

Peter Radford

Love Teaching

The Essential Guide to Improving
Wellbeing at All Levels in Schools

Teaching
Keep

Praise for *Love Teaching, Keep Teaching*

In *Love Teaching, Keep Teaching* Peter Radford offers an insightful pathway towards a school experience that is productive for youngsters as well as for those who teach them. The book is at times intensely personal, and it is well referenced and informed by a strong basis in psychology coupled with learning and leadership theory. The reflections at the end of each section encourage a positive questioning attitude to the way schools are at present and how they could be better.

A must-read for anyone who wants to delve into what makes teaching and learning tick.

**Mick Waters, Professor of Education,
University of Wolverhampton**

Love Teaching, Keep Teaching is an important book. All too often, teachers enter the profession and are swallowed up by unrealistic expectations – whether this is to do with our own mindset, that of leadership, or the education system itself. This honest and heartfelt account seeks to challenge the relentless cult of ‘outstanding’ and rallies against an identikit model of teaching that seems to be increasingly prevalent in some of the darker corners of education. Celebrating the art of teaching and leadership, Peter Radford draws on research and his undoubted experience to give a clear insight into how to develop a school culture that values human flourishing. His book offers a timely reminder for us all of the need to refocus on the things that matter the most.

Jonathan Lear, teacher, speaker and author of *The Monkey-Proof Box: Curriculum Design for Building Knowledge, Developing Creative Thinking and Promoting Independence*

I think most of us in the teaching profession would be able to identify the myriad of problems present in the day-to-day realities of working in a school. What Peter Radford does in *Love Teaching, Keep Teaching* is provide excellent, well-researched and practical ways of dealing with them and in potentially transformative ways. He empowers the classroom teacher and reminds even the most experienced school leader how to make the most of their staff.

Peter believes that good schools start with the foundations of teamwork and valuing every individual, staff member and pupil – and he emphasises that good exam results are an indirect outcome of putting people first and valuing who they really are. He examines the power of ‘starting with the end in mind’ in our schools. If we want our pupils to go on to help the world to flourish then we’d better sit up and listen!

With the demands of teaching in schools seemingly going up and up, Peter Radford describes the difference that a genuine focus on staff wellbeing can have, and in terms that all teachers and line managers can understand. It is refreshing to read educational views and proposals for positive change from someone who has genuinely experienced life in the teaching profession first-hand. Peter carries us honestly through his own tough experiences of life in the school setting and offers convincing, empathetic and practical suggestions on how to move schools into the future.

I strongly recommend this book to any member of the teaching profession, whatever their role or level of experience. Honest, grounded and truly inspiring, it offers something for every teacher!

**Martin Ashton, Deputy Head Teacher (Pastoral),
Wells Cathedral School**

This book beautifully refocuses your attention to what really matters in teaching and realigns our minds as to why we went into the profession. Amid the day-to-day running of schools and keeping our sights on the forever moving goalposts, it is so easy to forget what is most important and what our own values are. Peter’s brave reflections on his own experiences have enabled him to understand what so many teachers and leaders are going through and to blend this experience with the works of renowned authors and academics into one easy-to-read book. *Love Teaching, Keep Teaching* combines research, strategies and excellent reflective questions to challenge your own thinking and the status quo. I wish I had this book years ago as it would have helped me to better understand why I do the things I do!

Krissi Carter, Principal, Burton Borough School

Love Teaching, Keep Teaching is the book I should have read 20 years ago! In many ways it is three books in one, covering the prevalent themes of the day: teacher wellbeing, school leadership and the future of the education system. It is philosophical and reflective but also eminently practical with plenty of prompts for further action and helpful diagrams to illustrate and summarise key ideas. The book stands upon an impressive evidence base, both educational and non-educational, and you will want a sharp pencil and a highlighter to hand in order to annotate and page-mark for future reference. However, the most powerful sections are the ones in which Peter refers to his own experiences with a fair degree of candour and courage.

Mike Foley, Head Teacher, The Thomas Hardy School

Love Teaching, Keep Teaching is both a moving personal story and an expert's user's manual on how to survive being a teacher. Peter tells his tale of the challenges faced by teachers every day, but never once falters from championing this great profession. He stresses the need for authenticity, being true to your values and having the courage to control your own destiny. This is a book about accepting your mistakes and yourself.

