

# Breathe Life Into Teachers

that   
wellbeing  
guy

**Simon Bolger**

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## **Introduction**

Hello and welcome to *Breathe Life Into Teachers*.

My name is Simon Bolger and I qualified as a teacher in 2007. I have taught in a range of schools in the primary sector and at some point have been a class teacher for every year group from Foundation Stage up to Year 6. I have led almost every subject at some point, been a key stage leader for every key stage, been an Assistant Headteacher, Deputy Headteacher, and then I was appointed as a Headteacher 9 years into my career. I was 32 years old at the time and one of the youngest school leaders in the country. Even before I was a teacher I was employed as a learning support assistant, and even before that as a midday supervisor. So I am pretty confident in saying I have done most jobs within a school at some point in my life.

First of all, this is not a manual for how to plan and deliver lessons – and I have an online course designed for that purpose. Instead, this book is all about breathing life into teaching. I have seen too many colleagues suffer and go under with stress or leave the profession because of the workload demands.

In Latin, the word ‘inspire’ means ‘to breathe life into’. The aim of this book is to breathe life into you so you are able to take control of your thoughts, feelings, emotions and beliefs so that you can be the very best teacher you are able to be.

Hopefully as you read on you will encounter the odd story which will give you a laugh, make you think in a new way, and perhaps even challenge something you have always thought or believed.

I have deliberately gone light on the theory and science because when I read something I personally want to be challenged to think in a new way without being bamboozled by endless academia or theory. Instead, this is an ‘action book’. I will try to present my ideas through stories and analogies. Everything in this book is based on my own experiences of being in a school, in a classroom, and leading a community of people.

At any training sessions I lead, I always ask: ‘Who are the most important people in a school?’ I believe it is the staff. If they don’t have their head in the game, if they’re not feeling energised, enthused and with life inside them – then the simple truth is the children won’t stand a chance.

Despite my experience of working in a range of schools I do not claim to have all of the answers – but I do hope I can offer some strategies which can help in the short and long term.

We will examine our beliefs, thinking, attitude, happiness, mindset and purpose. Not only in the context of teaching but also in our wider lives. As a teacher, the first person you need to make sure has their attitude, beliefs and thinking set to positive – are your own.

The teaching profession has changed a huge amount in the time since I qualified. As has the world around us. Mental health and wellbeing was rarely mentioned back in 2007, but as the world has moved on and the pace of our lives has been increased tenfold, we find ourselves on totally different terrain.

Nowadays it has been accepted that the mental health of the children in our schools needs urgent attention. They will grow up to start careers that don't even exist yet – so we need to equip them with the psychological and emotional skills to not just survive and be resilient, but to flourish.

It is critical that schools focus just as much attention on the mental health of their teachers. The job is higher pressured than ever before and the rates at which teachers leave the profession is continually rising.

By breathing life into teachers I hope to explore personal responsibility, individual resilience, attitudinal choices – and how can they make a difference in the classroom and beyond.

You have chosen an incredible job that comes with highs that are unbeatable, but also lows that can sometimes seem soul-crushing. You are teaching in an unprecedented age where as a society we are charting new territory. Be brave, be bold, and be ready to breathe life into others.

But first, breathe life into yourself.

Let's begin.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Beliefs**

So here we go, it's time to find out how to be the best teacher in whole world, or more to the point, think like the best teacher in the whole world. And where does it start? Nowhere other than right inside your very own head.

This chapter is all about our belief system and how it causes us to think, act and feel in certain ways. We'll start off by looking at how similar we are to flea (you'll be surprised). They're great creatures and they can be used to demonstrate that perhaps we could be thinking about our lives from a slightly different perspective.

Then we'll look at your habits and how they influence the habits of others – and if we all made a few small changes perhaps the world could be a better place.

After that it's on to how we could change our minds and beliefs about being tired and being busy. We are in control of our own thoughts and our own actions – and by taking responsibility for our lives we could actually end up having a better life.

Finally, we'll finish the chapter by looking at a home truth – life isn't fair. But when we complain about life and how bad everything is, nobody is actually making us complain. Instead, we are choosing to complain. And that's just it, our belief system confirms to us when we see, feel or experience something we don't like then we can complain about it.

Once you realise you are in control of your own beliefs and they shape the way you view the world, you are responsible for the choices and decisions you make. Want to be miserable and moan a lot? Choose to be miserable and moan a lot. Want to feel upbeat and positive? Choose to be upbeat and positive.

The choice, dear reader, is yours. Let's dive in.

## **Don't become society**

Fleas are funny old creatures. They might seem small and insignificant. But if you look at them closely. And I mean really closely. You might see that we can learn quite a lot from them. Their life expectancy isn't much more than around 3 months. Even that is assuming they are living in the right temperature, with a good humidity and an ample food supply.

Without these correct conditions their lives could be as short as just a few days. They have to make every second of their short existence count.

You and I won't live forever. We exist for a blink of the universe's eye. In the grand scheme of everything our lives dim with insignificance. But whilst we are alive, we may as well live as though we mean it. Our importance and significance to our loved ones in the fleeting moments we are alive have a meaning greater than we could ever comprehend.

We only get one go with life. No practice, no dress rehearsal, and no rewinds. We need to seize it with both hands and give it the best shot we can. When those children step into your classroom you are the one giving them the skills they need to make the most of their one chance at life.

Back to fleas.

If you were to put a swarm of fleas inside a glass jar without a lid, then they would leap and jump and do their best to surpass the limits of the jar's ridge. But if you were to seal the jar with a lid, there would be a different story.

At first the fleas would continue jumping. Their attempts would be futile and they'd simply keep hitting the underside of the lid. After a short time, a couple of days at most, the fleas would have adjusted their jump height and would jump no higher than the height of the jar.

Here's the eye opening, grandiose, significance of the universe part. If you removed the lid of the jar then the fleas would remain safely inside. They would have learnt to not jump any higher than the lid – and so would not even try.

The fleas' pattern of behaviour has been fixed for the rest of their short existence. Their offspring are born believing they can only jump a set height. The cycle is complete. The limiting beliefs of the adults have been imposed on the children.

And there it is. Our similarity to fleas is extraordinary. The lid placed above the heads of our children is society. Today's world is geared towards being right all of

the time. Being successful means never being wrong. For many, it is better to not try at all than to try and not be right.

The psyche of society, and these are somewhat sweeping generalisations, impose limiting beliefs on us from an early age. The five year old who wants to be an astronaut is told the chances of him making it are slim has had his whole future limited. The six year old who wants to climb Everest is told it's too dangerous has had her potential limited before her seventh birthday.

When my daughter was two years old lots of people said to me and my wife, "You're so lucky with how she is."

She's well behaved, she's funny, resilient and an excellent problem solver. From only a few months old she started sleeping right through the night, 7pm to 6am. Not so much as a peep during the night. Again, the L-word came out. "You're so lucky she sleeps right through." It got to the point where we started lying to people about her sleep.

When others were moaning and complaining their kids were keeping them up all night, we lied so we could join in. We seemed like oddballs for talking about our child's sleep so positively and as if we were gloating.

It was a moment of revelation when my wife and I were discussing the L-word. Were we lucky? Luck implies good fortune attained at random. Our daughter wasn't randomly born. Her neural pathways didn't randomly link up. Her personality didn't randomly form. This was the revelation, the epiphany. We were not lucky at all. Far from it. The experiences we gave our daughter, coupled with the sights, sounds and the words we chose to use with her and around her had shaped her personality, behaviour and habits.

I am not for a single moment believing I am in parenting guru territory here. What I am suggesting is that our relentless desire for our daughter not to become what society tells her has shaped her into a being something you could not possibly call bog standard – and something you could never limit with something as simple as a jar lid.

For decades, society has been imposing limits, ceilings and metaphorical jar lids on top of our children's potential. We should be born and taught to believe there is no ceiling on our potential or what we can achieve. Instead, society fixes our behaviour to be just like everyone else. Bog standard, middle of the road, beige.

You are the teacher. You have chosen this career. You don't do it for the money. You don't do it for the recognition. You do it because you want to see others succeed.

Take those children and teach them to jump higher than any jar they could ever be put inside.

So what kind of teacher do you want to be remembered as: ordinary or extraordinary?



## **Set the right behaviour**

Remember the fleas? From each passing moment we can set behaviour for the future. Set behaviour for a few minutes and it can last an hour. Set it for a few hours and it can last all day. Set it for the day and it can last all week – and so on and so on. The point is, the way we set behaviour for the smallest of moments, actions or thoughts can influence how we set behaviour for life.

If you let the children come running and screaming into your classroom on the first morning and let it last all day, you will be spending weeks turning them around. If you don't bother to try and change their habits for the first few weeks – trust me, you'll be spending the rest of the year trying to change them.

When you become a teacher, your first month can dictate how the rest of the year will go. Sometimes, that first year can dictate how the next few years will go. Once we collect habits and believe there is a certain way of thinking, feeling and behaving in the role of a teacher, it can be very hard to shake them off as our career progresses.

There's two magic words that can help you master how to shake this off.

Self-awareness.

