

A D A M L . S A E N Z

the power of a teacher

RESTORING HOPE AND WELL-BEING
TO CHANGE LIVES



*“In my work with tens of thousands of educators across the nation, I’ve found that great teaching is rarely, if ever, based on WHAT I’m going to teach or HOW I’m going to teach it. Extraordinary moments in the classroom are always based on WHY I’m teaching. With a big enough WHY, the WHAT and the HOW always seem to fall into place. Read **The Power of a Teacher** and allow it to rekindle the why in your heart—both you and your students deserve it.”*

—Hal Bowman

Twenty-year Teaching Veteran and Author of *TEACH LIKE A ROCK STAR*

“Adam is indeed a rare breed of psychologist: a refreshing—even uncanny—ability to merge science with practice, and a teaching style that’s not only insightful, but actually fun. If you’re looking for a tool to build health and unity on your campus, you just found it.”

—Chris White, Ph.D.,

Director of Research, The Flippen Group

Co-author of New York Times Best Selling *THE FLIP SIDE*

*“Beginning with his own inspiring story, Adam has masterfully collected poignant narratives capturing the power of teachers to change lives in profound and lasting ways. But Adam knows mere stories are not enough to transform practice. Perspective, insight, and wisdom from these stories must be garnered and shared to harness the power needed for meaningful transformation. **The Power of a Teacher** will warm hearts, but more importantly, it will illuminate and inform practice.”*

—Trae Kendrick, Ed.D.

Former Teacher, Principal, and Current State-level Educational Leader

*“Dr. Saenz is not your typical school psychologist. His powerful personal narrative and professional expertise create the ideal combination to remind us all of **The Power of a Teacher**. This book will inspire you to make a difference and provide strategies to rejuvenate your own wellness. A must read for all educators!”*

—Kirsten Hund

Former Teacher, Administrator, and Current State-level Educational Leader

*“Read **The Power of a Teacher**. It will reignite your passion, and remind you in no uncertain terms that changing the world one person at a time is not such a crazy idea after all.”*

—Bob Beaudine

Author of *THE POWER OF WHO*

*“**The Power of a Teacher** is an insightful and heartfelt reminder of why we all started our life’s mission in the first place. On those days when all of the ‘white noise’ of the job steals your joy, sit down and spend a few minutes with this book. You’ll be back in the race in no time.”*

—Carolyn Castleberry

Television Co-host and Author of *IT’S ABOUT TIME*

*“If there’s one thing I’ve learned in my life it is that I really am my brother’s keeper. Knowing that requires me to make a difference when I can. **The Power of a Teacher** is a great reminder about the impact we can have when we take the time to care and act. I highly recommend it!”*

—Louis Upkins
President and CEO of Upkins and Co.
Author of *TREAT ME LIKE A CUSTOMER*

“The message you are sharing is a powerful one that many people need to hear over and over again.”

J.D., Teacher, Bryan Independent School District

“Your ideas are great, and I can’t wait to implement many of them into my lesson plans this year.”

B.M., Teacher, Brownsville Independent School District

“This was an eye-opener! I vow to work on changing myself. Thanks!”

J.C.M., Teacher, Northeast Independent School District

“This was a powerful message...You provide wonderful insight, personal testament, and solid illustrations....”

J.R., Principal, Uvalde Independent School District

“This has been the most effective training I have ever attended.”

J.Z., Specials Teacher, Victoria Independent School District

“I wish all our in-services were as helpful as this material has been. Not only will this help at school, but in all areas of my life. Thanks again.”

M.R., Teacher, Alice Independent School District

“This was awesome! It was scary how much of this information is EXACTLY what this school needs. I hope to see/hear much more, and I hope everyone’s ears were open!”

E. C. , Teacher, Coldspring-Oakhurst Consolidated Independent School District

“I’ve been teaching for twenty-six years, and this was probably the best and most useful workshop I’ve been to... your presentation was the most ‘teacher friendly’ I’ve heard. Please continue your work. EDUCATION NEEDS YOU.”

B.W., Master Teacher, Dallas Independent School District

The Power of a Teacher

By
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The Power of a Teacher

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Although the contents of my story are based on actual facts, names have been changed and events compressed.

For every teacher who wants to make a difference

(especially Mrs. JoeElla Exley, Mrs. Polly McRoberts, and Mrs. Sharon Brewer Stahli—
three teachers who did just that).