Reading *Love Teaching, Keep Teaching* will give you the confidence to either teach well where you are or to leave and find another profession – either way your own self-care is vital, and this book will help you reflect and act with integrity.

David Whitaker, Director of Learning, Wellspring Academy Trust

Peter Radford tells it as it is. With disarming honesty, he leads us into *Love Teaching, Keep Teaching* by informing the reader that he has quit the profession and by explaining exactly why. He does not spare himself and you soon realise that his own experiences have moulded the structure of the book. It starts with self-reflection and self-care, moves into a critical analysis of school leadership and finishes by taking a global perspective on what the education system needs to address in order to stay relevant.

This is a bold proposition – and it works. The blend of personal experiences, positive and negative, is narrated with skill. The book is brought

alive by drawing on sources way beyond conventional teacher education books, ranging from *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* through to *That Will Never Work: The Birth of Netflix and the Amazing Life of an Idea*.

Love Teaching, Keep Teaching could not be more timely. The need for self-care is greater than ever as those in the classroom wrestle with adjusting to new ways of teaching that are counterintuitive and laden with uncertainty. This extends way beyond work into teachers' social and family lives, too – which also contributes to rising stress levels. All those working in schools right now are searching for professional and emotional lifelines, as they aren't being provided elsewhere.

The book has been written in an accessible style that will appeal to teachers and school leaders alike. It is invitational rather than didactic and lends itself to being read in an armchair because it is talking to you. Furthermore, the exercises – which serve as vital barometers to check our own wellbeing – can be undertaken privately and reflectively. Yet the learning takes us right back to what's happening in school and how positive cultures can be nurtured successfully.

This is a refreshing change from the canon of teaching manuals anchored in current English government policy with its reductionist focus on a knowledge-rich curriculum and behaviour regimes that render students as passive vessels to be filled. Here is a book that will take you above the fray and empower those working in schools.

**Colin Diamond, CBE, Professor of Educational Leadership,
University of Birmingham**

This is an absolute must-read for anyone in teaching, or considering a teaching career. Peter Radford is an inspiring leader who practises what he preaches, and in *Love Teaching, Keep Teaching* he neatly distils how to deliver inspiration in the classroom and beyond. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

**Will Collinson, Assistant Head Teacher (Pastoral),
King Edward VI School**

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Introduction:

The Problem and How We Can Fix It

Teaching is the best job in the world. I have no doubt about it. To have the privilege of each day walking into a room and being able to shape and mould the minds and lives of young people is priceless. No matter the topic or the age group, no child leaves your classroom the same person as when they entered.

Philosophers have often posed the question, 'Is it possible to step into the same river twice?' since the water is continuously flowing onwards. Change is the only constant, and in much of life that change happens irrespective of our contribution. But in teaching the change *is* our contribution, and it is permanent. As Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr observed, 'When a man's mind is stretched by a new idea ... [it] never shrinks back to its former dimensions.'¹ The transformation of the individual is irreversible. As teachers, we hold within our hands the future of the human race and the future of the planet. What job could possibly be more significant?

It is not only young people's minds that we shape through imparting knowledge and skills; we shape their personhood too. Our interactions with them, the teacher–learner relationship and the genuine friendship that develops in a positive classroom environment, have just as much, perhaps more, potency to impact the frame of mind, the outlook, the worldview and the attitude of an individual. We enable children to see the world differently.

A thank you card from one of my students said this:

Every single lesson you taught was impressive: you made me think and I started to force the people around me to think as well ... You made me realise the importance of changing the regular mindset people share ... It took me some courage to

1 O. W. Holmes Sr, The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table, *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 2 (1858): 502.

share my views on gender inequality with my parents. I hope you inspire and influence many others as well.

This is an amazing privilege. We are able to instil such intangibles as self-belief, confidence, openness, positivity, respect, wonder and insight. Young people can emerge from our classrooms and schools with the seeds of new possibilities firmly planted and nurtured. The imagination to do things differently, to mend that which is broken, to challenge the known boundaries of possibility.