Be aware of how you think, feel and behave. Take a step back and look at how your thoughts, feelings and behaviour influences those around you. Are you habitually tutting or rolling your eyes at the same children? What message is that sending? What can you do about it?

The way you think and feel shapes what I call your internal habits. You can become habitually prepared to feel irritated in the presence of a specific person. Flip it the other way around and you can become habitually prepared to smile and laugh in the presence of a specific person.

Your internal habits include how you think, feel and talk to yourself. They influence your external habits. This includes how you behave and how you talk to people. Your external habits will influence the internal habits of those around you, and they influence their external habits – and so on and so on.

The simple fact is if we take control and responsibility for our internal habits, then we can change our own external habits and support the children in our class to form positive internal habits.

So there is the magic moment of revelation – it all starts with you. You can be the one to start a wave of positive internal and external habits. Simply by being self-aware and realising there can be another way.

When we learn habits, we also learn to forget that there can be a different way. We can teach ourselves to walk into the classroom in the morning and prepare to be amazed by what unfolds in front of us.

How do we do this? We decide to do it. It is that simple.

The simple truth is it is far too easy to join in with the negativity of others in order to fit in. And this is it. This is what society does to us.

We are all born the same in this world. But not always equal. Family circumstances, geography and economic reasons ensure that in the immediate moments after we are born. At birth we are a blank canvas. Every moment and experience we have adds to the layers of the self-portrait that is our personality. When we are young we have no control over this. So this is the moment where you, reading this as an adult, can take control of the experiences of the young people you meet.

The children who enter the gates of your school will come from all walks of life. Some of them will come with layers and layers of difficulty and challenge. Our job as teachers is to make sure that those children all have the same chances and opportunities in school. If we leave them to continue to add layers then they will become just like the fleas trapped inside the jar.

You might be the only enthusiastic person a child meets on a particular day. You might be the only person who is willing to give that child a chance on a particular day. Imagine if you don't take that opportunity. You would be acting just like society, and pushing that child to become the same as everything and everyone else.

Don't let any child climb into society's jar and have their behaviour and mindset fixed in place for the rest of their life.

Don't let them be mediocre, or bog standard, or beige. This all starts with you. It's time to get a leg up and jump out of the jar.

## **Life isn't fair**

This book is all about developing your ability to learn, to improve your disposition to teaching, help you thrive in an increasingly complex world and become a better teacher. No, scrap that! It's about becoming a better person who will make such a barnstorming difference that maybe, just maybe, the attitudes of a few kids could be better than they are.

So what better place to start than negativity? I know what you're thinking. What place does negativity have in a book telling you to be more upbeat and enthusiastic? Well, you'll be surprised to know that being aware of what negativity is can actually help us to deal with it more effectively.

The truth about negativity is it is too easy to start and too easy to carry on. How many times have you told people about the bad things that have happened to you in your life? Or worse, how many times have you told people about things that have happened to you that you think are bad but are actually quite minute?

Yes, that's right, I am looking at you, belligerent teacher who threw a massive wobbly because there weren't enough sheets of yellow card in the stock cupboard.

We complain about the weather, it's too hot, it's too cold, and it's always raining. There are too many cars on the road, people can't drive properly, and don't get me started on their parking. The next door neighbour always has his garage door open for no reason, what can he even be doing? Surely there are only so many screwdrivers he can order by size? The tree in his garden is too tall, and they wheel their bins out far too early. It's always dark when I get out of bed, I've got too much washing to do, and the floor needs vacuuming because I can feel bits under my feet. I've got too much to do at work, and not enough time to do it. And I haven't even had a chance to check my emails yet.

The list could go on. I'm sure at some point you've traipsed down the road of negativity and stopped off at one of the points above. What's worse is when someone else tells you about their Jupiter-sized problems and you simply wait for them to finish so you can have your turn and try to trump their misery with your own tale of despair.

But wait. What if the terrible problems we complain about every day are not actually that terrible? What if we realise that the reason we complain about these things is simply because we have learned to?

The world is hard and life is unforgiving. Ever heard that quote "Life's not fair"?

Well, it's true. Life isn't fair. And most people subconsciously realise this and accept it is fine to just be mediocre. And if the people around you in your life are compliantly mediocre then it is easy for you to fit in and behave like this as well. It's too easy to listen to other people's problems and say "Nightmare!" or "Oh God, tell me about it".

It just doesn't come naturally to be positive and buoyant about life. How many times have you met an old friend and asked how they're getting on to be met with something along the lines of "You know, same old shit"? And if that's what they say then you will come across as weird or strange if you start raving about how much you enjoy your job – or even, God forbid, life itself!

If you could decide what mood your own child's teacher would be in at the start of the school day then your answer would be a no-brainer. Of course you would want them to be upbeat, excited and enthused. What better way to transmit a love of life and learning to your child than by their class teacher role modelling that behaviour?

Now think about your own behaviour. How could the day be different if only your attitude was better?

The thing about complaining and being negative is that nothing changes because of it. It quite literally achieves nothing. If it rains in the morning and you spend all day complaining about it – it's still going to rain. The surprising truth is this: nothing is good or bad until you decide so.

The rain isn't falling deliberately to annoy you and ruin your day. Even if you woke up in a great mood or a terrible mood, the rain was still going to fall regardless. Nothing will change and the only thing you can be sure of is that you will have a rotten day. The weather is not coming inside your brain and 'making' you feel anything. Your thoughts can only come from you. You cannot change the weather, but you can change the way to react to it.

It is that simple.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Thinking**

Everything in this book boils down to your thinking. Your thinking can make or break whether you have a happy life or not.

In this chapter we'll explore an analogy of a barrel and dive in head first to find out the best way to remove all the stagnant water. Then we'll walk through fields and cut corners off of pathways to discover what desire lines are and how they help (or don't help) us to form habits.

The key message will be: if you have always lived your life in a certain way and not achieved the results you want – could there be the chance that there is a different way that can help you become who you want to be?

Then we'll finish by looking at choices. Our time on this planet is limited and you have a choice with how you live your life. The key is being able to take responsibility and know that you have a choice.

Ultimately, your choices will define who you are, who you are being, and the impact you are having on others.

## **The barrel**

I got married in July 2015. When we booked the date we believed we were in for a beautiful summer wedding filled with glorious sunshine. We had planned to hold our drinks reception on the patio of the venue and play lawn games in the gardens.

However, despite its summer setting, it turned out to be one of the wettest days of the entire year. We could have complained about the rain all day and let it spoil our wedding. Instead, the venue were fantastic. They had a wet weather plan and their positive thinking became contagious amongst everyone.

Yes it rained all day. But we accepted it and we got over it. And looking back, I wouldn't change it if I had the choice. Complaining changes nothing, but positive action and belief can change everything.

On a wedding day, the attitude and mood of the bride and groom multiplies over and over and infects the guests. Their behaviour sets the tone for everyone and everything. Our schools are the same. The head's mood can dictate the rest of the school. But in smaller clusters, one negative adult can ruin the mood in an entire year group or key stage. The key is to stop it spreading from the source.

Negativity is contagious. It is viral. It only takes one person to have a miserable attitude to ruin the mood for a group of people. If you encounter what I like to call a MALIT (Moaning and Loving It) then you need to have some strategies in place to prevent yourself from getting sucked in and joining the moan fest. Lots of advice will suggest you should just ignore others being negative.

The truth is this: the standard you stay silent for is the standard you accept. By ignoring negativity in others, you are transmitting you accept their behaviour. I have encountered people in the past who others describe as "They're alright once you get to know them." But what that actually means is "They're bit of an idiot but you'll get used to it".

We need to start challenging negativity in others so people understand the impact of their behaviour. In schools we can challenge this by explaining how an adult's negative attitude is impacting on children's learning.

MALITs are usually negative about almost everything. It is a habit they have learned and they don't know how to unlearn it. A fact about humans is it is easier to learn something new than it is to unlearn something old.

If we accept their negative behaviour then we are giving them free reign to carry on with it. This doesn't mean you should completely shut them down. What it does

mean is that you should try to understand where they're coming from. What are the reasons for their negativity? What could they do to solve the problem at hand? Is it even a problem at all?

Sometimes MALITs might even have a point with their moaning. But they're lacking the skills, confidence or knowledge to find a solution. Sometimes the school's systems fail in enabling adults to solve their problems. What if we found a way to help them find a solution?

And so we reach the barrel analogy. And no, I don't mean wallowing in pity whilst you drown your sorrows from a barrel of rum. Imagine the barrel represents your mind, and the water inside represents all of your thoughts. Some of that water will be stagnant. This represents all of your negative thoughts. All of the clean water in the barrel represents your positive thoughts. Look at the stagnant water, even if it is just a small amount, and how it contaminates all of the clean water. It is easy, too easy in fact, to let your negative thoughts cloud and block and contaminate your positive thoughts.

So what to do? How do we get the stagnant water out of the barrel? We can't reach in and scoop it all out. If we try that then we'll end up taking out some of the clean water as well. Not to mention the fact we will spill water everywhere, which is the equivalent of losing our minds!