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Chapter 1

A Case Study: The Sixth Grader in Handcuffs

Let's start here: select the student on your campus you would vote "Most Likely to End Up the Sixth-grader Handcuffed in the Back Seat of a Police Car for Possession of Marijuana and Arson." Depending on where you teach, there might be several potential candidates—all strongly qualified—competing for your selection right about now. It is not a lovely thought, I know, but bear with me. We're going somewhere with this. Have you selected the student? Don't read on until you have. Now hold that thought while I give a little context.

Where It All Began

In 2008, the Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association (TEPSA) asked me to present in the Distinguished Lecture Series at their summer conference. The idea was for me to address behavior management—always an in-demand training topic for educators—in the context of this new educational dynamic we were all learning about called Response to Intervention (RtI). My session was titled, simply enough, *What You Need to Know About RtI and Behavior Management*. I concluded the session with a very brief case study: What would it look like to actually *implement* a behavioral intervention using an RtI framework with a sixth grader in trouble with the law for possession of marijuana and arson? As I read through the feedback forms after the workshop, I was surprised that the brief case study—only a very small part of my presentation—was what seemed to have impacted the participants the most. My decision to include the case study had been, frankly, almost an afterthought.

TEPSA then brought me back for their summer conference in 2009, and I led a workshop on behavior management entitled *I've Tried Everything and Nothing Has Worked... Now What?* This time, though, based on the feedback I had received from my lecture the summer before, I placed much more emphasis on the case study. I took time to flesh out details, and I gave the kid a name: Lou.

How does a sixth-grader end up in handcuffs, anyway?

What were his parents doing or not doing at home?

What were his teachers doing or not doing at school?

At what point was a psychological evaluation warranted?

Once the school did intervene, how would you even begin to think about measuring progress in a case like this?

Again, the feedback was quite encouraging, reinforcing the idea that something about this particular case study resonated with hope for teachers. I had no idea then, but that case study—the sixth-grader in handcuffs—would be the start of *The Power of a Teacher*.

The Challenge of Teaching

Now, back to your selection for Most Likely. Even though I've never met this kid, let's see how closely I can describe your Most Likely based on data alone. Demographically this sixth grader is likely to be an African American or Hispanic male from a lower-income single parent home whose family life is characterized by varying degrees of chaos, interaction with the legal system and, perhaps, Child Protective Services.

Psychologically, he is sorely lacking in self-control and respect for boundaries, having learned to use physical and verbal aggression and intimidation to get what he wants and avoid what he doesn't—“a chronically-engaged coercive response set” is how we might refer to it in psychobabble.

Interested in modifying his behavior? Great. Take your pick—reward system or punishment, carrot or stick. Either approach will be increasingly less effective in shaping his behavior because he is, with each passing semester, growing more able to detach himself from what he truly wants and from what he truly fears. Imposed consequences—favorable or unfavorable—become irrelevant.

Academically, he is functioning below grade level. He probably has been referred to the district's special education for a psychological evaluation. Once he starts receiving special education services, even with that help, he actually becomes less likely to close the academic gap between himself and his general education classmates, less likely than his general education classmates to eventually graduate, and more likely to be placed in an alternative school for students with conduct problems and/or to be arrested.

Relationally he is impacting you physically, and I don't just mean the obvious hitting or kicking. When you see Most Likely, your heart rate elevates, your palms sweat, your breathing becomes shallow and accelerated, and the muscles in the back of your neck tense. In essence, your body has been conditioned to engage in fight-or-flight mode in response to his presence. And when you call Most Likely's guardian in a desperate attempt to collaborate in the problem-solving process, if the current phone number is still a working number, it doesn't matter anyway because the guardian has long-since memorized every number associated with any phone in the district and won't answer. If you're lucky, you'll get the opportunity to leave a voicemail that you know will never be returned.

Okay, so how close was I? I'd bet my Michael Jordan rookie card against a five dollar bill that on the days when you want to quit teaching, on the days when you're wondering whether this whole thing is really worth it, Most Likely has something to do with it.

Of course, it's not just Most Likely. Even when he has good days, your responsibilities as a teacher leave you with the myriad of other life-sucking demands that make you question your sanity for signing a contract to teach yet another year: lesson plans, staff meetings (with colleagues you wish weren't your colleagues), parent meetings (with parents who are eager to tell you why you're at fault), mediocre pay, little power in most decision-making processes, long days and nights. The list could go on.

It is precisely in the context of that stress that I want you to take time not just to read, but to absorb this book. The dilemma you face is that your vocation—your calling—as a teacher places you between competing realities: on the one hand, you have the power to truly impact and change students' lives, and on the other hand, those life-changing transactions occur in a broader professional context that has the potential to absolutely wear you down.

I believe this book offers a solution to that dilemma.

