

Chapter 1

The Challenge Before You

ONE OF THE GREAT “TEACHING” FILMS is *Stand and Deliver*.

It’s a typical education story. An optimistic math teacher, Jaime Escalante, starts his career at a difficult urban school. Many of the students are associated with gangs and criminal activity. Few of them care about school, much less about mathematics.

Yet in the course of the movie’s two-hour runtime, Escalante successfully wins the students over and teaches them college-level calculus, proving all the doubters wrong.

Sounds great, right?

Except the truth isn’t quite so rosy.

In reality, it took Escalante eight years to build his math program to the point where he could get his students to pass the AP Calculus exam, versus the two-year timeline shown in the film.

Additionally, he and his principal labored for years to develop feeder programs in the eighth and ninth grade that equipped students with essential prerequisite skills, like algebra, geometry, and statistics.

Did Escalante still meet the film’s core premise?

Sure.

Did he do it in a dramatic, Hollywood-fashion?

Not exactly.

As you’ll discover in your own career, the truth about teaching is much messier and nuanced than any motion picture can reveal.

First of all, there are the students. Most of your kids will be perfectly fine, even fantastic; but a small percentage will make it their mission to entertain their peers, thus disrupting your carefully designed lessons.

Then there is the ever-changing landscape of education itself. The field is always reacting to a broad range of factors such as discoveries in best practices,

developments in child psychology, and changes in district or state leadership.

These challenges may seem like the most difficult obstacles you will face in building a joyful teaching career, but what I've found is much different.

The hardest thing about teaching won't be managing the students or the climate; it will be managing yourself.

I didn't know this when I began my teaching career. I was focused on all the external challenges, and it nearly broke me.

When I began teaching, I nearly quit from the frustration. It wasn't for lack of effort: I spent hours preparing for each day in the classroom. I developed clear expectations and classroom rules, posting them and holding discussions with students about their importance. I tried to squash disruptions and redirect off-task behaviors, following the common wisdom of pedagogy. I read all the books that others recommended. I experimented with every technique.

Yet every day I went home exhausted, angry, and defeated.

Some days, teaching will not feel like the dream job you thought it was.

Despite my concentrated professionalism, some of my students continued to make teaching a living nightmare. They interrupted my lessons by talking, getting up, passing notes, throwing pencils and paper wads, making inappropriate jokes.... The list goes on and on of things that made my head throb in stressful pain day after day.

Worse, each class had its own small set of troublemakers. I had never met young people so committed to making life awful for someone else. They were leeches for attention, seemingly unable to draw a breath without swirling around and tapping, whispering, touching, giggling, grabbing, belching, swearing, lurching, and other performing other bodily functions.

They never waited for an ideal moment to do it, either. Instead, they seemed to know *exactly* when I was most vulnerable. They could sense the point in my instruction when I reached a point of great importance, the key detail or takeaway that would make or break the success of the lesson.

That is when they would strike.

I did what you'd probably do: Correct them. Redirect. Try to be polite.

Derek, please raise your hand so you don't interrupt!

Cassandra, please respect your shoulder partner's personal space.

Jamie, could you remember to excuse yourself quietly?

The harder I tried to put out fires, the more they spread with apocalyptic abandon.

Within a few months of starting, I was desperate. I asked my colleagues and administrators, and they gave me some books. I read them all cover-to-cover and tried implementing the suggested changes to my approach.

Nothing worked.

As Christmas approached during my first year of teaching, I could barely summon the strength to lift my head each morning as I trudged across the parking lot toward my classroom. I wasn't cut out for this. I was doing everything "right."

Wasn't I?

I decided the problem wasn't the kids.

It was me.

But I didn't realize this in a positive sense, the sense we're going to explore in this book. I took a pessimistic, critical perspective. I believed that some people—*other* people—possessed a gift for successful classroom management. Somehow I had missed out on this mysterious skill during my own education and teacher preparation process.

My peers seemed to be thriving, but I could barely get the teenagers to stay seated and quiet for an entire class period.

Somehow, guys like Jaime Escalante had figured out how to take large groups of rowdy kids and get them to master calculus.

I felt like a failure. Whatever lofty ideals had led me to this profession were clearly gone now.

What was I supposed to do? Was there some magic book I could read, or training I could attend, that would make me talented at the hardest parts of teaching?

Or was I doomed to hate my career for the rest of my days?

The Problem With Teacher Prep Programs

TO BECOME A TEACHER, you spend a lot of time, energy, and likely money. You sat for a handful of intense courses on child development, psychology, learning theory, and the various sciences of pedagogy. You participated in internships, shadowing master teachers and trying to do the job yourself in a

limited capacity.

All of these experiences are not only important, but critical to a successful career in education.

But they fail to prepare you for the greatest challenge in teaching, and this is why so many teachers get burned out and quit.

I'm not saying these teacher preparatory programs are completely broken; I'm saying they don't place the proper emphasis on the most critical component of a successful approach to teaching.

You'll learn all there is to know about Piaget, Vygotsky, Ericsson, and Maslow. You'll memorize every buzzword there is to learn about instructional methods, cooperative learning, writing, thinking, questioning, and so on. Shoulder partner. Think-pair-share. Mnemonic devices for argumentative paragraphs.