The solution is quite simple. We must pour more clean water into the barrel. That way, over time, we will flush the stagnant water out. The psychological equivalent is to not focus on our negative thoughts. Put more of your energy into focusing on positive thoughts and over time that will flush the negative thoughts from your mind. It takes effort, it isn't easy, but it is worth it.

It's the psychological equivalent of trying to always look on the bright side of life. No matter what happens, or how annoying or negative, you could say to yourself "I've had a bad morning but how could I make today really special for the children?"

Easier said than done, huh? Surprisingly, it isn't as difficult as it seems. It's true that you get from life whatever you give. If you actively look for the positive in everyday situations then you will start to notice more and more of them occurring. In time, your mind will automatically start to pick up on the positive moments of everyday life. This is key to diminishing the negative thoughts you carry.

Go forth and cleanse your barrel!

## **Engage or exist. Which desire lines are you following?**

There's a moment in a popular blockbuster TV show where Kit Harrington looks up, broods down the camera and says "The dead are coming."

Well, you know what, Jon? I think they might already be here.

Have you ever really looked at people commuting to work? There's a whole load of 'the dead' dragging themselves out of bed and into work in the morning wishing it were the weekend. And you could be one of them.

It is time to engage or exist. If you choose the latter, you are simply living your life in body only. You get one shot at living, so my thinking is that you might as well look like you want to be here. And by 'here', I mean alive!

Previously we examined internal habits and that as we accidentally accumulate them over time they can sabotage our lives. Ever heard of desire paths? Chances are you have walked on one. A desire path is a path caused by erosion from humans walking over it. The paths are often the shortest or easiest routes between two destinations. We often see them in forest or woodland areas, between gaps in hedges or trees, on the corners of fields linking together footpath routes, and along the edge of fields where paths never existed.

They can sometimes be known as desire lines. Human beings have an incredible hardwired ability to create desire lines in their minds. We take a route one time and leave the start of a feint trail behind us. When we reach the same point again we often go over the same trail over and over until it becomes habitual and we forget there is any other way.

It doesn't become impossible to avoid the desire lines or take a different route, but it becomes so engrained that it is the only way of thinking that we never try anything else again.

Sometimes following the desire lines and forming habits can be really beneficial. But other times it means we accidentally learn there is only one way to think, act or feel in a situation that we lose sight of any alternatives. It is how we form bad habits like giving up or complaining.

Running is one of the most simple and accessible of all sports. Lots of people try it and only a few stick with it. If you have ever been new to running you will know that it can feel quite difficult quite quickly. That is why a lot of people give up. This forms the start of a desire line. When they consider trying to start running again,



they remember how they thought, acted and felt the last time – and generally they repeat it. They accidentally learn the habit of giving up.

It is the same for complaining. At some point you may have been irritated by how your neighbours park their car. I'll admit it, I have. It forms the start of a desire line. Every time I look out the window I start to expect to see bad parking and when I do, I get cross. If I don't see bad parking on this occasion, I just assume I'll see it later on. My desire line has formed and I forget that somebody might have parked badly a couple of times, but on the whole, their parking is probably fine.

This is the same reason that people learn to be helpless in their lives. It is why some people are very quick to blame others. And it is why some people think they are always a victim.

So reflect, what desire lines have you formed? Could there be another way?

## **There is a choice**

There will be children in your school who have formed very strong desire lines. These will most likely have come from their families. Children are never formally taught how to view the world or how to shape their belief system. They learn this by copying those around them. They look at their parents and see what they're doing, and then they do it too.

It isn't usually until they start pre-school, nursery or school that they start to see people who have different thought patterns and belief systems to them. These will influence the way they think and what they believe. Our teenage years are some of our hardest in our life. One of the reasons for this is that we are trying to find out of all the belief systems and habits we have experienced, which ones personally resonate with us.

Take a look at the desire paths you have walked down. Now is the time to decide if you should change. Responding to the same event in the same way every time makes us forget that there are other paths and choices available to us.

It is too easy for us to look at the paths others have chosen and criticise or judge them. In fact, it is so easy that we don't even realise we are doing it until we have done it. But when we look at ourselves we let our judgements become clouded by emotions. It is more difficult for the rational side of your brain to engage when it is emotionally involved.

Cast your mind into the future, engage your flux capacitor, and imagine someone is interviewing your great grandchildren. What would they say about you? Or more to the point, what would you want them to say about you? Now, what could you do straightaway to get the ball rolling? If you have been complacent and letting life happen to you, maybe today could be the first day of the rest of your life.

An alternative scenario is where a grown up child in your class is talking to their great grandchild. The small child looks up at their elderly relative and says "What was your teacher like at school?" How would you want your grown up pupil to answer that question? What could you start tomorrow to make sure they have nothing but wonderful stories to tell?

On average we will live for about 28,000 days in total. By the time most people realise this, quite a large chunk of those days has already passed. The reality is, the daily count is on, it's ticking towards zero, so you had better get a move on. It is never too late. It's your life and your responsibility – so take action now.

To quote the Alicia Keys song, '28 thousand days', "If you had twenty eight thousand days/ Who would you love, where would you go?/ What would you celebrate?/ I'm telling you that life's too short to just throw it away/ So have the time of your life, so have the time of your life."

The choices you make in the classroom can, and will, have an impact not only your life but also on the lives of the children who are in your class. This is a cage rattling moment. How are you spending your 28,000 days to live them to the fullest? How are you helping others, especially children, to get the most out of their 28,000 days?

## **Chapter 3**

### **Attitude**

We have already looked at choice and how choices can determine your beliefs on any given day. In Chapter 3 we will learn five simple words which can change your habit system entirely and also give you a different perspective on how your attitude impacts on those around you.

Then we'll find out why it's great to wake up and why it's good to hear the birds sing in the morning, even if they are competing against the ambient drone of the nearby motorway.

Finally, we will find out about gratitude and what it can do to transform your perspective on life. We'll look at positive and negative seeds and figure out how we can lay more of one and fewer of another.

## **Five simple words**

In their first five years, children learn the majority of everything they will ever learn in their entire lives. Whatever you do, they will absorb. We don't learn to think and develop a belief system in a specifically formal way. We learn how to do this through acquiring habits, usually from our parents and family. How you behave will influence how your children behave. How you speak will influence how your children speak. You cannot not have an impact on your children. Your habits will become their habits.

With that in mind, if you are the type of parent who sits scrolling through social media whilst your toddler is playing at home, your child will not learn about conversation, interaction or eye contact. What they'll actually learn is isolation and the art of nothing to say. This will, of course, make their journey through life all the more difficult.

Once we understand the impact we have on those around us – everything can change. Don't like taking your child to the park because you're missing out on your favourite soap opera? Don't fancy reading a couple of books at bedtime tonight because you're tired or you need finish to checking those emails? Because you have had a bad day are you not keen on asking them how fantastic their day has been? These might seem like small things. Surely they won't have much of an impact?

Wrong!

Skipping a trip to the park to catch up with some TV could mean over time you forget to spend your spare time doing something with your child. By 'doing', I mean having an experience and actually living in the moment. What's worse is your child could learn the habit that their parents won't take them to the park so they stop asking because they know it won't happen.

Reading books at bedtime is some of the most high quality time I have ever had with my children. Reading, language and words give us so much access to the world that it is crucial we develop a love of it. Everything we do can role model habits to our children. I know parents who have literally turned their own children off of books one day at a time.

If you don't ask if they've had a fantastic day, who can they possibly tell when they do? They will lose all sense of what it means to have a fantastic day.

In the classroom, we need to recognise that there will be children who come second to their parent's phone or to the television. It is our job as teachers to make sure that

they know there can be different way. We can make this a reality in the classroom by deciding to be genuinely interested in their lives.

Yes, the National Curriculum says we need to know important moments in British history, but what about all the other skills we need to navigate our way through life. It's statutory to learn about sequencing the events of the Battle of Hastings, but learning to be genuinely interested in someone else's life isn't.

Being a teacher is so much more than just teaching some facts or knowledge. It is about helping to shape every aspect of the child. We can do this by remembering five simple words that can shape how we live our life.

Always go a little further.

If we believe that we can always go a little further we will imprint this on our children. Always go a little further when arriving at school in the morning. Always go a little further when planning lessons. Always go a little further when talking to children. Always go a little further when dealing with parents. Always go a little further when greeting people. Always go a little further when you get home to see your family in the evening. Always go a little further when meeting people you don't know.

These are all minor improvements to how we live our life. When we combine them and look at the aggregated impact – it could be life changing.

Remember, our habits influence how we spend our days – and how we spend our days is precisely how we spend our lives. So now is the time to get our habits in check and tune them towards positivity.

Always go a little further.

## **Can you hear the motorway?**

The world is an astonishing place. When was the last time you considered just how amazing it really is? I would be probably be close in saying the last time you gave this any thought was when you were a child. We were all like it once. The crashing of a wave, the brief glimpse of a squirrel, or the beauty of a garden flower. These are incredible sights to young children. But over time we forget about this splendour.

Our children are incredible at spotting the ordinary and seeing it as extraordinary. “Look Daddy, an aeroplane!”, “Wow! Your eyes are blue, just like mine”, and “I saw all my friends, I’ve had the best day” are just some of the wondrous musings my daughter said when she was 2 years old. As an adult I had forgotten how incredible aeroplanes are to watch, how fascinating it is to look into someone’s eyes, and how brilliant it can make me feel when I spend time with my closest friends.