The Sixth-Grader in Handcuffs Revealed

Remember the case study I shared at TEPSA? The sixth grader in handcuffs who inspired us to consider your Most Likely? That sixth-grader was not a case study of a kid I saw for therapy. He was not a student I was called to evaluate in a school setting. He was not just a kid I knew growing up.

That sixth-grader was me: Adam Louis Sáenz. Or, in those days, Lou. Let me tell you my story and why it matters to you as a teacher.

My family lived in a working-class neighborhood on the southeast side of Houston near Hobby airport. My dad worked days at a gas station a few blocks from our house, and he worked nights loading freight onto eighteen-wheelers. My mom worked as a bank teller. It was by no means a life of luxury, but my parents managed to pay bills, keep food on the table, and take the family on the occasional day trip to Galveston. Life was pretty simple for my older brother, older sister, and me: go to school, come home and do homework, then play outside until the streetlights came on. Happy is the child whose parents provide, protect, and direct. I was a happy child.

I knew I would love school long before I was old enough to attend. I overheard my brother and sister tell my mom seemingly endless stories about school: what they learned or what they did at recess or a joke their teacher told. The night before my first day of kindergarten, I was so excited I couldn't sleep.

Kindergarten did not disappoint. My teacher was Mrs. Tholan. She was wise, kind, noble, firm, and angelic

My classmates and I were asking two questions about this new experience of being in a classroom and having a teacher. The first question was: *Does my teacher care about me?* The second question was: *Can I make my own rules?* Mrs. Tholan made it absolutely clear from day one that the answers to those questions were “yes” and “no,” respectively.

Gary Welter cried every morning for the first three weeks of school—I’m talking bawled-his-eyes-out-and-snot-running-out-his-nose cried. It was like every day of school was the first day of school all over again for him. By the end of the second week, I was ready for him to get over it already (and so was most of the class—I knew this because I took it upon myself to ask them). Every day, though, Mrs. Tholan would patiently wait with him at the door, smile, give him a hug, and say, “We are your friends, Gary. We are so happy you are here today.”

Yep. She cares.

Even though in my heart I knew Mrs. Tholan didn’t have a class favorite, I was secretly jealous of Monica Severs, who seemed limitless in her capacity to impress Mrs. Tholan. If Monica wasn’t writing the alphabet with penmanship the rest of us could only dream of, she was out at recess sharing cupcakes that she had cooked in her Easy-Bake oven. One day Monica was discovered to have “borrowed” Mrs. Tholan’s markers, which Mrs. Tholan had repeatedly instructed us were off limits for students. When Mrs. Tholan confronted Monica, Monica claimed that the custodian must have put the markers in her desk. One thing Monica was *not* good at was lying. Mrs. Tholan gave her a single look, and Monica crumbled. We thought Mrs. Tholan would let Monica slide, though, since Monica always seemed to be earning bonus points; surely she had enough credit to get by on this one. Mrs. Tholan would have no part of that. Rules were rules. She immediately summoned Monica to her desk and issued the consequence: Monica would have no morning or lunch recess. Monica was devastated. I don’t remember her ever “borrowing” markers again.

Nope. I can’t make my own rules.

Mrs. Tholan’s consistency left no doubt in our hearts and no mystery in our minds about the nature of our relationship with her.

During the first week of school, Mrs. Tholan let each student borrow a book from her personal library, and I picked *Curious George Flies a Kite*. I was fascinated by the cover image: a monkey holding a huge yellow and white striped kite, which looked to me like a good story waiting to happen. Several times over the course of the next few weeks, Mrs. Tholan would ask me how the book was coming, and would I share with enthusiasm about the crazy things George would do—how he was constantly getting into trouble, and how no matter what George did, the man with the yellow hat was always kind to him.

At the end of the first six weeks, Mrs. Tholan stood before the class and announced that the class was to have a special treat. For the morning reading time, instead of Mrs. Tholan reading from our daily reader, Lou was going to read *Curious George Flies a*

Kite. I was thrilled. It was a command performance, if I do say so myself, and I nailed it, cover to cover. I felt capable and confident.

I sat next to Mrs. Tholan at lunch later that day. As we settled into our sandwiches, she looked at me and smiled: “Thank you for your contribution in class today, Lou. It was very special.” Her words were life to me. I was convinced the world could not possibly be more right than it was at that moment. I *knew* I would love school.

I smiled back at Mrs. Tholan. “Thanks,” I said. “You’re a great teacher.”

Early in the summer after first grade, I came home from the little league park and saw a moving truck parked in my driveway. Life as I knew it was about to change forever.