Furthermore, teachers are the nurturers and overseers of a community. A school is an environment where children can feel like they belong. It is the first real place where they learn how to form and sustain meaningful relationships; how to navigate the minefield of people's differences and quirks; how to relate effectively so as to thrive socially and emotionally. Many of the children in our care will face their first friendship breakdowns at school, many will venture into the arena of love and suffer hurt and heartbreak, and many will experience bullying and be exposed to diversity and conflicting views. They will come face to face with difficulty, failure, competition and the consequences of inequality in our world.

All this they navigate while in our care. And as teachers we help them to navigate it, we are there for them when things get tough, we show them how to live. We get to shape the future. Now. In real time. Every single day we make an impact. A tangible, definite impact. Why would anyone want a different job?

Yet recent statistics tell us that teachers are leaving the profession in unprecedented numbers. Reportedly 20% plan to leave in the next two years and 40% in the next five.² Schools are haemorrhaging the lifeblood of education. And these figures are not simply descriptive of education-weary teachers entering the twilight of their careers. It was recently reported that in the London area, 43% of teachers leave the profession within five years of qualifying.³ Something somewhere has gone very

2 S. Weale, Fifth of Teachers Plan to Leave Profession within Two Years, *The Guardian* (16 April 2019). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/apr/16/fifth-of-teachers-plan-to-leave-profession-within-two-years>.

3 S. Weale, Teacher Crisis Hits London As Nearly Half Quit within Five Years, *The Guardian* (4 October 2018). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/oct/04/teacher-crisis-hits-london-as-nearly-half-quit-within-five-years>.

wrong: in such an intrinsically motivating line of work, we somehow manage to murder a new teacher's passion and enthusiasm within five short years. With all that teaching has going for it, this indicates some major issues.

What has gone wrong and how to fix it is the subject of this book.

Why do I care? Because I am one of those statistics. I left, and I didn't leave because I don't enjoy teaching. I left because I had a breakdown. I came fully to the end of myself and knew that I had to get out to save my own sanity, my health and that of my family. Since then, I have reflected long and hard about what led me to that point. There were three main causal factors, which will shape the three parts of this book.

The first factor was me. I take full responsibility for my own degeneration. There is no point blaming others. It is futile and disempowering. You can't change others, you can only change yourself. If we are going to move forward, this has to be the starting point. I can change me. I fully believe in the ability of any human person to change. Responsibility means just that: I have the ability to choose my response. It was my mindset and the way I thought – my conditioning and my lack of awareness of just how negative these were in some respects – that played a big part in why I unravelled. In Part I, I will explore just that: our very common inability to effectively manage ourselves, whether due to a lack of self-awareness or of the positive coping and life skills that make for a balanced, healthy and fulfilled existence.

The second factor was the often dysfunctional and counterproductive leadership styles and structures to which I was exposed and of which I was a part. In my experience, leadership across the profession is shooting itself in the foot on a daily basis. Regrettably, little to no leadership training and development is given to leaders in the teaching profession. We promote someone to be head of maths because they are a good, competent and ambitious maths teacher, not because they are capable leaders and managers of people. We take individuals from the classroom where they are confident practitioners and place them in leadership and management positions, making them responsible for the wellbeing, progress and productivity of colleagues, and give them not one hour of training on how to do this.

The approach prevalent in many schools has somehow managed to eradicate the 'people element' from the role of a leader – for example, we refer to leadership positions as 'subject leader' or 'head of subject', as if leadership were essentially just an admin role. A head of English is not merely leading English as a subject; he or she is leading a team of English *teachers*. Here again we have the power to change things. The leaders in the profession are *us*, not just the senior leadership team (SLT). Looking back, I realise that I had a choice on a daily basis about what kind of leader I would be. I am ashamed to say that I was often the wrong kind. I put the task above the person over and over again. I communicated my agenda before listening to others, and I controlled and did myself what I should have been enabling and empowering others to do. I will address leadership, both in and out of the classroom, in Part II.