I grew up in a town that had its very own motorway junction. How’s that for a claim to fame? Yes, Junction 14 was really not very far from my home as a child. So whenever I was outside I could always hear the ambient tone of the M1 off in the distance. It became the norm for me. I heard it every day and so often that it caused me to stop hearing it. I never even noticed it was there. But when I moved house to a town nowhere near the M1, the comforting hum of a busy motorway vanished, and I noticed its absence straight away. Sleeping in the summer time became tricky. With the windows open, in the early hours of the morning when the sunlight just began to peak through the edges of my blind, what could I hear? Birds singing. Hundreds of bloody birds bloody singing. I couldn’t sleep.

Where was the soothing drone of the M1?

I was telling this to a friend and getting myself worked up about how annoyed I was. I was almost tipping into full rant mode when my friend interrupted me. “At least you can hear the birds,” he said. Then I realised what was happening. I was actually moaning and complaining about being able to hear birds sing. How many people in this world do not have that luxury? I suddenly had instant gratitude for their irritating little tunes at 4am. And very quickly, their tunes didn’t seem so irritating. Then an even deeper thought hit me:

*When I woke up at 4am because of the singing birds – at least I woke up.*

It’s quite hard hitting and can put life into some real perspective. I had learned gratitude, and it was going to change my life. It helped reframe my thoughts and question feelings and emotions I would conjure up without hesitation.

"I've had the worst day ever! Everything has gone wrong." What, everything? 100% of things have gone wrong? Really? "I suppose not everything then..." became a standard conversation I started to have with myself. (That's right, a conversation with myself, more on that another time.)

Rather than focusing on the 10 minutes of my day that didn't go so well, I learned to focus on the many other hours that it did go well. I learned not to let one bad moment ruin my entire day. This simple retune is like a superpower which can give you the boost you need to have a brilliant day right from the moment you wake up. Try it yourself. Get out of bed and check the weather for the day ahead, then be grateful and marvel at the fact you live in a world where you can actually know ahead of time if you will need an umbrella or not.

By focusing on moments in the day and trying to get the best out of them, we can set ourselves up to have positive experiences by choice. The most powerful attitudinal change for any teacher is to arrive at school and decide to be positive regardless of whatever has happened in the seconds, minutes or hours before the school day starts.

To put it all into perspective, your children need you to arrive at school having decided to be in a positive and upbeat mood, because how else will they learn this habit?



## **Gratitude**

We have already looked at how life isn't fair and how it is too easy to quickly become bogged down in the minutiae of life. I have seen it happen to many teachers over the years. They enter the profession with a verve and vigour – yet over time they lose this magic. Sometimes it happens in a space as short as a single week.

I have had it happen to me. I worked in a school where I was able to walk to work from my house. My journey in the morning would take me around 10 minutes. Whilst walking I was able to clear my thoughts and arrive stress free. Until I actually did arrive that is. I would walk through the school gates, turn right and into a corridor. That same corridor. If I close my eyes now I can still see it. Then I would have a single thought fill my head.

“Oh crap. I'm here again.”

I had become so bogged down in the small things about the job that I had completely lost sight of why I did the job in the first place. I resented the excessive and unnecessary monitoring, I couldn't stand to go in the staff room because the banal banter was torturously tedious, and the staff attitude towards the children meant the kids themselves couldn't care less about being there.

I had completely forgotten the purpose of the job was to make a difference and help shape the lives and futures of young children. All I ever thought or felt was an overwhelming sense of dread. It took two forms, “Oh crap, I'm here again,” or “Oh crap, I have to go back there again”.

We have talked before about always going a little further and how small positive changes can add up to have a larger impact. The same can be said the other way. I had laid so many seeds of negativity and resentment about that school the only way to get over it was to remove it from my life. I left that school shortly after. It took so much from me but I know that I am stronger for it.

It is massively important to make sure that we are aware of the impact our attitude has on not only those around us – but on ourselves.

We didn't start the job so we could complain about every aspect of it. We started it to make a difference and to change and shape children's lives. To put it into perspective I would urge teachers to start practising gratitude. You can be grateful you can hear the motorway in the morning, grateful you can hear birds singing, or grateful that you are able to help a classroom full of children to be able to learn about the world. By attaching value to what you choose to do on a daily basis you will instantly feel better about your outlook.

I know sometimes we wake up in the morning and think about how much we don't want to go to school in the morning. We develop phantom stomach aches, made up sore throats or just downright simple dread. But we can practise gratitude by being thankful for the fact that we are well enough to be able to even get out of bed.

We take all sorts of things around us for granted. They can be big or small. A sunset, a meal, running water, our loved ones, central heating – the list goes on. We take them all for granted. What if we actively sought to notice as many of the amazing things around us as possible? How would our outlook change?

My suggestion for teachers, or anyone in fact, would be to write three things they are grateful for every day for a month to see how it impacts on their outlook of life.

Gratefulness enables us to give thanks now in the present, and helps us to stop waiting to be happy. The happiest people in the world haven't sat around waiting for happiness to be handed to them, they have taken action now. Choose to be grateful for what is in your life, rather than what is not. The burden of waiting to be happy can be lifted and you will be free to see the world in a better light right now.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Happiness**

First we'll learn about carbonated soft drinks in Eastern Africa, how less stuff and more experiences in our lives is better, and then a statement that is common sense but not always common behaviour.

Then we will learn some calorie free advice and talk about cake recipes and how they can influence your life, your lessons and the children in your class. We'll look at a quote Albert Einstein may or may not have said before going on to find out why life isn't like The X-Factor.

Happiness can be a superpower in the modern world as well as the modern classroom. Harness this power and you can potentially be unstoppable.

## **Happiness in a bottle**

A few years ago I went on holiday to Kenya. We flew into Mombasa, went on a bizarre ferry ride, and then drove for hours to our hotel in what I can only describe as a broken van. It is a different world. The living standards are so far removed from what is considered standard in the UK. The funny thing is, whilst we were there we kept seeing adverts for a well-known soft drink.

Everywhere we went there was another poster with families enjoying the drink. I kept thinking it was strange that in a country where poverty is quite widespread, where families struggle to provide food, shelter and clothing – that a huge billion pound company were trying to sell bottles of their drink. Why would they possibly want this drink so badly? But that was just it, everywhere I looked I saw people drinking it. Clearly there was supply and demand.

It wasn't until I really looked at the posters that I realised what was at play here. The slogan on the poster said something along the lines of "Choose happiness, choose our brand". On the surface, yes, we should be choosing happiness. But there was an underlying current of capitalism that when you really think about it appears to be loaded with exploitation.

What the advert was really saying was "You won't be happy unless you buy our drink". The Kenyan people believed it. That they could buy ready-made bottled happiness. Many of them lived in poverty, with a low life expectancy, and little chance of making it out of their situation. Drinking a branded soft drink which in the adverts appeared as though it made people happy seemed to be the perfect way to escape their life situation.

That's the moment it hit me. The modern world has tried to flat pack happiness into a product that you can buy and keep in your house. Just look at any advert of television. A huge electronics company has devised a new smartphone with a massive screen, clever voice assistant and a camera with ten trillion pixels. In the advert the users are smiling, laughing, hugging, they're on holiday, they're windsurfing, they're in the mountains, they are the living the life you think you want.

The advert is not saying "Look how efficient and practical our phone is". Instead it is saying "If you get this phone you can be happy".

Unless it is a magic phone, you can't and you won't.

On the other side you have the newspapers telling you "Look at all these terrible things that are happening – because of this you will never be happy." People are

cold, hungry and poor. Crime is up, employment rates are down, and don't even look out the window at the weather. Brexit is everywhere, petrol is too expensive, and why are Jaffa Cakes in packs of 10 instead of 12 nowadays?

You can help children to see that deciding to be happy is the answer. Not waiting for the latest modern gadget, or growing up to hopefully win a reality TV show. Help them see that being happy means loving your family, being enthusiastic to learn, enjoying a dance in the rain, and genuinely caring for others.

There are two simple truths which are common sense, but not common behaviour. The first is we have a choice and there is another way. The second is even though it's simple, it doesn't mean it will be easy.

For some children, you as their teacher, might be the only positive person in their life. If we can build a generation of young people who grow up choosing to be happy then maybe we can ensure that tomorrow's children have more than one positive person in their life.

## **The cake of life**

I don't think I have ever made a cake in my life. In fact, I don't think I have even baked anything other than the occasional white bloomer. But every now and again I do enjoy the odd episode of the Great British Bake Off. To see people talk about something so passionately and with so much joy can only leave you feeling warm and fuzzy. And in this case, hungry.

Baking and teaching are actually quite similar. Stick with me on this. They are both scientific and precise, yet at the same time can be artistic and creative. They require careful planning and preparation – but can be spontaneous and impulsive. There are so many different ingredients that require blending together to ensure the 'taste' is just right at the end.