My parents were having marital problems, I would later discover, so they decided to move back to their hometown in the Rio Grande Valley, hoping that the proximity to their families would provide them enough support to endure. It didn’t.

I came home from school one day early in third grade, and my dad was gone. The story I got from my mother was that my dad had moved back to Houston to find a job, and once he found one, he was going to come back and get us. I was relieved, honestly. I still hadn’t adjusted to our new town, and I missed my friends in Houston. Days, weeks, then months passed. Finally, I think my mother grew tired of my asking her every day if she had heard from dad, and she told me the truth: he wasn’t coming back to get us—he was just gone.

Before my dad left, my mom had been actively involved in our lives—continually asking questions about our school, our friends, our interests—the kinds of things moms seem to intuitively ask and do. When we had problems, we knew we could turn to her for help with anything from a tough homework problem to a skinned knee. After my dad left, though, my mother became preoccupied with trying to feed and clothe three children on a bank teller’s salary as she also tried to deal with her own issues in the wake of losing her marriage. She disengaged from my life, no longer willing or able to keep up with my siblings and me. It felt like a double-whammy: my dad left, and then my mom, though still physically present, also was gone.

The realization devastated me. I developed what would become my main coping strategy for many years to follow: I did what was modeled for me, and I disengaged from everyone, including myself. Disengaging was a gradual process of learning to care less, hope less, believe less, and want less from life. By the end of fifth grade, I ended up gravitating toward older kids in the neighborhood who introduced me to drugs; living that close to the border, any drug was both readily available and very affordable. If disengaging was my new coping mechanism, drugs were my new escape.

As the summer before sixth grade came to a conclusion, serendipity paid me a visit. When my mother bought my school supplies, by accident she bought for me what was on my sister's list. Among the "accidental" purchases were three spiral notebooks. Though I didn't need them for school, I didn't tell her that and secretly kept them anyway. If my mom knew they weren't required for school, I felt sure she would return them for a refund. I knew every penny counted in our home, but I loved drawing and decided to squirrel them away for that purpose. Then something odd happened. One day, instead of drawing in them, I started writing in them. At first, I wrote poems and short stories, but eventually I began to write about my life. I found in those blank pages my only truly safe place to be honest—to be me. I had nowhere else to express the sense of loneliness and betrayal I felt, nowhere else to express the anger towards my parents. My anger turned into rage, and sadness turned into depression.

By the time sixth grade started, I didn't care who cared about me, and at school, I was asking only one of the two questions I asked Mrs. Tholan: *Can I make my own rules?* I had learned that disengaging was a two-edged sword. The cost of relational isolation was that I no longer was able to receive love or nurturing when it may have been offered. The benefit, though, was that I was protected from experiencing emotional pain, or at least much more in control of the process. The isolation also offered me autonomy—breaking rules was so much easier when I wasn't worried about how my defiance affected my relationships with my teachers or my mother.

Mr. Smith was known among students as sort of an old-school, hard-nosed, in-your-face type, and he was keen on making sure I knew I could not make my own rules. After first period on the first day of sixth grade, Mr. Smith found me in the hallway and introduced himself.

"Lou, I've heard about you," he said to me sternly, leaning over, his nose into my face. "I know you vandalize property. I know you set fires. I know you use drugs. I know you've given your teachers a run for their money. I want you to know one thing from the start—it is my goal this year to get you in line, and I will not put up with any of your crap. Period. In fact, if you so much as even look at me wrong or speak a word of Spanish in my classroom, you, me, and this big brown paddle of mine will head down to the principal's office, and I *will* break you down. Do you understand me?"

I knew in an instant what this was about, and I responded accordingly: "*Sí entiendo, pendejo.*" (For my non-Spanish-speaking friends, "Yes, I understand, you !#\$%*.") It was a short honeymoon.

It seemed my entire educational experience soon boiled down to me either walking to or from the principal's office. Profanity. Fights. Disrespect. Dress code violations. A few days' suspension. Then, then the cycle would start all over again. My teachers and I had developed behavioral expectations of each other, and most days, it felt like we were all operating on autopilot.

And so it went, day after day, week after week, month after month. Some days, Mr. Smith would win. Some days, I would win. By the Christmas holiday, though, both Mr. Smith and I were ready for a break from each other. Unfortunately, things weren't going too well at home, either—the usual conflicts and stressors, only with greater intensity. My time off campus was unstructured and unpredictable, and I became even more depressed, gaining momentum in a particularly unhealthy direction.

