

“Mawi is able in simple and elegant language to convey profound truth with brevity and sincerity.”

—Richard Marius

Senior Lecturer, Harvard University

“Asgedom has taken the disparate things life has given him up to now, bound them together to make them whole, and transformed them into something solid for the nourishment and use of others.”

—Harvard Magazine

“Mawi Asgedom is a hero to me and my students.”

—Pat Martin

Superintendent, St. Paul Public Schools

“Mawi’s books provide a powerful way for us to help thousands of teens across the country develop skills for success.”

—Allison Burns-Ferro

Director of Corporate Relations, Time Warner

“Your materials are working here at Rolling Meadows High School.”

—Liz Brandt

English Teacher, Rolling Meadows, IL

“Amazing!”

—Oprah Winfrey



DEDICATION

Dedicated to Powerful Educators around the world.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to all the schools and families that have allowed me to learn with them the last fifteen years. Special thanks to Allison Niebauer and Pat Donohue for their editing of this book; and to Dan Elliott and Victor Kore for their design.

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The 5 Powers of an Educator:
How Educators and Parents Inspire Students

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The 5 POWERS
of an
EDUCATOR

The **5**
POWERS
of an
EDUCATOR

How Educators and
Parents Inspire Youth

Mawi Asgedom

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last 14 years, I've had the privilege of working with thousands of educators across the world. I've been humbled by the challenges they face. Here are some of the stories educators have shared:

Our school is so competitive that many of the kids are on anxiety medication. The parents will tell you that they want their kid to be happy, but really, they want their kid to attend an Ivy League School.

My school has had eight principals in four years. I spend so much energy on adults I have little left over for my students. I'm tired of new initiatives. I'm tired of new leaders. I'm just tired.

98% of the kids at my school are on free and reduced lunches. I try to teach but most of the time I'm just playing policeman.

Parents have also shared their own challenges:

My daughter has been bullied for years. I met with the principal and the superintendent and it didn't help - it seems the school has no power to combat verbal abuse. Even though we will lose \$150,000, we have put our house on the market. Our daughter cannot survive another year here.

My son cares more about reality shows and pop stars than anything I have to say. His priorities are: his friends, his girlfriend, and his phone.

Ever since my divorce, my daughter has tuned out. She used to be a good student, but has had C's and D's the last year. I'm not around as much as I'd like because I have to work overtime.

Challenges like these can make any adult feel powerless. Especially because we know there are no silver bullets. No magic

buttons we can press to instantly and permanently fix these problems.

Where is the Power?

WHEN I FIRST STARTED WORKING with schools, I worked almost exclusively with students. I did a few parent and educator presentations but over 90% of my work was with students. The reason was simple. I believed that I could inspire any student with my life story.

At age six, I came to the United States as a refugee from war-torn Ethiopia. I did not know any English and grew up on welfare and in low-income housing. Fifteen years later, I graduated from Harvard University.

Through my story, I wanted students to see that anyone of any background could live the American Dream. And today, I still have deep belief in the power that our students have to create opportunity. But after working with over 1,000,000 students and observing every kind of school possible, I believe the greatest power lies with us, with adults.

As educators and parents, we create the world that students live in - we create the families, the schools, and the communities. We create the mindsets and expectations. To inspire our youth, we need to believe in our own power and use it continuously. Even when we feel tired and question our impact. Even when we face intractable challenges.

This book unabashedly asserts that you - as an educator,

parent, relative, or community member - have the power to profoundly impact youth. In this book, I will show you how to use your five most foundational powers.

The Story All Cultures Tell

IN THE RURAL ETHIOPIAN VILLAGE where I was born, almost no one could read. For example, my own mother couldn't read in any language before she came to the United States.

Lacking literacy, Ethiopian villagers used a powerful method to pass on wisdom from one generation to the next. Stories. Like the ancient Greeks before and countless other cultures since, Ethiopian villagers told stories.