In teaching terms we need to make sure all the tasks for children are appropriately challenging, that the end product is explicit and purposeful, that we teachers don't pontificate for too long when the kids could be getting on with it, that we are giving high quality feedback as often as we can, and that children are fully motivated and up for the learning. All these things combine together to make the recipe for a great lesson. Doing too much or too little of some of them will change the overall 'taste' of the lesson. The balance needs to be just right.

The cake analogy is fantastic in so many ways. It is particularly effective in helping you to reflect on your thinking. Assume your life is a cake. You can determine what your cake tastes like by choosing which ingredients to add and mix together.

If you choose to put poor, sour tasting ingredients into your cake then guess what type of cake you'll end up with. You don't need to be Mary Berry to know this cake isn't going to taste great.

Lots of people are living their lives in this way. They hate their job, they blame their colleagues (or in the case of a teacher, the kids in their class), they're not paid enough, they have too much work to do, and have you seen the traffic on the way home on a Friday evening?

The real truth is: these situations are completely neutral. Remember earlier we said nothing is good or bad until we decide it is. Well, here it is again. Nobody has a good or bad job until they decide it is either. Two people can be doing precisely the same job, in the same environment, for exactly the same amount of money and holiday entitlement – and feel completely different about the job.

Our situations are all neutral. Our brains look at all the different situations in our lives and decide whether to staple a good or bad label to the side of them. Usually, once that label has been attached, there's no getting it off.

We can hate our jobs, be annoyed by our colleagues, be frustrated by the children we teach, accept a low salary, become swamped with work and sit in endless queues of traffic – and wait for it all to change one day. Or, we can take action now.

These attitudes will result in behaviours like moaning, complaining, blaming, resenting and simply pure negativity. Now imagine these are the ingredients you are putting in your cake of life. What type of cake will it make? I am sure you don't need me to spell it out for you.

There's a quote that I often see knocking around on the internet that Albert Einstein apparently once said. Although I question the authenticity of whether the great man himself actually said it – I completely subscribe to its meaning.

“Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

If we keep putting moaning, complaining, blaming, resenting and negativity into our cake day after day, then nothing is ever going to change. Life won't deal you a magic hand that will suddenly make you feel great and free of problems. We are the bakers of our own cakes. We are the ones in control of our own fates. Nobody can tell you how to think and feel. But it is your responsibility to take action and be aware of how you think and feel.

The real truth is: life isn't like X-Factor. There isn't a chance to stand on a magic spot and hope you can be plucked from obscurity and into overnight success. Because trust me, behind every overnight success there will be 10 years of back breaking work and commitment.

Get ready, we are about to cover some big thoughts here. Think of all the time that existed before you were born, and now all the time that will exist after you've gone. How big is your 'bit'? Or more to the point, how small is your 'bit'? Life will always keep on going no matter what. Think about everyone who has ever lived, and who is yet to live. Life will not stop to check they are OK. It won't slow down so any of them can keep up. It will always go on, no matter what.

So now we are back to choice. You can do nothing. Inaction is still a choice. You can wait for life to give you what you want and hope someone will deliver a magic hand that will change your life. But guess what? You'll wait your whole life and it will never come.

You get to choose whether to take action or not. You get to choose which ingredients go into your cake of life.

Choose now and choose wisely.



## **Chapter 5**

### **Mindset**

In Chapter 5 we will find out how failure, and lots of it, can be one of the best things in your life. We'll examine whether my daughter is actually clever or not when we she first learned to walk.

Then we'll examine how we talk to ourselves and how we can make our own inner voice our very own personal motivator. We'll look at the reason I mainly spend a round of golf lashing shots into the trees and undergrowth.

We'll move on to the words we use, the praise we give and the behaviour we expect. Not to forget a quick examination of what we think success looks like, and what success actually looks like.

Next we'll look at why teachers are like professional footballers and why our stakes are higher than Olympians. We'll discover why it's great to eat lunch, go outside and enjoy an annual holiday.

After that we'll move on to why we secretly hope contestants fall over on Strictly Come Dancing and what it means if there's lots of seagulls hovering over our heads. We'll learn the meaning of the word 'sonder' and how it can change the way we perceive ourselves and others.

Finally, we'll ask ourselves if 110% is a real thing and then try to reduce the number of monkeys on our back. Then we will finish this chapter by learning about how the perfect teacher does not exist.

**Fail often. Learn lots.**

I remember hearing it around my daughter's first birthday. She had just started to walk and the phrase reared its head. It comes from relatives, friends and sometimes even strangers.

"Aren't you a clever girl?"

I know. It sounds like I am belittling the milestone event of my daughter successfully walking for the first time. But there are two parts to that previous sentence which underpin my belief on this subject.

The first part is 'milestone'. It means to place a stone to mark the distance on the route to a particular place. So now we know two things. My daughter's milestone of walking is neither the start nor the end of her journey. She didn't just wake up at this destination in her developmental journey. She had been somewhere else, somewhere further back down the road. And she was still heading further up the road.

The second part is 'first time'. In the sentence I said "successfully walking for the first time". Let's be clear. On this particular occasion, she successfully walked for the first time. That tells us something very important about how children learn and develop. If she successfully walked for the first time – there must have been occasions where she unsuccessfully walked.

And you've guessed it. There were. In fact, there were hundreds, maybe even thousands, of times where she unsuccessfully walked. But with each passing day and another tally of unsuccessful attempts to walk, she made slight improvements. She showed better balance, better posture, increased strength and the same, or sometimes increased, desire to succeed.

The clever bit isn't the fact that she walked successfully on this one occasion. The real success can be found in the level of determination she showed over a sustained period of time and how she was able to use multiple failures to eventually form a pathway to success.

Here is what we can take away as educators – success is a process. It is a journey that happens over time.

The fact that so many people said to her over and over "Aren't you clever?" shows that often we are guilty of forgetting this. The reason for this is because many adults have been hardwired by society to believe that the main currency for being successful is being right. And being right means we are clever. That getting things wrong means looking foolish or embarrassed.

The real truth is: nobody has ever learned anything from being right all of the time.

By accepting and owning your mistakes and faults you automatically have an advantage over anyone who denies they exist in the first place. This could come in the guise of accepting the good with the bad for a particular lesson you have taught, or initiative you have rolled out. Performing a 'lessons learned' activity (or a post-mortem) on a lesson, initiative or event will help identify any mistakes or failings and ensure that you can take positive action to improve them in the future.

The mistakes we have made in the past do not have to impact on our future. Very often, previous failures and the worry of not looking clever and being wrong can force us into future inaction. The internal voice we all use to talk ourselves tells us: "I tried that once before. I didn't get it right that time. I won't try again in case I get it wrong. If I get it wrong I won't look clever."

We often predict how the future will go based on what has happened before – and then build desire lines to reinforce these thoughts. But here's the amazing thing that I'm guessing you already know: nobody can predict the future.

The past is history. The future is a mystery.

What if we start acknowledging and accepting mistakes happen, take responsibility for them and not cover them up, and then move on and not dwell on them?

This shift in thinking and attitude can change the practice of school leaders, especially when giving feedback to staff. Suddenly, instead of telling teachers that a particular aspect of their lesson wasn't quite up to scratch, we can empower them to identify their mistakes themselves and help them move on.

In my experience I have sometimes felt that teachers have been told something wasn't good enough, so the teacher tries to cover up or blame someone else for the mistake or failing. The first step to learning from mistakes is simply to acknowledge that they happen.

Mistakes – accept and acknowledge they exist, take responsibility for them, and move on.

## **Can you hear me?**

I had never really thought about how I spoke to myself until I was stood on the first tee of my local golf course a few years ago. I had arranged this round of golf a few weeks earlier and my friends and I had all talked about how we were going to attack the course and how we were going to play our best ever round.

I was first up to play. I pressed the tee into the ground and placed my ball on top. I settled into my posture and rested the club behind the ball. I relaxed and exhaled and started into my backswing. I geared up to uncoil and hit the ball when at the top of my backswing a little voice from somewhere said "Nope".

I snatched downwards, shanked the ball and it shot about 30 yards along the ground to my left and into the bushes. "That's lost," said the same little voice. "You're rubbish."

I looked around to see who had so rudely interrupted me mid-swing. All I saw were my friends grimacing at how I would react to the lost ball scenario. And I realised who the voice belonged to.

It was my own voice.

Why was I talking to myself like this? The answer was simple. Because that is the way I have always talked to myself. I have never known any different.

I believe that we have a set of different voices we use. They are all our own, except the words and tones they choose are different. There is the voice we use for people we don't know, it often doesn't carry too much emotion or give a lot away. There is our work voice, it is for colleagues and children in our class and remains professional and measured. There is our friendship voice, a candid tone we take with our oldest and best friends that can only be gained over time. There is our loved ones voice, the caring and unconditional love always pervades through this voice. There is our intimate voice, exclusively for our spouse or partner.

Then there is our internal voice. A solitary sound that only we hear. This is the only voice which speaks the absolute truth. This is the voice that influences how we think, act and feel.

I could have brazenly said to my friends on the golf tee, "Watch out lads, this shot is going to get me into the next Ryder Cup team!" – all whilst my internal voice says "Hope you brought your scuba gear because this is going in the lake". Which voice is going to have the bigger influence on me?

