipe for disaster. The kids would kick off. I would not be able to control their behaviour. I would get the sack. But there was another nagging feeling: frustration that these students were being set up to fail too. I got the attention of the class, who had started to become restless, and I announced that we would learn it together.

'I am not an expert, but we will go through it together. We will learn this together as a class.'

And we did. We muddled through the material. I can't remember the content of the lesson, but I remember using analogies to explain something in the textbook and the class erupting with laughter. I used an example familiar to the students to explain a scientific concept described in the curriculum. The students completed their tasks. The behaviour was not terrible. At the end of the lesson, I dismissed the class and some thanked me. It left me with this combination of feelings: a sense of accomplishment, a feeling of pride and a growing sense of indignation. I wanted to make sure that I could teach the content clearly and be confident that what I was teaching was accurate. I felt a little bit angry that the young people were being given such a raw deal. I wanted to help these young people. Without realising it, I had stumbled on my *why*; albeit a fuzzy, abstract version of it.

In his book *Start With Why*, Simon Sinek (2009) argues that, when an individual or organisation can effectively articulate their purpose and the reason they exist and behave as they do, it inspires action. It took me several years to be able to express succinctly the reason why I am a teacher, but I think I would have benefited greatly if I was taken through this process at the outset of my career. It would have served as both a mission statement to aspire to and an encouragement during challenging periods in my career.

What is your origin story?

So what is your origin story? Why are you a teacher? This is an important question for you to consider. The answer is at the core of who you show up as in the classroom and beyond. It's the engine that drives you, and understanding this will unlock the key to maintaining motivation in one of the most rewarding and taxing professions.

Spark something

Start with why

The origin story is cherished in popular culture. It allows us to get beneath the surface of what motivates and drives our favourite heroes and villains. For example, *Breaking Bad's* prequel *Better Call Saul* and Disney's *Mufasa* offer insights into how the protagonist was shaped and moulded into their character. Understanding their formative experiences provides a framework for understanding why they see the world in the way that they do, especially in moments of difficulty. Reconnecting to why you started and / or the factors that influenced you to start is a powerful catalyst to provide clarity and focus.

Writing a pen portrait can be challenging because it requires you to try to be objective in evaluating your experiences, beliefs and values. Just as an artist might begin a self-portrait by beginning with sketching a circle to help accurately establish the facial proportions, there are some questions that can help you to begin sketching the contours of your identity, before adding more layers of detail.

To begin, you will need to start with your professional CV. How you complete this is up to you: you might want to work through each question and write a summary paragraph, or you may prefer to grab a big sheet of paper and create a mind map. Answer the following questions (Campbell et al., 2003) to help develop the initial picture of who you are as a professional:

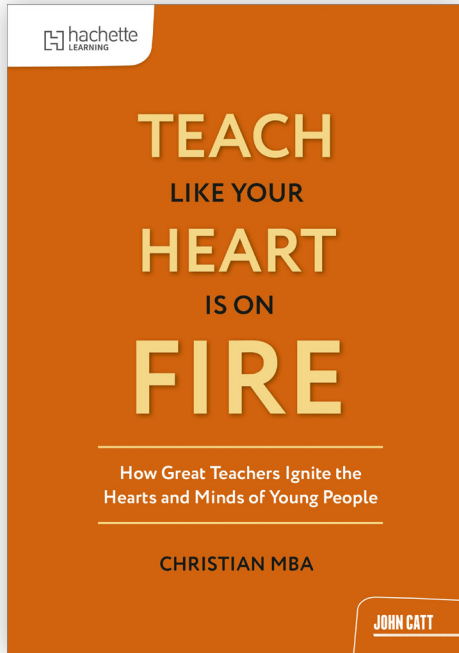
- Where and when were you educated as a teacher? (Give the dates and location.)
- What qualifications do you have? (State the awards and dates.)
- What teaching experience do you have?
- What areas of the curriculum have you taught? (List the subject areas you have taught, along with details of age groups.)
- What posts of responsibility have you held? (List posts you have been promoted to, and their responsibilities.)
- What external responsibilities have you had?
- What professional-development activities and processes have you been involved in? (List and provide dates and durations of activities. Give details of whether you contributed to or led any of these.)
- What interests in education do you have? (List your current and past interests, and any non-teaching activities or part-time teaching in other contexts that could support your development.)
- Are there any other related interests or experiences that enhance your profile?
- List any external roles that you have undertaken, such as examiner or moderator.

Once you have completed your CV, you might already start seeing some patterns or trends emerge. Perhaps you have enjoyed working in environments that put you under pressure, or maybe you have flourished working with a coach or mentor. It can be really rewarding to revisit moments in your origin story that reveal strengths and weaknesses, and aptitudes and talents you did not know you possessed. Whatever this exercise has helped you capture, it will now form the basis of the next part: the portrait. Use the following questions to help you craft your pen portrait:

- What kind of teacher are you?
- What are your core beliefs about teaching and learning?
- How would you describe your teaching style?
- What makes you tick as a teacher? What motivates you to develop your teaching?

- What ideas do you have about the nature of teaching? What do these ideas add to knowledge about teaching?
- Where do your ideas and beliefs about teaching and learning historically come from?
- How did you come to these ideas?
- What helped you formulate your ideas and thinking about teaching?
- Do your practices accord with current views of teaching? If not, how are they different?
- Do you address inequalities and discrimination in education?
- What do you feel strongly about in education?

Now you have outlined your professional and personal journey, you should be better able to articulate not only your origin story, but why you are a teacher.



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