My new year started in January with the after-school detention I was scheduled to serve for my most recent pre-holiday infraction. I had arranged to meet with some older friends after detention to get high in a small, abandoned A-frame house near the edge of town. We just called it “the party house.” To our surprise, the police arrived. When they heard our mad scramble inside, they drew weapons and surrounded us. My friend who was carrying most of the drugs fled on foot, but two other friends and I were cornered and handcuffed. It all happened so quickly; it felt surreal, like a dream. My head was spinning.

I still remember the pain of the handcuffs digging into my wrists as the officer loaded us into the back seat of the cruiser. I tried to stand with my feet on the floorboard and my shoulders on the top of the seat to keep the handcuffs from cutting into the top of my hands. Both my friends slumped forward in the back seat, hiding their faces as the officer took the long route to the station, through downtown, because he “wanted to take a joy-ride.” At the juvenile detention facility, my older friends represented the possibility of access to the proverbial bigger fish for the police. As the youngest of the group, I was released, under certain parameters, to the custody of my mother.

Incidents like that can be a wake-up call. Rather than serving as a turning point, though, that event merely became a highlight of my ongoing decline. Things only got worse as the semester progressed, both for me individually and for my crowd. Two of my friends arranged to make a drug buy with the intent to rob the dealer. Unbeknownst to my friends, the “dealer” was an undercover officer, and they were caught in a sting. When my friends drew their guns for the robbery, they were both shot and killed.

At that time, there was little formal gang activity where I lived, but we all traveled in a few different packs and tried to stay loyal to each other. My friends' deaths shook up everyone. Accusations flew and tensions were high. A leader in the group I ran with did something (to this day, I don't know what) to offend one of our rival groups, and the retaliation was swift. I was the target of their revenge, and in retrospect, I assume it was because I was the youngest. Seven young men came to my house where two of my group and I were hanging out. They overpowered us, and they held me back as they tore the place apart. Worse by far, they forced me to watch as they sexually assaulted a girl I knew well. Whatever fragment was left of my ability to trust and my ability to be emotionally vulnerable was destroyed that day.

The next day, I hid the cuts and bruises, hid the pain, and none of us—including the victim of the sexual assault—ever told a soul. In retrospect, I'm baffled by the fact that I was back at school that next morning. It had been the same scenario the day after my

friends died in the drug deal—we were back in school the next day, and no one spoke a word of it. There were no counselors to hold grief groups, nothing. What I experienced off campus in no way *excused* my behavior on campus, but it certainly did *explain* much of it. To be very clear, I absolutely believe my inappropriate behavior needed consequences. As I look back, though, I wonder if my teachers would have understood and approached me differently if they had some clue about what my life was like off campus.

Even in my journals, there are very few allusions to the events of those months. I think they were simply too painful and confusing to acknowledge or explore writing. What is clear now, though, is that the trauma of those months re-shaped the core of my identity. All the evidence in my life pointed me to the single, undeniable conclusion that I was inadequate. I was an inadequate son. I was an inadequate student. I was an inadequate friend. I had long since forgotten the capable and confident Lou that sat in Mrs. Tholan's kindergarten class, and I was firmly entrenched in my new identity: a drug-using, depressed vandal from a single parent home.

By that point, my mother knew things didn't look good for me. Desperate to salvage my remaining childhood years, she found a way out for me. A family friend—he and his wife were teachers—heard of my difficulties and offered to take me in. Although Child Protective services was not involved with our family, my mother signed a permanent transfer of guardianship, and within a matter of days, I was living with a new family, several hundred miles away from all I had come to know.

The change was dramatic. In my new home I was loved well. I didn't have to worry about food, clothes, or my personal safety. I didn't want anyone at this new school to know about my past. I was very careful not to talk about it and simply do my best to blend in—not an easy road for a Hispanic with my background suddenly in school with predominantly upper-middle class white students. The subject didn't come up often, but when my friends asked about why I wasn't living with my parents, I gave vague responses. Everyone extended grace by not prying.

Through junior high and high school, I stayed out of trouble and was socially engaged. I even made decent grades. I wasn't using drugs, and I managed to spend most of my time with peers who cared about school. In reality, though, I simply shifted from being the Lou who was outwardly defiant to the Lou who was outwardly compliant, but inwardly desperate. The waves of depression continued. An entry from my journal:

October 27, 1982...

“I don't understand it. There's just this darkness all around. I can't get past it. I never know when it's going to show up, and when it comes, it stays for days.”

I dreaded high school graduation. The family I was living with had been very good to me, but when I turned eighteen and graduated, I knew I would be on my own. I had a sneaking suspicion that the demons from my past—which really had only teased me throughout high school—were patiently waiting to do real damage once I was living independently.