You'll become a walking, talking library of educational trivia.

But this still doesn't prepare you for the *real* challenge of the classroom: Delivering all this content to the students consistently and sustainably over decades.

I'm not talking about lesson design, either. I've met dozens of great lesson designers who were terrible teachers—or, put another way, they were terrible at successfully delivering the lessons in a way that worked for them and the students.

I had a colleague who liked to say, "Teaching would be great if it wasn't for the students!"

Whatever your opinion on such a statement might be, it reveals a hidden belief: That teaching is about designing beautiful lessons and activities, *not* figuring out how to connect content to the kids in meaningful ways.

It also belies the fact that this teacher was frustrated with inappropriate responses from her students that made the learning environment chaotic. Between her careful lesson design, and whatever TED Talks she'd been giving them, the needle wasn't moving.

That means there's a good chance *she was getting burned out*.

This is the problem with most teacher prep programs: They create lesson planners and motivational speakers, not teachers.

Every year, tens of thousands of brilliant, passionate, and highly motivated professional lesson planner-speakers enter the education workforce. They believe in their hearts that they care about kids and want to make a difference, and they're ready to get in the trenches and do the hard work.

But within four years, nearly 20% of them will be planning their exit strategy.

Almost half will state that the pressure of motivating students is making them feel burnt out. 27% will claim that the social and emotional needs of students are wearing them down, grinding away their ability to do the job for much longer.

I'm not saying great lessons aren't important; I'm saying that great lessons don't have the impact we think they do.

I also don't intend to say that you shouldn't try to motivate students or give them a short pep talk from time to time.

But I truly believe that films like *Stand and Deliver*, motivational speeches in films and television, and our own heroic fantasies lead us to spend 99% of our energy trying to transform our students' lives via lecture.

As we will see, this rarely works. Maybe it worked for *you* in your youth, but it almost never works for classrooms of 25–30 teenagers.

I don't say this to be a cynic or "realist." I say it because I've discovered what actually works, and I want to save you tremendous amounts of sweat and tears.

So if becoming a master of pedagogy isn't the answer, and wowing the kids with compelling speeches isn't either, then what is?

Why Teaching is Hard

EVERYONE KNOWS TEACHING IS HARD.

But I want to press into this and ask, *Why*? Why is teaching so hard?

There isn't one "obvious" answer.

Some will say the kids. Some will lament "broken" households, social media use, or the breakdown of societal morals. Others will blame public education and something about it they find troublesome.

All of these answers may be true, depending on your state, school, and group of students.

But it can't be true for everyone. In other words, none of these things explain why teaching will be hard *for you*.

Teaching isn't hard because of some great external factor.

Teaching is hard because it forces you to reckon with the gaps in your self-control.

Every judgment call requires discernment.

Every interaction requires kindness and wisdom.

Every interruption requires patience and grace.

Every sudden change—and there will be many—requires quick-thinking.

cleverness, and a dash of humility.

Teaching isn't about the lessons or the speeches.

Teaching is about flowing with the volatile humanity all around you.

Lessons help. Rhetoric can, too.

But nothing will empower you for success as a teacher more than a rock-solid personal constitution.

Going forward, we'll call this constitution your Unshakeable Presence.

The Unshakeable Presence

NOTHING IN TEACHING matters nearly as much as maintaining an Unshakeable Presence. A teacher with a nervous, erratic, suspicious, unfriendly, and defensive Presence is not just shakeable; they're unpredictable, erratic, a time bomb.

But teachers with calm, consistent, compassionate, and confident Presence are ready for anything. They weather storms and ride waves of energy from their students like professional surfers. They never overreact but always remind students that they are there, listening and watching, keeping things going.

What is an "Unshakeable" Presence, then? We'll dig into its four main components soon—Confidence, Objectivity, Relationship-Focus, and Equanimity—but for now, think of it as **your ability to calmly, fairly, and professionally handle any situation *without* sacrificing your connection with students.**

Students instinctively want to know whether you are a safe, unshakeable teacher, or an unsafe, unpredictable teacher.

In the classroom of an unshakeable teacher, students feel a clear sense of peace and comfort. They feel free to "be themselves" and take creative and intellectual risks. They feel known and accepted and respond to redirection generally well.

Yet in the classroom of a chaotic or unpredictable teacher, that sense of safety evaporates and is replaced with a heavy fog of uncertainty and tension. They're not sure what they're going to get, so they tend to adopt a "fight or flight" mentality. Either they're playing it safe—and avoiding any healthy risk-taking—or they're preparing for the impending confrontation that everyone "knows" is coming.

This dichotomy is the most important element of teaching. Period, full stop.

Either you will be unshakeable, and therefore the kind of teacher with whom

students thrive, or you will be an unpredictable source of uncertainty and tension.

This alone determines not only your success and happiness as a teacher, but whether or not most students will thrive in your classroom. It alone decides how most of your days will go. It sets you on a course toward joy, or a descent into burnout.

If you want to have a great career in education, then this is the first and most important priority: Establishing your Unshakeable Presence.

