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See page 115 for information about Downloadable Resources.

Introduction

COVID-19 shook us all.

It affected our students deeply: 49% of our students began the 2022–2023 school year behind grade level in at least one academic subject. Prior to COVID-19, that number was 36%.¹ But **while COVID’s effect on students was significant, its effect on educators was even more devastating.** COVID affected us on multiple levels, draining us physically and crushing us emotionally.

Yet, COVID-19 was only one of many significant pressures educators faced and continue to face. Consider how our fraught political culture brings new challenges to educators, and how demographic shifts affect our students and budgets. In a 2022 *EduWeek* study, “60 percent of teachers said they experience job-related stress frequently or always,” and only 9 percent said they experienced such stress rarely or never. Forty-one percent said they are less effective when stressed. The study also found that **“more than a quarter of teachers said job-related stress leads them to think about quitting, and 16 percent said they dread going to work every day.”** Elsewhere in the article, Patricia Jennings, a Professor of Education at the University of Virginia and a specialist in teacher stress, states that “the demands on teachers have gotten greater...and [they have] fewer resources and fewer choices—when you combine those two, you’re basically putting teachers in a vise.”²

A *Forbes* article from the same year cites several additional factors that contribute to educator stress, such as long hours, lack of resources, lack of work-life balance, political issues, the loss of planning time due to sub shortages, lack of professional autonomy, and sometimes even the lack of time to attend to basic needs (such as using the bathroom) during the workday.³

Despite these factors, many educators got into their profession because they genuinely care about students and want to make a difference in their lives. For that reason, they don't give up. They don't stop putting energy into building and maintaining the kinds of relationships that reveal each child's potential. Our influence can still be profound. But the landscape of education continues to change. And the pressures mount. Every day becomes a new performance, act, or experience. We become the chameleons of our profession, juggling our roles as parents, doctors, counselors, actors, scientists, and lawyers all in one as we strive to adapt to constant changes and novel challenges. That struggle has left many of us feeling anxious, confused, exhausted, and, above all, burned out.

The questions become:

- How do we recover?
- How do we win?
- How do we achieve a renewed sense of purpose and drive to be the educators we signed up to be in the first place?
- How can we do that when we have 25 students who are 60% below reading level, 13 with behavior challenges, and 10 with special disabilities on our Title-1 campuses?
- How do we keep showing up while also taking care of ourselves?

As an educator myself, I've stood in your shoes. I've grappled with these questions and emotions. What I've learned, time and again, is the power of resilience in the face of challenges. I've discovered three guiding words that lie within my soul and continually re-energize me and keep me traveling along the path to success: **Passion. Purpose. Position.** These words direct me through a personal action plan that fuels my servant-leader role and helps me persist through adversity to emerge ever closer to my goals.

This book is about helping you to achieve that, too.

You can think of this book as a sort of guided retreat, and the goal is your personal and professional renewal as an educator. Unlike a physical retreat, which can take days or weeks away from a life many educators can't afford to abandon, or a formal course that only adds arduous tasks and commitments when you're already struggling to keep homework graded, this book will give you more energy than it takes. You can complete each chapter in a very short time, but don't let that brevity fool you: you can move a mountain a pebble at a time. The chapters are carefully structured and graduated to lead you—in manageable, energizing chunks—through a process that will give you the opportunity to reflect upon and rediscover those important foundations of passion, purpose, and position, and help you discern where those passions can lead you next. **By the end of the book, you will have re-articulated what it means to you to be an educator, re-ignited your most motivating passions, and gained many important tools to assist you in your position along your journey.** These chapters will guide you to become a stronger, more resilient version of yourself—and a testament to the core of why you chose this profession. Let the renewal begin.

Ashley

How to Use This Book

- Take it in chunks (15-20 mins a day). Life is busy but setting small amounts of time for this reflection/action process can have a profound cumulative effect.
- After reading each chapter and its sections, process those new ideas by answering the journal prompts. You can use the pages of this book or collect your reflections/action plans in a separate journal.
- Share what you have learned with a colleague or team who could use some support to remind them of their significance in their role!
- Grab some sticky notes to annotate important parts of the book. Revisit those stickies to motivate yourself even on the hardest days.

The following icons will help you navigate important sections throughout the book:

Put It into Practice



Put It Into Practice

Throughout the chapters, you will find interactive worksheets needed to complete the guiding prompts in the chapter. Each time you see this icon, pause to reflect, and write personal connections.

Key Takeaways



After reading the chapter, these highlighted key points summarize main ideas for you.