Just as I feared, after I graduated and moved out on my own, the bottom fell out. I had struggled with depression for many years, but now I also was beginning to experience symptoms of anxiety—sleep difficulties, racing thoughts, and heart palpitations. Once again, I turned to street drugs to self-medicate. I had no real sense of the future; I simply hoped to make it through each day.

I was sleeping on the living room floor of a co-worker's apartment, and everything I owned fit in the bottom half of his hallway closet. My journals were my most valued possession. One evening, after a particularly dark day, I found myself alone in the apartment reading through these records of my life. As I opened one of the journals, two pieces of paper fell out—letters written to me by two of my high school English teachers just before graduation. These are excerpts from each letter:

“You are extremely talented and intelligent, but most importantly, you have a good heart... I know you will use your talents to help your fellow man, and that is the most satisfying life that a person can have.” -Jo Ella Exley

“Don't quit writing (especially in your journal). Someday it may be the basis for your book... you have insight, sensitivity, intelligence, and maturity beyond your tender years... keep on analyzing and thinking—you are so adept at it. Most of all, keep on being you. You are a special person.” -Polly McRoberts

Until that night, I had completely forgotten about these letters. Yet, as I sat there reading and rereading them, lonely, anxious, and mired in depression, something clicked. I thought back to my experiences in Mrs. Exley's and Mrs. McRoberts's classes: I knew they cared, and I knew I couldn't make my own rules. I also knew they were honest. They would not write anything to me that they didn't truly believe, and I knew I could trust them. In that moment, somehow, I simply chose to take them at their word, and I accepted their assessment of me. For the first time in a very long time—maybe ever—I believed that their words about me might be true. I was done being Lou. Just for emphasis—if only for myself—I decided I would start going by my first name: Adam. It was time.

I enrolled in one college course: Introduction to English at the University of Texas at San Antonio. Immediately, though, I was overwhelmed with fear: How would I pay for tuition or books? How would I get to class? Even after discovering financial aid, I was attacked by fear again when I actually stepped on campus. I felt like an obvious imposter. What business did I have on a college campus? What did I possibly have in common with these other students, all of whom seemed so much younger than me and whom must have come from healthy, well-adjusted families? I overheard animated conversations about

vacation plans for spring break (I would be working double shifts at the restaurant to pay for tuition—very uncool. *I'm out*). I overheard conversations about pledging fraternities (Word was that you had to pay to get into one, and most fraternity guys I saw didn't dress like they shopped at thrift stores—at least not the one I did. *I'm out*). I kept to myself that first semester and focused on work and Introduction to English.

At the end of that first semester, I received a letter from the university: I passed Introduction to English! I could not believe it. I decided to take a second class just to rule out the possibility that my passing Introduction to English was a clerical error. At the end of that second semester, I received another letter from the university. I passed again! My second college class, done! After years of working full-time and taking a few classes each semester, I received yet another letter, this one from the Registrar's Office: I actually would graduate with a Bachelor of Arts in English. I was almost twenty-seven years old.

The following years were filled with more school—a master's degree in counseling, a Ph.D. in school psychology from Texas A&M, clinical training Harvard Medical School, and a post doctorate from the Alpert Medical School at Brown University.

There's an inside joke in my profession that the real reason we entered the field was to work on our own issues. That was certainly the case for me. As I started coursework for my masters program, I was hoping to try to make some sense of my life up to that point, and I realized I needed individual counseling. The effects of trauma don't just go away, and I knew that certain memories still held a grip on my mind and my heart.

I felt psychologically raw for weeks after each session. There were days I wondered whether I was actually getting worse than better—days I didn't want to go to work, days I didn't want to go to class, days I didn't want to be around another human being, and days I felt absolutely miserable regardless of whether I took my medication. Being honest with myself and talking about my thoughts and feelings—session after painful session—was like a series of broken bones finally being reset. The process was not at all pleasant, but it was essential for my proper healing and growth.

In the end, I found truth, and it set me free: My parents' divorce? Not my fault, not my responsibility. My friends' murder? Not my fault, not my responsibility. The sexual assault? Not my fault, not my responsibility. My future—the rest of my life and what happens to me? No one else's fault, wholly my responsibility. After all I had been through, the greatest challenge was still ahead: could I be vulnerable again? Could I trust that the healing power of love was worth the risk that accompanies vulnerability?

I could write about how teachers impact their students from a variety of perspectives: sociologically, behaviorally, pedagogically, culturally, and so on. I want to focus on the teacher's role in shaping a child's identity, which might be thought of as the culminating effect of each of those perspectives.