The third factor is the education system we have inherited but which we also perpetuate. This is the area in which we have a tendency to blame others the most. Education in Britain has become so politicised that changes are introduced at an astounding rate, which in itself generates anxiety. However, these changes are often counterproductive, short-sighted and motivated by short-term, synthetic improvements that will generate good headlines for re-election. They are not changes championed by the people on the ground who are doing the work. And rarely are they changes that are evidently in the best interests of all (or arguably even some) students.

We have a top-down education system: SLT receive their orders, who pass them down to middle leaders, who in turn pass them down to classroom teachers. I have often heard the following justification in a staff or department briefing, 'Sorry, but this is what we have to do now.' A resigned acceptance that unwelcome directives will keep on coming and our role is simply to shovel them. It is easy to shoot at whichever messenger delivers the news, but it is also futile. The profession has become utterly passive and reactive instead of proactive and innovative. Without realising it we find ourselves waiting for the next directive, ready to moan the hell out of it at the first opportunity. Then we retreat to our classrooms, our comfort zone, a little more anxious and troubled, and just teach the next lesson, hoping that at the first data collection point the student progress looks okay.

But this too is within our power to change, and that is regardless of which party is in government. Bad ideas coming from on high has always been the state of the world. To wish otherwise is to waste precious time and collude in your own demise, just as simply wishing that the ship you're on isn't sinking achieves nothing to prevent it from doing so. Our task is to find a way to grow something good out of it! Famously, Dale Carnegie wrote, 'If you have a lemon, make a lemonade.'⁴ The systems, policies and procedures in our schools do not have to reflect the broken systems of government, or of the past, or of the school down the road. We do have at least *some* autonomy. There are a myriad of ways to go about doing education, which can tick the right boxes for inspection but are not limited by those boxes. Those boxes are not the aim or the purpose – they are just safeguards. Let's look at it differently: no architect considers the building regulations first and then aims to devise a structure which perfectly ticks each box. No, first she imagines and decides what it is she wants to create, then she finds a way to make it acceptable. The building regulations are not the point. We need to start dreaming all over again.

When it went wrong for me

In September 2016, I was sitting in my office staring at my inbox with my handwritten to-do list at my side, frantically trying to bash out replies to ten emails in the two minutes since the bell had gone for next lesson, which I was due to be teaching in a classroom on the other side of the school campus. As I typed, I crossed off those jobs on my to-do list while also adding new jobs which were emerging from the emails I was reading and responding to. I had just worked through my lunch break at a crazy pace to clear some of the backlog, so I was disheartened as I ran to my lesson that my list was now longer than it was at the start of lunchtime.

Back in my office later that day, I gazed at the computer screen and paused, just for a moment. I was overwhelmed by the feeling that no matter what I did to shift the work, it kept on growing. I felt as if I was

⁴ D. Carnegie, *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1948), p. 138.

drowning in quicksand: the more I thrashed and tried to help myself, the further in I sank. There were multiple plates spinning in my head, many starting to wobble, some already falling, but still more being added and spun. I remember foreseeing a moment of complete disablement and implosion, when this sense of being overwhelmed would be so great that I wouldn't be able to do anything at all. It scared me.

I had seen films and known former friends and colleagues who had suffered breakdowns, some to the extent of never being able to work again. Previously, I had never understood those stories or shown much empathy. The disability seemed so invisible as to be unreal to me. I didn't judge but I didn't relate. Until that day. On that day, I both saw it and felt it: a point not very far ahead when everything would come crashing down. That was the moment I sat up and took notice.

Around the same time I had two very vivid dreams. In one I was playing a classic game of musical chairs (always loved that game!). I was engaging with competitive zeal, as always. As the chairs were removed the organisers spaced out the remaining ones to make the challenge harder. In my dream, the game developed into a race. The pace was frantic. But each time I ran to circle a chair, it was moved. I would run to where the next chair was, but it too would be moved and obstacles placed in my way. I awoke panicking. I could not get to the chair.

My second dream was more sinister. A laughing face right in front of me – almost puppet-like but frightening, like a ventriloquist's dummy. I pushed it away but it wouldn't go. It was coming for me. It was hurting me. I couldn't get it away from me. And all the time it was laughing. In desperation, I took a knife and thrashed at the figure before me, plunging the blade violently into its chest. But it did no good: the face continued to laugh at me and my puny efforts to hit back. Needless to say I awoke in distress and thought, 'I need to do something about this.'