CHAPTER ONE

POSITIVE VS. NEGATIVE LABELS

We didn't become educators for the wealth and fame. For most of us, our choice of profession is deeply rooted in who we are, our core values, and what we want from life; it is not just a job. As we progress in the field, our jobs as educators and our identities only become more intertwined. It's no wonder, then, that when we come under fire from the stresses and changes mentioned in the introduction, those factors affect our identities. An attack on our ability to do what we do is an attack on who we are. Research supports a link between educator stress and loss of identity. For example, a 2002 study by Peter Woods and Denise Carlyle found that the stressors common to teachers caused basic aspects of identity to come under attack: "Emotional competencies, emotion regulation skills, positive emotional experiences are lost, resulting in a loss of self."⁴ One of Woods' and Carlyle's interview respondents described it this way, thinking about the impact micromanagement from his school's administration alone had on him:

[School management] took away every bit of confidence ... It wasn't just that they made me believe I was useless at teaching. I felt useless at living. If I tried to do something, I'd do it wrong, break it, make it worse, which is why I sat about doing nothing.⁵

When we experience deep stress and burnout, we experience a loss of identity. Despite such loss, Woods and Carlyle also found cause for optimism, noting that most of their study subjects were ultimately able to find renewed hope and purpose. Not surprisingly, their recoveries began with rethinking and rediscovering a core sense of identity.⁶ One of their respondents commented:

Soul searching takes an incredible amount of time. I got really involved in my own understanding. What was making me tick? What was enjoyable about teaching still? Was it worth continuing? Things I'd been taught, inherited from my mother, the work ethos ... Why am I feeling like this ... It's not my fault. I hadn't really respected myself enough.⁷

Any journey of renewal as an educator, then, must start by thinking about our identities. About who we are without the “educator” title. Knowing our identities allows us to bring our own unique traits and qualities to the table, adding value to both our own experiences and those of others. A stable sense of identity enables us to engage our empathy, resilience, creativity, and adaptability. Our self-beliefs and identity, then, are essential foundations for initiating a process of re-setting, re-charging, and rediscovering our passion, purpose, and position.

For some of us, writing down what we love about ourselves may be difficult or complex, especially if we have been criticized, mocked, or even misunderstood. Whether past trauma, echoes of naysayers, or the weight of societal expectations, these influences can cast shadows on our ability to see the lights within ourselves. But we must begin here. My hope is that this chapter will help give you a space to reflect upon and rediscover (or perhaps realize for the first time) the strengths and abilities that make up the core of who you are. Let what you generate in the following exercises be a celebration of your worthiness as an incredible human being and an acknowledgment of your unlimited potential.

Use **The Real You worksheet** to complete the following three exercises. You can also use a piece of paper or a page in your journal.



Put It Into Practice

The Real You – Positive Traits

Using **The Real You** worksheet complete Exercise One. Write your name or attach an image of yourself. Write down as many positive adjectives/traits that describe you that people may or may not know about you.

Examples:

- Loves to draw
- Loves to teach
- Talented singer

THE REAL YOU

EXERCISE ONE

Write something in the "Cut" column, attach an image of yourself! Attach about six to ten positive core identity adjectives/traits that describe you. These are the qualities you bring about yourself that successful leaders often possess. Make it honest to you.

Your Positive Core Identity Traits

EXERCISE TWO & THREE

Write words of the descriptive and positive labels that you have been given (label yourself)

Negative Labels

Positive Labels

I hope that first exercise created an opportunity for you to reflect honestly on your core identity. That's the first step. The next piece is to differentiate those inherent characteristics from labels, which are qualities or characteristics ascribed to us by others, or even that we give ourselves. Labels are more of what others see or think about us based on our interactions. Sometimes labels appear to match "The Real You," but they don't always. We all carry labels, stereotypes, and first impressions imposed by others or by ourselves. In a previous school counseling lesson I implemented in a program called The WhyTry Program LLC, I challenge students to answer many questions about themselves, especially about aspects of themselves that others may not know or see. I believe we need to reflect on similar questions as adults. Do your colleagues know the real you? How do you see yourself set apart from the titles/roles you hold? Are there things about you that you wish others knew?

In the following two exercises, you will reflect on the positive and negative labels that you have called yourself or that others have given you. We will start with the negative labels first.



Put It Into Practice

The Real You – Negative Labels

Using **The Real You worksheet** mentioned above, complete Exercise Two. Consider your experiences with how others see you in your professional role. Think about your role, the tasks you do, and the interactions you have had in your school community. What are some negative labels that you have been given or called yourself?

As you wrote those negative labels, you may have recalled situations or moments in which these labels were deeply hurtful, and you felt misunderstood or targeted. **Negative labels often stunt our growth and corrode our minds, preventing us from seeing the light in any situation, even in ourselves.** We can start believing those labels are justifiable, especially when the professional environment and culture around us continually prevent us from doing what we know would be our best work. As the study mentioned above suggests, we can even reach our breaking points when we are forced to engage in activities or interactions that collide with our sense of identity. When I have reached high stress levels, I have engaged in actions where others labeled me as “lazy” or as having an “attitude problem.” By becoming more conscious of my core identity and the difference between that identity and the labels imposed upon me from outside, I became able to recognize that they did not reflect my true self.