People in my field take entire graduate courses on personality and identity development, so for the sake of brevity, let me borrow some wisdom from PBS's *Antiques Roadshow*. The show's website describes it as "part adventure, part history lesson, and part treasure hunt." The premise is simple: take your item to the appraiser and let him tell you whether you have a valuable antique or junk. My favorite vignettes are ones in which the owner thinks she has an item that is junk that, upon appraisal, is found to be of great value: "My husband uses this lamp in the basement for his workshop, but I've always wondered where it came from. We bought it at a garage sale in 1982 for five bucks." Then, the appraiser will discuss the item's distinguishing qualities and conclude with something like, "This is an excellent example of this series. If it were to come up at auction, I would estimate its value at \$60,000. You should probably get it insured for that amount, and by all means, get it out of your husband's workshop."

I love those moments because they remind me of a very simple, but fundamental human truth—one that is crucial for teachers to know and remember. In a nutshell, that truth is this: identity and perceived value impact function and behavior. If I believe my lamp is worth five bucks, I will treat it like a five-dollar lamp. If I believe it is worth \$60,000, I will insure it, protect it, and invest myself in its preservation. The same is true for people. If I believe myself to be of little value, I behave accordingly. If, however, I believe myself to be valuable—to have the ability to matter to the world around me—I live as though my choices matter. The corollary is true as well.

The feedback loop, then, is that how I perceive and understand myself play a critical role in the choices I make about my behavior. How I behave, in turn, impacts how others respond to me. How others respond to me, then, impacts how I perceive and understand myself. Over time, we tend to commit to an identity. We prefer and default to the behavioral feedback loop that offers the least cognitive dissonance—the one that aligns with and reinforces the identity with which we are most comfortable and believe to be true, regardless of how inaccurate we may be in our self-assessment.

Until I truly absorbed what Mrs. Exley and Mrs. McRoberts were communicating to me in those letters, my feedback loop reinforced my sense that I lacked value, thereby undermining my sense of purpose. I desperately needed something (or someone) to step into my chaos and clarify my value. I have no idea what Mrs. Exley or Mrs. McRoberts were doing that night as I sat in a quiet apartment, but months after their active investment in me, their words convinced me of my value. They gave me the courage to step out of years of a deeply rooted fear that I would forever be Lou, the kid who gets high and gets handcuffed, and step into who I might become if they were right about me. I needed their encouragement to hope that a different life was possible. I needed their encouragement to take the first of what became the many steps out of a false identity and into whom I have now become.

I'll finish my mini-autobiography with one final story.

Several years into my private practice, I wanted to develop a model to treat anxiety disorders that incorporates both psychological and spiritual aspects of the patient's being. I enrolled in a Doctorate of Ministry program at Graduate Theological Foundation, and for my thesis, I completed a short-term residency at the Christ Church College of Oxford University.

A highlight of my time at Oxford was the high table dinner in The Great Hall (Harry Potter fans, think Hogwarts Dining Hall). The high table dinner is a long-standing tradition at Oxford in which faculty dine with their students at a table—raised on a platform—located at the end of the dining hall. I was assigned a seat next to my instructor, Canon Vincent Strudwick, who had recently been awarded the prestigious Lambeth Degree by the Archbishop of Canterbury. While it was clear after the first hour in Canon Strudwick's class that he was fantastically brilliant, what I appreciated most about him was his meek and gentle spirit; it would be hard to be in his class and not feel loved. Still, I felt somewhat out-of-place as a psychologist in a classroom filled with seasoned clergy from around the world.

As we settled into the entrée of our four-course meal, Canon Strudwick looked at me and smiled.

“Thank you for your contribution to the class discussion, Dr. Sáenz,” he encouraged me in his high British accent. “As a psychologist, you bring us a unique perspective. It's refreshing for us theologians, and I believe it makes our shared experience in the classroom all the richer.”

In an instant, I flashed back to the meal I had shared with Mrs. Tholan thirty-five years before—a memory I had long since forgotten. I was immediately overwhelmed by a flood of emotion, and I fought the lump in my throat. “Thank you for saying so, Canon Strudwick,” I managed to respond. Then I smiled and added, “You're a great teacher.”

Why I Wrote *The Power of a Teacher*

Statistically speaking, I am an “outlier.” Outliers are bits of data that don't end up on the data grid where we think they ought to, based on how the variables we're observing have interacted in past cases. Outliers can be something of a flashing dashboard light that prompt us to wonder what happened, specifically, to make this one piece of data end up way over here, alone, when the rest of the data set is huddled way over there, nicely and predictably, where we expected it to huddle. When we pay attention to outliers, we stand to learn more about the cause-and-effect relationships among the variables we are observing.