Why We Need a Book About This

This concept may seem obvious. You may be wondering, *Do we really need a book about this?*

As we've seen, most teacher preparation programs don't talk about this. If they do, they do so in brief, passing moments. Students are expected to assemble their philosophy of Presence piecemeal, grabbing bits from one professor and another, from one experience or textbook and another, in the midst of focused pedagogical study.

This book is exclusively about how one builds, establishes, and maintains their Unshakeable Presence.

It is not about methodology, theory, or best practices in pedagogy. My assumption is you have read and will read plenty about this in your training and professional development.

This book is also not about many of the other issues in the world of education: Standardized testing; disciplinary procedures; response to intervention; English for speakers of other languages; Special Education; college admissions; and so on.

It is about the #1 thing that will determine not only your success, but your joy, as a teacher: An Unshakeable Presence.

To my knowledge there is no other book that teaches this. No other book, course, podcast, video series, or training program teaches what this book teaches. That is why I believe it isn't just important but *absolutely necessary* that I share this with you.

Because too many teachers are quitting.

They're leaving schools or the profession (about 20% per year, nationwide), and they're quietly quitting by staying in the field but giving up on making a difference in it. They're giving up on their passion and the hope that the work

can, and should, be joyful.

Teachers matter; *you* matter.

And if you want to be a part of a thriving generation of educators that are equipped for the challenges ahead, you need to be provided with strategies that are proven to work. Not platitudes from the 1980s and 90s that worked for *our* forebears. Not tactics that kept students motivated before the age of smartphones and TikTok. Not theoretical concepts from “experts” who haven’t taught a real class of teenagers in decades—or actually taught at all.

What we need is an approach that can flex while remaining steadfast. We need a methodology of pedagogy that acknowledges the difficult realities of teaching in the mid-Twenty First Century, while simultaneously raising the standard and demanding more from our students because *they can do it*.

Clearly what has come before isn’t working as well as we’d hoped.

My goal with this book is to change that.

How to Thrive and Not Just Survive

MY GOAL WITH THIS BOOK is simple: To empower you with the framework, strategies, and coping mechanisms to thrive in the world of education.

Whether you’re a brand-new teacher straight out of college, a substitute working your way toward a fulltime position, or a seasoned professional stepping in to help however you can, I want you to thrive, not just survive while treading proverbial water. Too many teachers are burning out as they try to make it to summer or Christmas break. Some are polishing their resumes and hoping their education skills are transferable enough to get a good job in a different field.

This breaks my heart.

There’s nothing wrong with leaving teaching *if that’s the best path for you*.

But if you’re unsure—if you feel that God or the universe has gifted you with a unique set of skills that benefit young people—I beg you to trust me and dig deeper into this book.

The world needs great teachers like you. Kids need great role models, adults who show equanimity, kindness, courage, and compassion.

These kids need an adult like you in their lives.

But for that to happen, you must be properly equipped and fortified. You need proven, time-tested strategies that will keep you going when times are harder than ever.

That's exactly what you're about to discover in the coming chapters.

None of this is suggested in a vacuum. Nothing I have to say comes from the comfort of an administrator's office where I'm shielded from the daily difficulties of interacting with children. I'm literally writing these words after a full day in the classroom with real students in a real public school. I've been in the trenches for nearly 30 years, and I've spent every one of them in teaching roles, face-to-face with students.

I want you to believe in the power of great teachers and who build an Unshakeable Presence. I want you to believe in your own unique gifts that empower you to be a tremendous force for the good of young people.

And I want you to believe in your ability to learn and grow in areas where you are currently not as strong; this is crucial because no one maintains a perfect, Unshakeable Presence every day of every year.

Everything I'm about to share can be learned and practiced. Every principle and strategy and tactic is usable by anyone and everyone. This is not, like I feared, a mysterious skill or gift that some are born with and others are not.

Trust me: It will be the difference between surviving and thriving. Between success and failure.

Between loving your career and hating it.

Key Takeaways

- The Hollywood version of teaching gives a false impression of how quickly a teacher can get results or make an impact. Escalante needed eight years and a feeder program, not one inspiring semester.
- Teacher preparation builds lesson planners and motivational speakers, but it rarely (or sometimes never) addresses the one thing that decides whether you last: How you establish your Unshakeable Presence.
- The hardest thing about teaching will not be managing the students or the climate. It will be managing yourself.
- Teaching is hard because it forces you to reckon with the gaps in your own self-control. Every judgment call, interruption, and sudden change asks something of your character before it asks anything of your pedagogy.
- The single variable that determines your success, your joy, and whether your students thrive is your Unshakeable Presence. You are either a steady, safe adult, or you are an unpredictable source of tension. There is no third option.

Practice Winning By: Naming the Real Problem

Think back to your worst day in a classroom. Write down what happened in three parts: the event, your reaction, and the outcome. Be honest about the middle one. Most teachers describe the event in detail, describe the outcome in detail, and skip past their own reaction as if it were inevitable. It was not.

Circle your reaction and ask a single question: *If I had responded differently, would the outcome have changed?*

Think deeply about the answer. The gap between the event and the outcome is the only territory you actually control, and it is what the rest of this book is about.