For example, one of my favorite Ethiopian stories is of the blind man who carried a lantern around at night. When people asked him why a blind man needs light, he told them the light was to help everyone else see. I first heard this story in the refugee camp, and it has stuck with me ever since.

What if I were to tell you that there is one story that all cultures tell, and that you play a critical role in that story?

Joseph Campbell was a renowned anthropologist and psychologist who spent his career studying how cultures create stories. Through his decades of research, Campbell demonstrated that all human cultures tell the same basic "great story," with the same archetypal characters and plotline.

- **THE HERO:** The great story features a young hero of humble means. Orphans such as Harry Potter,

Luke Skywalker, and King Arthur are great examples.

- **THE EVILDOER:** An evil character threatens the entire land. For example, Voldemort in Harry Potter or The Emperor in Star Wars.
- **THE MENTOR:** There is always a mentor that provides wisdom, training, and support. Dumbledore counsels Harry Potter; Yoda trains Luke Skywalker; Merlin advises King Arthur.

This great story has been told thousands of ways, and it encapsulates the collective wisdom of cultures across the world. The only thing that has changed for the better, is that the hero is now as likely to be a heroine. For example, in *The Hunger Games* books and movies, a heroine named Katniss saves the world.

Our Heroic Story

IN THE GREAT STORY OF how we raise our youth, the characters are both different and the same:

- **The Hero:** Our youth, of all socioeconomic backgrounds, can contribute in incredible ways to our world. They have vast power, but will they realize it?
- **The Evildoer:** The personal challenges our heroes might face, such as poverty, illness, and family problems. The larger, macro challenges our world faces

such as war and disease. Can our heroes defeat the Evildoer?

- **The Mentor:** This is you. Without your guidance, love, and support, the hero will fail. Without the guidance of parents, mentors, and educators, the Evildoer will destroy our youth.

I could try to convince you of the power of educators and parents by giving you research studies and data sets. And I do provide studies in Appendix A that show how critical parents and educators are.

But you don't need the research. You know intuitively, without the data, that educators matter. That parents matter. That caring adults matter. You know that our youth have as much chance of reaching greatness on their own as Luke Skywalker had of unlocking the Force without Yoda.

That's why you matter and why you can never give up, regardless of the challenges your school or family faces; even if you feel like you have nothing to add, or your home is in shambles, or your school is falling apart.

Great and inspiring stories are impossible without you. Our youth need you to say, "Yes. I will embrace the power I have as an adult. I will train you. I will challenge you. I will help you see that you have far more in you than you ever thought."

Who is a Powerful Educator?

WHEN I WAS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL, I used to go shopping at a local grocery store called Jewel. Well, shopping is the wrong word. Several friends and I would enter Jewel and after some quick surveillance, head for the baseball card section. My friends preferred TOPPs but my favorite cards were Donrus, and the dream card was the Ken Griffey Junior card. The Griffey Jr. was rumored to be worth \$70.¹

There was only one problem. My annual budget was roughly three dollars, consisting primarily of money I found on the sidewalk as I walked back and forth to school. One pack of baseball cards cost 50 cents.

In the store, I would open my empty backpack. After a few furtive glances, I would quickly load three boxes of Donrus. Each box had 36 packs and each pack had 15 cards. So in one trip, I would steal 1,620 cards. Sometimes, I made 3 trips in one day, totaling 4860 cards. We stole so many cards one summer that the store had to install a glass security system, where you could buy baseball cards only if a store employee unlocked them with a key.

Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if I had been caught - assuming my father let me live. Would I have been sent to “Juvie” or Juvenile Detention? As a low-income black boy with a record, would I have been permanently labeled a low-potential kid? Would I have gone down a drastically different path than a

1. The two dominant baseball card brands at the time were TOPPS and Donrus. TOPPs was the traditional, affordable brand with history that went back decades. Donrus was newer and a little flashier.

scholarship to Harvard?