Reflection Questions

- Are any of the negative labels true? If they are true, do you want to change them?
- Are any of these labels holding you back from being your best version of yourself for your peers, students, staff, or school community?

YESTERDAY IS HISTORY.
TOMORROW IS A MYSTERY.
TODAY IS A GIFT,
AND THAT IS WHY IT IS CALLED
“THE PRESENT.”

This proverb is a powerful reminder that while the past may have been written—including those negative and inaccurate labels applied to us—we can still make the present our own. When we allow those past labels to “stick,” they can impede our progress toward our goals. We then learn to live in the history of past hurts without focusing on the gift of the present, in which we have the control to create something new.

Negative labels do not dictate or define our present or our future. Often, writing down those labels and reflecting on them allows us to identify them as unproductive or just plain wrong. By objectifying them, we can recognize that there’s no reason to hang on to them and that we have the power to change them.

Remember, the present is a gift. It offers us the opportunity to **redefine ourselves and let go of the burdens of the past.** By embracing the present, we can move beyond negative labels and realize our full potential.

For example, here are some negative labels that others have applied to me:

- I’m too loud and full of energy.
- I act like a know-it-all when it comes to student success.
- I do too much for the kids when they just need to do it on their own.
- I care too much about my job.

I've learned to pay close and critical attention to such labels. In doing so, I gain control over them: I can *decide* which labels really apply, which ones are unproductive, and which ones do and don't affirm that the "real me" that others cannot always recognize. Instead of simply accepting negative labels and allowing them to hamper my progress, I determine what positive labels I desire, and find ways to show people more of "The Real Me" through deliberate action. Recognizing negative labels for what they are—misguided judgments that do not define your worth or capabilities—is crucial. Combating these negative labels requires you to objectively evaluate their validity. Challenge their accuracy and replace them with positive affirmations about your strengths and achievements. Surround yourself with supportive people who see your true potential and remind you of your worth. Remember, **you have the power to rewrite your story**; the labels from the past are just part of history. Focus on the present moment, embrace your unique qualities, and set goals that align with your true self. By actively choosing to reject negative labels and affirm your positive attributes, you can create a future unburdened by the misconceptions of the past.

Try this: go back and review the positive traits you have listed for "The Real You." Consider deeply the truths you expressed about yourself and feel free to add more. I hope the traits you listed earlier put a smile on your face and make you eager to add to the list of qualities/attributes that make you positively "you." Simply noticing yourself as you list your own positive traits is important: that very activity increases your endorphins and helps boost your confidence over time.

Keeping this in mind, let's move to reflecting on and writing down positive labels that others have given or that we would *like* to give ourselves. The term "labels" is important here: while **positive *traits* refer to the qualities and characteristics that we use to describe ourselves, positive *labels* are more action-oriented and are often associated with behaviors, actions,**

or roles we exhibit or aspire to. Thinking about this difference can help us align our positive *traits* (which are internal to us, and that others might not always see) with the positive external *perceptions* of what others think, see, and feel, so that the labels they apply begin to line up more and more with who we really are. Thinking about these labels in this way helps us to focus on how we engage with the world, interact with others, and contribute to our communities.

Here's the next step: refer back to the "The Real You" worksheet and get carried away writing as many *positive* labels that you can think about yourself regardless of your professional role.



Put It Into Practice

The Real You – Positive Labels

Using **The Real You worksheet** complete Exercise Three. What are some *positive* labels you have applied to yourself or that others have applied to you? How do others perceive you based on your actions and behavior?

Examples can include:

- I always help others when they feel sad.
- I can think of creative solutions to complex problems.
- I show up on time for important events.

As you reflect on these traits, think of them as great reminders of your true identity, what you are called to be, and what you bring to others around you. By identifying more of the positive labels, you set yourself up to dig into your passion, purpose, and position in your educator role. In the following chapters, you'll

continue to reference these positive labels as they pertain to your specific professional role.



**KEY
TAKEAWAYS**

- **Know Your True Self:** It's essential to know who you are beyond the titles and roles you hold. Understanding your true identity helps you stay grounded and authentic.
- **Reflect on Labels:** Take time to reflect on the labels, both positive and negative, that you have given yourself or received from others. Acknowledging these labels allows you to assess their impact on your growth and self-perception.
- **Combat Negative Labels:** Negative labels can hold you back from reaching your full potential. By recognizing these labels and questioning their validity, you can take steps to change them and move forward in your personal and professional life.
- **Embrace Positive Labels:** Celebrate the positive traits and labels associated with yourself. These affirmations serve as reminders of your strengths and unique qualities, boosting confidence and motivation.
- **Create a Positive Narrative for Yourself:** By understanding, reflecting on, and reshaping labels, you can cultivate a stronger sense of self and create a more positive and empowering narrative for yourself.