I didn't realize it at the time, but when I shifted in that TEPSA workshop from presenting research to simply sharing my story, the session became less about the knowledge and information I could offer educators as Dr. Sáenz and more about the encouragement I could offer educators as Lou, a kid whose life was deeply impacted and whose direction was profoundly changed by teachers.

The take-away lesson for me as a psychologist and trainer was clear: while teachers may need additional knowledge and information to be effective (RtI today, who-knows-what next year), most of all teachers need hope. They need a reason to believe, or maybe they just need a reminder, that it really *is* worth their while to invest their resources—their time, their money, their energy, their relationships, their lives—not just in teaching, but in teaching well. In 2010, the global financial institution ING conducted a survey in conjunction with the National Teacher of the Year Award. They found that eighty-eight percent the 1,000 Americans age eighteen and older who were surveyed identified at least one teacher who had a significant, positive impact on their life. Ninety-eight percent believed that a good teacher can change the course of a student’s life. In fact, teachers were second only to immediate family as the group having the greatest, positive impact on the lives of those surveyed as they grew up—even ahead of close friends.

So, what began as a case study at a workshop evolved into the book you are now holding in your hands. As an outlier whose life trajectory was forever changed by teachers who cared, I wanted to write a book to encourage educators, to remind them of their power (both in the lives of the students they teach and in their own lives), and to equip them to maintain the wellness and balance in their lives that will empower them to live into the greatest potential of their calling.

What to Expect

I want you to teach from a place of wellbeing. What I’ve realized working with clients in both private practice and school settings is that when we don’t maintain wellbeing in critical areas of our lives, we—to again put it in psychobabble—“decompensate,” which refers to a breakdown in the coping systems we keep in place to make our lives function. At the point of decompensation, information and knowledge about what we should be doing to live effectively become increasingly useless; the further we slide into a state of decompensation, the more we lack the capacity to actually do what we know we should do. The vicious cycle: As we decompensate, we become less effective. As we become less effective, we become more anxious. As we become more anxious, we decompensate even further. On and on the cycle continues. The teacher caught in this cycle is at-risk for losing touch with the profound vocational calling to impact students’ lives, tragically trading it for not much more than a willingness to tolerate the job because it provides a paycheck and benefits with summers off.

How do we break the decompensation cycle? We return to—or find for the first time—a place of personal wellness.

The Power of a Teacher is a wellness guide designed to help you find balance and peak experience in your role as a teacher. After you read about the five core areas of wellbeing, you’ll take The Teacher Wellness Inventory, a fifty-item assessment designed specifically for teachers that measures wellbeing in the occupational, emotional, financial, spiritual, and physical areas of your life. The assessment reveals to what degree you are living a balanced life and identifies areas of weakness to target for growth.

Change—even change for the better—can be overwhelming. Not to worry. You’ll read about the psychological dynamics that maximize your ability to make the changes you need. The Change Organizer will guide you through a step-by-step process of prioritizing goal-setting and establishing support and accountability in the areas of your life that need attention.

In addition to the Teacher Wellness Inventory and the Change Organizer, discussion questions are included at the end of each chapter with the hope of creating dialogue and building professional community among you and your colleagues—maybe an exercise for you and your co-teacher, maybe for the teachers at your grade level, maybe for your entire campus. A quick note about the discussion questions: my experience leading group discussions tells me that most people don’t like going first when answering question like these, so I decided I would go first. After each question, I have written my responses, being as vulnerable and brutally honest as I know how to be. You get to go second, and I hope you will find the courage to be honest with yourself and your colleagues.

Finally, at the end of each of the five chapters about specific areas of wellbeing, you will read a brief story about someone whose life was changed by a teacher. These are the encouraging stories I worry teachers don’t hear enough of—stories that real lives are changed by real teachers who understand and live out their calling.

In my years of working in school systems, I have observed that when a teacher is well—not just free of obvious symptoms, but truly functioning at optimum capacity—variables like student behavior, parental involvement, teaching strategies, and test scores, while certainly relevant, will not ultimately control the quality or effectiveness of the professional experience. Those realities won’t disappear, of course, but a healthy teacher can navigate them, confident that the goal of his or her vocation—impacting students—still is well within reach.

We who have been impacted by the power of a teacher know the crucial role educators play in shaping the future. To all teachers who read this book: Be encouraged. Be enlightened. Be well.



JoElla Exley Elementary, Katy Independent School District



Polly McRoberts Elementary, Katy Independent School District