How we speak to ourselves can have a massive impact on what we get out of life and how we experience life. All I wonder is, what would happen if I had a friend who spoke to me in the same way that I speak to myself? I know the answer. I wouldn't be friends with that person.

I don't need someone following me around to tell me I am useless, that I should give up or I shouldn't even bother. I am quite literally stuck with my internal voice for the whole of my life. So whilst that voice is in my head I may as well try to make sure it is a voice I want to listen to.

Your inner voice can empower you. It influences your outer voice and how you speak and act around others. Amazingly, your external voice can motivate and inspire others to use their internal voice differently, especially children. How you role model behaviour can influence how the children in your class perceive themselves and how they can speak to themselves.

You are, at the same time, your biggest obstacle and your very best motivator.

Ask yourself this: what would change in your life if you spoke to yourself more positively?

## **Watch your words**

We have discovered previously that the way we speak to ourselves can have a massive influence on our lives. Also the way we speak to others can have a huge impact on their life. I have spoken before about the word 'clever'. At first glance it seems like it is a fairly innocuous word. Perhaps it could be used as a superlative to describe children when they have done something really well. But really, secretly, it is one of the most dangerous words to allow into a school.

Take a standard Year 2 maths lesson where children have been set ten simple number sentences. One child finishes before all the others and has his sheet marked by the teacher. "Wow, you're fast, you've got them all right. You are so clever," says the teacher. Doesn't seem too suspect at this point. But look deeper.

What is the teacher actually praising? Why is the child clever? Because they finished quickly? That they got everything right?

What message is this giving the child for their learning in the long term? That if they don't finish quickly or if they don't get everything right, that they are not clever? What if the child didn't even try that hard because the maths problems were not the right level of challenge? They have just been told they are clever for not even doing their best. How will this impact on their learning in the future? What message will it give their internal voice? How will it influence how they perceive themselves?

There's every chance the child will be telling themselves: "I'm clever because I finished quickly" and "I don't always need to try hard because I'm clever".

What about other children who overhear this praise being given? What if they don't finish quickly? What if they get one or a few wrong? Does that mean they are not clever?

Rather than praising the outcome, we should try to praise the process. An example of a process could be effort, different strategies, techniques, or behaviour.

By praising children's ability to try hard we are reinforcing the importance of the most crucial skill they will need for the modern adult world – the ability to be resilient. Even if they are finding something hard, or not getting something quite right in the first couple of tries, what we need them to learn is that they should try hard and not give up. By telling them they are clever, we are killing the acquisition of this skill.

Children need to be enthusiastic with their efforts too. In fact, they should be as enthusiastic to learn as you are to teach. So we need to make sure children are

intrinsically motivated to try their best and learn new things. How do we do this? We eradicate the use of the word 'work'. Work is something you 'do', that you 'get on with', that you 'complete'. Learning is something you acquire over time. In every school I have worked in I have had to have a conversation at some point with a teacher about the importance of learning gains made, rather than work being completed.

I remember being in a Year 2 maths lesson once and the teacher had asked the children to tidy up for break time. A small group of children ignored this at the behest of a learning support assistant who was stood over them saying "That one is fourteen. The answer is fourteen. Come on, write fourteen."

The LSA believed that the teacher was expecting all the children in the group to finish and to get every problem correct. It didn't matter whether the children understood the concept or had reached a mastery level. It was all about doing the work, being right and getting it finished. Children need to understand that we work because we have to, and we learn because we want to.

It is important to remember that if we just focus on effort only then it can lead to four common problems:

1. By making it sound as simple as 'try harder' we are diluting the entire theory behind the learning process.
2. It doesn't help children who try hard and still fail. They would be better off developing other processes and formulating different strategies.
3. Effort is not the only thing. If a child tries hard but doesn't learn anything then that isn't good. Sometimes we say 'great effort, you tried your best' just to make children feel good in the moment.
4. It can lead to the belief that a child has failed because they didn't try hard enough.

We should praise different strategies that children use, how they modify their techniques, when they ask for feedback, when they show resilience, and when they collaborate. If we focus on just praising the effort children put in then we are endangering them into thinking that they can 'believe' their way to success.

After all, you can keep trying and trying and trying, and still fail. Not because you gave up but because your strategy or technique was not appropriate.

Remember this, gut-busting effort and precise strategy is superior to ability, when ability doesn't put in a shift.



## **Performance management – but not as we know it!**

I love sport. I always have. Watching it, talking about it, taking part in it and writing about it. My particular favourite sport is football (cliché I know). I could go on about how it is known as the beautiful game and become all poetic and flowery. But for me, I believe it is the ultimate performance sport.

Take the very best players who play for the very best teams in the world. Their performance has to peak week in, week out, all year long. If a player isn't quite feeling it or isn't on top of their game, then they won't play. This is different to so many other sports.

Take athletics. The very best athletes do train all year long but they are building towards a specific event. For somebody like Usain Bolt, the fastest sprinter of all time, he would train all year round in order to peak around every two years, usually when the World Championships or Olympics were being staged. It almost didn't matter outside of these championships if he was performing at the peak of his powers or not.

It is the same for marathon running. The greatest marathon runner of all time is arguably the Kenyan athlete, Eluid Kipchoge. He is changing everything we know about marathon running and leaving the competition in his wake. He will probably never run more than 20 marathons in his career, and he averages around two races a year.

Everything that athletes like Bolt and Kipchoge do is geared towards peaking at a specific time of the year. They take a gradual journey towards a particular moment in time when they are required to perform at their best.

To put this into teaching terms, it would be like building towards delivering your best lessons in a specific week at the end of the summer term. Whilst every lesson that came before was to build up to that particular moment of peak performance. With the agenda in schools very firmly fixed to believing 'every minute counts', this just wouldn't be possible or effective.

The way football teams approach their sport is geared towards ensuring their players perform at their very best in every game, week after week. Take any team in any division in England and you will see by their league position that two or three wins in a row could be the difference between breaking into the promotion spaces or falling into the relegation zone.

Like in teaching, every lesson counts, in football, every match counts. Football teams would not make anywhere near the progress they make if they forced their players

to push themselves to their limits every single day. They would end up suffering burnout. This is why rest and recuperation has become such an important aspect of modern football. Transferring this into teaching, we can see that if leaders push their teachers every single day without any focus on recuperation, then our teachers will ultimately fall foul of burnout.

We should think of ourselves like footballers. Teachers are elite athletes in a regular high performance sport.

You will never be able to get any more time. Time runs out. The sun will rise and fall with the same regularity every day. So wishing for more of it will not help at all. However, we can get more energy. The amazing thing about energy is that it is clean, green and renewable.

When your energy levels are low there are small steps you can take to replenish it. And they're relatively simple steps.

**Take your holidays.** You have a half term every seven weeks for a reason. To renew and replenish yourself. It is too easy to spend your whole half term working and being in and around the school mentality. It doesn't mean you should spend all half term lying down. But it is great to be able to do something different that can take your mind off of your school commitments.

**Take your lunch.** How many times in the last month have you actually entered the staff room and taken the time to have your lunch? I know what it is like in schools and how the lunch hour can vanish in the blink of an eye. But challenge yourself to take 20 minutes in your lunch break to simply sit, eat and enjoy your food whilst being away from your computer or phone.

**Get some sunlight.** I remember as both a class teacher and a senior leader that there were days when everything came and hit me at once. Because of this it meant I never left the boundary of my classroom or office. Once I even had an office that didn't have any windows! Being outside in the sunlight and fresh air has excellent renewable qualities that should not be ignored by teachers (or anyone for that matter!).

**Get a hobby.** What a brilliant way to turn off than to dedicate yourself to something else. You can set goals, collaborate with others, make a personal change, and really support yourself in switching off.

**Delete the email app.** I remember one Saturday morning where I checked my work emails on my phone because it was just too easy having the app right there. I read an email and it spoilt my entire weekend with my family because I just couldn't get it out of my head. The world is busy enough without us contributing to it by making

ourselves available 24/7. Delete your email app now. You'll thank me for it in a week.

Rest and recuperation should be as important to teachers as it is to Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi. If you are tired, exhausted and unenthusiastic – what chance do the children in your class have?

## **Seagulls**

It is dangerous being British. Whilst it is hugely enjoyable being so self-deprecating as a nation it can start to cause problems for our thinking and attitudes over time. We are probably the best country in the world at bonding over a negative.

If you have ever been on holiday abroad and had to wait in line at the airport to check your luggage in then there is every chance that you have developed a feeling of frustration at the fact there is only one attendant on the desk whilst 500 people wait their turn. It takes one person in the queue to mutter "This is absolutely ridiculous" to start off a chain of complaining. We hear one person moan and we instinctively want to join in and thus, bond over the negative.

We are the only country in the world where we actually take pleasure in the small misfortunes of others. I don't mean this in a sinister way. Instead, I mean rewinding *Strictly Come Dancing* to watch a D-list celebrity fall on their backside over and over. We're awkwardly laughing at their misfortune whilst being very thankful that it isn't us.