My best friend and frequent partner in crime was my older brother Tewolde. But as he entered his sophomore year of high school, my brother changed. Tewolde stopped stealing; he worked harder in his classes; he even started his own cleaning business to make money for my family. Tewolde's transformation was driven by an increased desire to care for our family and by his spiritual growth.

I kept shoplifting with friends from my middle school, until my brother did the unthinkable. He sat me down and told me that if he ever heard that I was stealing again, he would tell our dad about our shoplifting over the last few years. Telling my dad was the nuclear option. As my siblings often say, in our family, there were no "Time Outs," only "Knock You Outs." I never shoplifted again.

My life changed forever during my sophomore year, and my brother's senior year. Tewolde went on a road trip, and about 3:00 AM, a drunk driver slammed into his car, killing Tewolde instantly.

That horrific week, as I went through my brother's desk, I discovered something that inspires me to this day. A 6-year old child's photo. My brother had been paying \$20/month to sponsor a child across the world, providing that child with food and an education. *The kid who had shoplifted just years before now used money he got from cleaning bathrooms to save a child's life.*

Tewolde helped me understand the answer to an important question: Who is a Powerful Educator? Is it a parent, a grandparent, a coach, counselor, a teacher? Yes. But it is also the older

brother or sister; it is a neighbor or college student. A Powerful Educator is anyone who applies their elevated status, by virtue of age, resources, and life experiences, in the service of our youth.

The Five Powers of An Educator™

YOU HAVE COUNTLESS WAYS THAT you can inspire and impact youth. In this book, I will train you to use your five most foundational powers. Each of these Five Powers has its own chapter:

- 1. Press Your Turbo Button**
- 2. Relate to Matter**
- 3. Speak Success Mindsets**
- 4. Push for Skill**
- 5. Champion Voice**

Why did I pick these five? After all, adults have endless ways that they can impact youth. I based The Five Powers of an Educator on my:

- **Field work with schools:** I have worked directly with over 1,000 schools, where I have visited the school in person, met the administrators, and worked with students and teachers. This book is driven primarily by what tens of thousands of educators and 1,000,000+ students have taught me over the last fifteen years.
- **Success Literature & Research:** I've studied the research on youth development. These Five Powers blend

the work of leading researchers with our society's collective wisdom on youth success. In Appendix B, I share some of this research.

- Personal experience: I came to this country as a refugee from Ethiopia and lived the American Dream because of Powerful Educators such as my parents and my high school guidance counselor, Mrs. Martin. My own story shows me that no student, however motivated, can rise to their best without caring adults.

How to Use This Book

IF I MEET YOU AT the airport someday and you tell me that you read this book, and perhaps that you liked it, I will thank you. If you can tell me something that you DID as a result of reading this book, I will buy you a sandwich. I really will.²

Action is the bridge between training and impact, and I challenge you to read this book with an eye for how you can apply it.

I recommend first just reading this book and absorbing the main ideas. Perhaps a specific story will jump out at you. Maybe one of the Five Powers will resonate with your current circumstances.

Then start applying it. You can do it however you want. You can make a list of things that you can do immediately; you can focus on one Power at a time; you can create a detailed plan. To

2. Limit: Mawi buys three sandwiches a day. I will not buy sandwiches for your entire school if I meet 100 of you at the airport.

help you, each chapter ends with questions and discussion points you can use to apply the Five Powers to your own situation.

If you are on a school team, you might evaluate your school on the Five Powers and strategically work on one. For example, I recently worked with a team of 30 principals from a large urban district and they identified Power #5, Champion Voice, as their greatest focus for the coming year.

Extend Your Lantern

AS YOU GET INTO THE details of the Five Powers, remember the larger story. Our youth need you. They need you to be a coach, parent, mentor, teacher, uncle, aunt, administrator. They need you to embrace your role in the Great Story and become the Powerful Educator you are meant to be.

Being a Powerful Educator does not mean you will always feel powerful. Nor does it mean you will always know what to do. More often than not, you may feel like the blind man with the lantern, stumbling around at night.

Like him, extend your light anyway.

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