I don't claim to be a dream interpretation expert, but it seems obvious to me that there is at least some correlation between the themes of my dreams and my mental state at that time. I was an assistant head teacher in one of the largest secondary schools in the country, and I was suffering mild panic attacks on a daily basis. Although at first glance the problem might have seemed to be workload, in fact it was much more subtle than that. (Workload seems to be the default explanation for

anything relating to teachers' wellbeing, which paradoxically sits alongside a common perception in wider society that teachers are work-shy: 'You already get 13 weeks' holiday a year – that not enough for you?')

My struggle with workload had at least as much to do with my own mindset and my approach to work as it did with my actual remit and day-to-day task list. However, I realised this only months and years later, after much counselling. It is for this reason that Part I of this book will address the way we think and the significance of developing positive habits that will foster greater productivity.

However, besides struggling with workload there was something potentially even more damaging going on. I was feeling increasingly disingenuous in my role. There was a huge amount of pressure to achieve better GCSE results and get a good rating from Ofsted. The approach largely being taken in my school, as in many others, was to heap ever greater pressure on teaching staff to up their game and extract more and better from their Year 11 students. Monitoring of teachers was constant. Monitoring of middle leaders monitoring teachers was constant. Procedures, internal reviews and audits and whole-school initiatives ostensibly aimed at 'using data more effectively' created unbearable pressure for middle leaders. The heads of department I line managed came to me in tears on a weekly basis. I empathised fully. However, I had been given a job and – this was the problem – my job was to enforce policy. Of course, that is not how I saw my role but, of course, that is what was expected of me. And the policies I was expected to enforce were policies I didn't believe in myself!

This is a ticket to hospital. When you find yourself doing something that is at odds with your core values it creates an inner tension, a stress that inevitably becomes internalised. In order to carry out the task you have to suppress the inner voice telling you that it's wrong. But that voice doesn't go away. Instead, it leads to living at a new level of disconnection with your true self. In short, you lose your authenticity. You become something you are not. You can't possibly believe in what you are doing, and therefore the whole workplace becomes a bitter place to be. The opposite is also true: Gandhi is reputed to have said, 'Happiness is when what you think, what you say and what you do are in harmony.' By implication, then, unhappiness is when your words, thoughts and deeds are in disharmony, when they are not aligned. This is unhappiness in the

extreme and it causes stress, which has both a mental and physiological impact.

All of this relates to the crisis of leadership in teaching which I address in Part II – both the lack of any training and considered thought about effective leadership, as well as the typical bent towards top-down leadership models that consist either of shunting the problem ever downwards (let's find the scapegoat at all costs) or autocratic leadership styles that ultimately disempower, demotivate and ostracise staff.

The third factor which led to my breakdown, which correlates with Part III of this book, was the education system. What I experienced was, in some ways, tantamount to a crisis of faith. Not of the religious kind, but rather my faith in education. I had spent over 20 years of my career doing what I believed in. I am passionate about changing the world for the better and I am passionate about the power of education to accomplish just that. Intrinsic to my philosophy of education is my belief that our task as educators is not simply to produce good mathematicians or good geographers but good human beings. We are first and foremost not teaching history or science, we are teaching children.

I do not believe that education is a functional process whereby the teacher merely deposits his or her knowledge into the mind of the learner. Teaching is personal. Every child is different, unique, individual. It is the teacher's task to find 'the element'⁵ in each child – the spark that switches them on – and develop that. It is the teacher's task to develop not just the academic ability of learners but also their social, emotional, moral, cultural and spiritual awareness. It is the teacher's task to guide and care for their students, to enthuse and inspire them, to help them enter the world as rights-respecting global citizens equipped to make a positive contribution to their families, communities and society – and, in turn, teach their own children how to be good, rights-respecting human beings.