Our friends over in the USA are some of the most optimistic folk on the planet. If they saw a celebrity fall on *Strictly* they'd probably be thinking "I hope they're OK, that looked bad," whilst the British are probably thinking "That is the funniest thing I have ever seen". The negative brings us together but at the same time we are terrible for dwelling on all the bad stuff that happens in the world.

I am by no means saying that the world is a bright, shiny, sparkly place filled with rainbows, fairies and unicorns – nor am I saying that it is full of misery, doom and gloom. The reality is: the world is as it is. We assign the feeling of good and bad to it all of the time. That means, that yes, bad stuff will inevitably happen.

It is very easy to think after one bad thing that happens, that a whole parade of bad stuff follows. It is then too easy to say "Why is this happening to me?" or "Why do bad things happen to good people?".

Here is the real truth: all sorts of stuff happens to all sorts of people.

Sometimes we think all of the bad stuff happening to us is the worst thing ever, then we hear about someone else who is having an even worse time and it can put our own problems into perspective. There is a fantastic word called 'sonder', which is the realisation that other people's lives are just as complex as your own.

People who have not achieved sonder believe that their own life and problems are worse than anyone else's. Not everyone can achieve sonder. So what I ask is now

you know what it is, to be aware of the situation or circumstances others may find themselves in. For every ten problems you have, there could be ten passers-by who also have ten problems of their own.

What we need to do is accept that bad stuff will happen to us at some point in our life. Every now and again a seagull will fly over us and drop a parcel on our head, and sometimes a flock of seagulls might fly over us and all drop some bigger parcels on us. The point is, over time it will wash off.

Teaching is stressful and emotionally draining. Sometimes we will encounter some seagulls in the form of difficult parents, challenging children or inspecting visitors. But their excrement won't last forever. The feeling of being down won't last forever.

Eventually we will find within ourselves the ability to move forward. But before that happens we need permission to not feel OK, as long as we understand it won't last forever. This is where our in-built resilience muscle kicks in. Your internal voice needs to say: "I know you don't feel great right now and that's OK. But it will pass and you will bounce back."

Ask yourself two things: If I don't move forward, what will happen? If I do let myself move forward, what will happen?

## **Where's your mind at?**

For a long time I believed that there was no such thing as 110% effort. How can you possibly give more than 100%? I always thought it was a ridiculous thing to hear when footballers said "Do you know, at the end of the day, the lads gave 110%." How could this be possible?

It wasn't until I became engaged with the work of Carol Dweck in her excellent book, *Mindset*. She doesn't precisely outline the idea of 100% and 110% effort. But her work prompted a reaction in me that made me believe there is such a thing as 110% effort.

I do need to include another word to add clarity – 110% *perceived* effort.

Dweck's work around mindset compares two states of mindset. Fixed mindset and growth mindset. If you have a fixed mindset, you believe that your talent and intelligence is fixed. That your ability has a limitation, and there are things out of your reach which you will never be able to attain. If you have a growth mindset, you believe that your intelligence is like a muscle. That it can be worked and exercised and ultimately strengthened.

If you have a fixed mindset, you will use phrases like "I can't do this", "this is too difficult", and "I don't have enough talent". In schools I always hear this when talking to parents about learning maths. A generalisation is one parent will often say something along the lines of "Don't ask me about maths. I was never any good at maths," and they suggest the child should ask the other parent.

When we say "I'm not a maths person", or "I was never any good at maths. I hate it," we are reinforcing to our children that it is socially acceptable to say we don't like and that we are not good at maths. It is not socially acceptable to say we don't like and we are not very good at reading. Somehow the attitude around maths has infiltrated our society.

Growth mindset vocabulary would include phrases like "I can't do this yet", and "I need more practice". People with a growth mindset believe that time, effort, input and practice will make a difference to their overall ability. In a previous chapter, 'Cake of life', we talked about for every overnight success there has been 10 years of hard work and effort. A growth mindset requires the belief that success is a journey and developed over time.

A fixed mindset is self-limiting. If you believe you cannot do something, then you will probably never be able to do it. By giving up and believing we can do no more, we perceive we are giving 100% effort. But as soon as we optimise our thought

process and believe that we can progress incrementally and with time, effort, input and practice – we will be able to do something, then we go beyond our 100% perceived effort.

A growth mindset is so much more than simply putting the word 'yet' at the end of statements. It has to be corporate. In a school, the staff need to define a learning culture of continuous improvement and this needs to be transmitted to the children. By holding the belief that we can always improve, then seeking the means to make it happen, we will secure a growth mindset.

The real truth is: we live within our own thought constructed reality. We will look into this more deeply later on. Simply put, the thoughts and beliefs we hold, influence how we perceive the world and our ability to operate in it. If you believe you are not a maths person, when confronted with a maths task you will shut down and decide you cannot do it before you have even attempted it.

If you believe that you can improve, you will seek guidance, input, feedback and then pursue purposeful practice to improve over time.

110% - it is all in your head really.

## **Monkeys**

‘A problem shared is a problem halved’. In schools I don’t think this is true. As a leader I can recall many visits to my office where people would like to ‘share’ their problem. However, the word share means that they should have some and I should have some. In reality the visit to my office is simply to give me the problem as a gift. It is ready wrapped with a neat bow on, and once handed over the gift giver will often absolve themselves of this problem.

A fellow headteacher once introduced me to the concept of monkeys. The idea is that when people have a problem they are trying to deal with, it can be described as ‘a monkey on their back’. When problems were gifted to me, the monkey transfers from their back to my back.

Sometimes I could arrive at school and walk into the main office and be given a monkey by the receptionist. The caretaker would then nab me in the corridor and give me another monkey. By the time I have walked down the school and greeted everyone, I have been stopped a few more times and gifted with more monkeys. By the time I arrive back at my office or classroom, I could very well have a dozen monkeys on my back.

Everyone who has gifted me their monkey will have that feeling of a weight being lifted and feel content that the problem is no longer theirs to solve.

Some of my favourite problems that people have brought to my door to magically solve include:

- There are no tea towels in the staff room.
- It’s raining outside.
- There’s no fruit for the children at break time.
- A clock has run out of batteries.
- An LSA’s car has a flat tyre in the staff car park.

If you have people who bring you problems and issues (of course, I am not really talking about problems and issues am I? I’m talking about monkeys!), then are some steps you can take to help them to help themselves. Don’t accept monkeys from other people.

Some cracking questions to ask that help others to tame their monkeys include:

- What can I do to help you?
- What is the best that could happen?
- What is the worst that could happen?
- What is the most likely thing that will happen?
- What would happen if you did nothing?



- Who else might be able to help you?
- If I wasn't here today, what would you do?
- What have you learnt from this?

The more you are able to help others to help themselves, the fewer monkeys you will find on your back.

I am by no means saying you should be disregarding others when they ask for help. But instead of jumping up out of your chair or leaving your own class where you have own responsibilities to solve problems that other people should be able to solve on their own, you can take the time to ask some killer questions to enable others to take responsibility for their own problems – and hopefully begin to solve them.

Go forth and rid yourself of monkeys!

## **The perfect teacher does not exist**

Social media is an amazing tool for education. Whether it is used for to gain inspiration for activities, how to set up activities or areas, or even to connect with other educators – it is a fantastic resource for the modern teacher.

However, it also has its dangers. Away from the working world so many people are guilty of endless scrolling. The scrolling almost feels unintentional. We say to ourselves “I’ll just look for five minutes” and before we know it 45 minutes will have passed. We keep scrolling in the hope that the next scroll will give us the ‘thing’ we need and want to see – without even knowing what the ‘thing’ is. The ‘just one more scroll’ mentality is also a form of making sure we don’t miss out on anything.

The sad thing about social media is that it is generally fake and fabricated. That rehearsed selfie, the well placed pretend candid family photo and the cry for attention statuses are all forms of editing to ensure that we put forward an unflawed version of our life.

I see numerous accounts of teachers on social media who have created swathes of incredible resources and activities. It is too easy for the rest of us mere mortals to compare ourselves to what we see online and feel inadequate. We can spend hours on social media looking at beautifully set up role play areas, wonderful continuous provision with colour coded pots of pencils, and delightfully laminated resources hanging at every angle from every part of the ceilings and walls in classrooms. It makes us feel like we are not doing a good job.

The real truth is this: the quality of a teacher cannot be told by the volume of laminated resources attached to their displays. These online accounts look they have been made by perfect teachers – the superhumans of the education world.

The real quality of a teacher can be found in the effectiveness of their delivery, the precision and depth of their questioning, their attention to differentiation and their ability to quickly move children on to the next step in their learning. Everything else that we see online is simply surface level sheen that has been polished with fakery.

You should quite rightly look online for sources of inspiration and ingenuity, but don’t end up comparing yourself to the edited sheen of someone else’s practice.

The real takeaway from this is: don’t be so hard on yourself. When you see someone else’s amazing practice online, you are seeing it out of context. All you can infer by a photo of a very well designed role play area is that the person posting it is very good at designing and putting together a role play area. You are not seeing the context of the types of children who use it, the overall quality of the teacher’s ability to plan,

deliver and reflect on a lesson, or how the children have been able to interact and build their skills in the area. You are simply seeing a photo and nothing else.

By framing how you think about what you see online and responding to it in an appropriate way, you can get so much professional development without killing your own mojo for teaching.

Just remember, you are enough already.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Purpose**

So we reach the final chapter.

We will explore why we do what we do – and why that is so important in ensuring we make a difference to the lives of others and ourselves. We'll meet some concentric circles, use some words in capital letters, and figure out why WHY is more important than WHAT. Then we will finish by talking about baby buggies, Keanu Reeves and grains of sugar.

Hopefully you'll become aware of how you can take control of your thoughts, feelings, emotions and actions – and not only become a better teacher – but live a better life as well.

So... where's your why?

## **Where's your why?**

In his excellent book 'Start with why', Simon Sinek introduces the concept of what he calls the 'Golden Circle'. It helps individuals and organisations drill down into what they do, how they do it, and why they do what they do.

The Golden Circle is made up of three concentric circles. The deeper we go into the circles, the more we understand about why we do what we do. The first level of the circle is WHAT. Every individual or organisation will know what they do. This boils down to being able to describe the product, resource or service that is provided. Identifying what we do just skims the surface. For teachers, it is quite simply that we teach children.

The next level of the circle is HOW. It is amazing how many people know what they do but not how they do it. In school terms, I have encountered many teachers who know their WHAT is to teach. But identifying their HOW is much more difficult.

There is a proportion of teachers who do not know how best to teach their children. You will know the teachers I am talking about – if you can't, then it might be you! They are the ones who teach the same lessons, with the same plans and the same resources every year, year after year. If the children didn't understand then it couldn't possibly be the teacher's fault because this is the same lesson they have been using for the last decade. By simply continuing to teach, and when I say 'teach' I mean 'talk at the children', there will be very little learning going on. In turn, the HOW remains unknown.

Now we reach the middle of the circle. This is where WHY is located. There are so many people, and not just teachers, who cannot identify their WHY. Why do you do what you do? This is about your purpose, cause, mission and belief. Why are you a teacher? Why do you come to school every day? Why should the children care? Why are you the one who should get the job at an interview?

Lots of people and organisations think about (or don't think about) their WHAT first. They sometimes state their HOW. They hardly ever state their WHY. The reason for this is WHAT is the easiest to identify.

The most successful individuals and organisations do just as Sinek says, they start with WHY. The WHY makes others care. With buy in and trust, the road to success can be less bumpy.

By getting your own WHY in place, it can compel others to believe it and help them buy into whatever you are trying to do.

My WHY is 'to breathe life into others'. HOW do I do that? By using a mixture of pedagogical approaches to engage and enthuse everyone no matter what their ability or starting point. So WHAT do I do? I'm a teacher.

So... where's your WHY?

## **There is no spoon**

And so we reach the final part of the book. It's a biggie. It is all about how massive and impacting our thinking is on our reality.

My second child, my son, was born in 2018. After much turmoil of trying to choose a name for him, we finally settled on Phoenix. With both my wife and I being teachers we were very choosy when it came to names. We wanted something neither of us had ever encountered in schools because usually behind every name is a story of something that happened with a child.

So once we decided on his name, something strange happened. I started seeing and hearing it everywhere. In the same week as when we chose his name I delivered some training at a local secondary school whose address happened to be Phoenix Drive. We visited the hospital for a growth scan and walked past the Phoenix Unit. On my commute to school in the morning I sat in a queue of traffic and the van in front of me was emblazoned with the name 'Phoenix Heating'. We watched two children's films that very week, Peter Rabbit and Paddington 2. In Peter Rabbit, the deer is called Phoenix – and in Paddington 2, Hugh Grant's character is called Phoenix Buchanan.

It seemed amazing at first that we were encountering this name, but in actual fact, we have been to the hospital and walked past that unit a number of times, I have driven the same way to work for years so chances are I have seen that van before, I have been to the secondary school a couple of times in the past, and I had even watched both films before.

The realisation is that I have simply never noticed the word Phoenix in the context of all those places. It is a bit like your nose, eyelids and eyelashes. You can actually see them all of the time, but you never really notice it.

We focus on what we think about and what we believe. Before my wife became pregnant I would never notice pregnant women in public. But as soon as we found out about my wife expecting, suddenly I saw pregnancy everywhere. I also didn't know that the buggy and pram industry is the one of the most lucrative in the entire world. It is actually quite similar to the car industry. You can buy buggies with swivelling seats, detachable parts and they come in all sorts of shapes, sizes and textures. Before I knew this I don't think I knew anything about buggies. But suddenly, on the street I was seeing buggies everywhere, and more amazingly, I knew all about them.

What we think about and how it becomes conscious is focused on more deeply in the work of Syd Banks. Banks developed 'the three principles', mind, thought and

consciousness. An exploration of Banks' work will give you a more profound understanding of the three principles. Basically, Banks' insight is the thoughts you bring to consciousness influence the way you feel at any given point in time.

I am going to only focus on the two principles, thought and consciousness, because they are the two which influence our mood and attitude on any given day. Let's break down why we feel the way we do and how it is influenced by our thoughts.

We all live in our own thought constructed realities. In 'The Matrix', Keanu Reeves is able to bend the spoon when he realises there is no spoon. His thoughts help him to construct the reality he is in. We perceive and experience something which causes us to have thoughts about it. This makes the thoughts conscious within our minds and allows us to be aware of the wider world. In my case, I had experienced the name Phoenix and applied my own thinking to that becoming the name of my new son. It sits conscious to me and the name becomes more noticeable in my future perception of the world.

The amazing thing about the conscious constructs we build from our thoughts is that we become aware of our thoughts. If you imagine the number of thoughts you have in an average day is equal to around 60,000 and we can represent this with all the grains in a bag of sugar. If I were to drop the entire bag of sugar over you there is no way you would be able to catch them all. In fact, you wouldn't really be able to catch many of them at all. Not all your thoughts stick inside your head and become conscious because you have the ability to choose between them. Your thoughts enable you to form images inside your mind and provide you with the essence of ideas and inspiration. You are perfectly able to pick and choose between them – it is just that so many people have forgotten, or didn't realise, there is a choice.

When your thoughts take shape inside your head and you bring them to consciousness, you are also providing yourself with the ability to feel emotions about the world around you. Being happy and being sad are not like sensations such as feeling hungry or cold. When you're hungry or cold, your body is reacting physiologically. Happiness and sadness are emotions that are formed by thoughts becoming conscious. Your thoughts are not true reality, the way you perceive reality is informed by how you think.

In short: *you are feeling your thinking.*

It is far too easy to fall into the same rut of allowing negative thoughts to continue rising to consciousness and forcing you to experience a negative reality of the world.

Remember how earlier we looked at how every event in the world is neutral. It isn't until we apply thinking to an event or situation that we form an emotional state.



Banks' argument is that once we are aware of this concept we should be able to take greater control of thoughts. Which in turn will influence the emotions and feelings within us, and enable us to respond more positively with our actions and behaviours.

A classroom example is imagining your children arrive into school ready for registration first thing in the morning and two children immediately start arguing as they come through the door. These children are not first time offenders. Your first thought could easily be: "Oh, here we go again". Which causes your emotional state to become anxious, flustered, frustrated and cross. This emotional state could possibly mean that you react angrily by shouting at the children and ruining everyone's start to the day.

By applying the concept of being aware of thought and consciousness, you can intercept the negative thoughts and react differently.

You see the children arguing. You intercept any initial thoughts and ask yourself: how can I respond in the best way? Perhaps it is putting yourself between the children and cracking a joke to diffuse the situation. This is your thinking. It gives rise to an emotional state of being positive, cheerful and caring. Your actions and behaviour will be influenced by this and you will respond in the moment in a cool, calm and positive manner.

Be aware of your thoughts. Don't let them sabotage you. You already have it within yourself to be able to intercept them and choose which ones you want to mould and influence your actions and behaviour.

## **Conclusion**

So here we are. We made it. Thank you for reading.

If there is one thing I want you to take away from reading this book it would be that your attitudinal choices have a far bigger impact than you could ever realise. They influence the mood of your family, your colleagues, the children in your class, and most especially – yourself.

If you know someone who would get something useful from this book then please feel free to forward it on to them. The wider the message goes, the happier I will be!

Just remember, you make a difference every day. Keep fighting the good fight.

I wish you lots of success in your personal and professional life.

Best wishes,

SB

## About the author

Simon Bolger is **That Wellbeing Guy**. A former primary school teacher and headteacher who now operates as a teacher, trainer, speaker and coach. He is on a mission to start a wellbeing revolution in our school communities by educating, empowering and energising school staff to live their best life every day, teach great lessons, and create an environment fit for flourishing.

[www.thatwellbeingguy.org](http://www.thatwellbeingguy.org)

[www.facebook.com/thatwellbeingguy](https://www.facebook.com/thatwellbeingguy)

[www.twitter.com/simonbolger](https://www.twitter.com/simonbolger)

You can contact Simon by emailing him at:

[simon@thatwellbeingguy.org](mailto:simon@thatwellbeingguy.org)

*“Our dreams don’t mean anything  
unless we do something about them whilst we’re awake.”*

- Simon Bolger