This was my dream. This is what I had worked for and lobbied and argued for in every school in which I'd worked, and I felt that I had made some progress. And yet in that final year or so, I felt that my key achievements were being undone, one initiative at a time. All my sweat

5 See K. Robinson and L. Aronica, *The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything* (London: Penguin, 2010).

and toil to introduce changes at a systemic level – changes of which I was proud – were, in my perception, being rolled back and shelved in the name of better GCSE results.

I was devastated. Not just that my efforts were being undone but by the hopelessness I felt at the direction that education was taking. For the first time in my career I felt beaten. I felt (irrationally, of course) as if nothing made a difference. I'd been kicked one too many times and I had no strength left with which to fight. The system had won.

Or so I thought. On the other side of trauma, I have discovered new hope and optimism to build a better world, no matter what the context – particularly the potential for school leaders to be brave, authentic and innovative in building school communities that challenge the status quo and mould an education system fit for the 21st century. We certainly can't wait for politicians to do it for us. It's us or no one.

The low point

These three factors, taken together, represented a perfect storm for me. I went off sick, at first expecting to take just a few days to recuperate. But, as is the custom in schools, I continued to plan lessons, mark and keep on top of emails from home. Coupled with my own guilt at creating more work for others by being off work, my first week at home failed entirely to help me recover. During week two, I finally realised that I actually needed to stop and not just 'work from home'. So I allowed myself to pause. And a day later was when everything came tumbling down.

The tasks I had set for myself that day were to do a food shop and make a chilli. Two tasks that lie well within my capabilities and are both semi-regular occurrences. I decided not to rush (which is my default), but for some reason I didn't finish the shopping until after 2pm, despite having been focused solidly on doing that. I began to make the chilli, but when I looked at the recipe I suddenly felt totally overwhelmed. I didn't know where to start. I couldn't start. I was having a panic attack. I called my wife at work, who talked me down.

She said, 'You don't have to make a chilli. Just leave it ... sit down.'

I said, 'Really, I don't?'

'No, it's okay. Just lie down.'

The next few months were hard. Small things overwhelmed me completely. I had gone from sustaining a massive remit in a big secondary school to managing to accomplish just a few, simple, mundane tasks per day – maybe. I'm grateful that over the following months the support of my wife, close friends and family, as well as counselling, enabled me to recover and change things. I started my own business shortly afterwards, although the road to full recovery took a full two and a half years. But I did come back!

I mentioned at the start that I left teaching, but I couldn't stay away because it is part of who I am and why I am. I still teach in schools every week. I am very much involved in education and speak to students and staff about the very issue that I think we all need to prioritise: *how to be better human beings*. I hope this book will help you not just to more fully embrace that goal yourself, but also to provide you with ideas and inspiration to shape our schools into places that make that goal their *raison d'être*.

This book is about three key aspects of improving wellbeing in schools:

- 1 Teachers and leaders improving their own wellbeing.
- 2 The role of teachers and leaders in improving wellbeing across schools.
- 3 The challenge to change the culture of our schools and education system.

I have also included an adaptable strategic plan template as an appendix. I am writing primarily as a teacher with some experiences and insights that have been invaluable to me and shaped my approach to life and education. I don't pretend to be a therapist or counsellor, and I wholeheartedly recommend, should you be feeling depressed or anxious, that you seek professional help.

Most importantly, I hope this book helps you *love teaching* again and reignites in you the passion for why you do it.

A practical guide to staying well in a high-pressure profession

In the midst of a recruitment crisis and a massive exodus of teachers from our schools, now is the time for some joined-up thinking about teacher wellbeing and mental health.

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Krissi Carter, Principal, Burton Borough School

Reading *Love Teaching, Keep Teaching* will give you the confidence to teach well. It will help you reflect and act with integrity.

David Whitaker, Director of Learning, Wellspring Academy Trust

I strongly recommend this book to any member of the teaching profession. Honest, grounded and truly inspiring, it offers something for every teacher!

Martin Ashton, Deputy Head Teacher (Pastoral), Wells Cathedral School

Peter Radford is a teacher, trainer, public speaker and coach with a wealth of experience in leadership, management and personal development. He began his career in youth work before entering teaching and working for many years in middle and senior leadership. Peter has also played a lead role in helping two large secondary schools achieve Unicef's Rights Respecting Schools Award.

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