

RECLAIMING HUMANITY IN EDUCATION

*The*  
*Teacher's*  
*Heart*



TAUNGA AUAHA  
PUBLISHING

SARAH AIONO



# RECLAIMING THE HEART OF TEACHING IN A WORLD OF METRICS

*Teaching has never been just about content delivery or test scores. At its best, it is a profoundly human act – one that nurtures trust, belonging, and curiosity in every learner. Yet too often, education policy reduces teaching to compliance and measurement, stripping away the heart of the profession.*

*The Teacher's Heart: Reclaiming Humanity in Education is a bold invitation to teachers, school leaders, and communities to resist this narrowing view. Dr Sarah Aiono draws on classroom stories, research, and decades of practice to argue that teaching is a human science: complex, relational, and deeply ethical.*

*This book reminds us that thriving classrooms are built not on rigid programmes but on professional trust, creativity, and courage. It offers teachers a vision of autonomy within constraint, practical strategies to protect their integrity, and encouragement to reframe the narrative of what successful education looks like.*

*At its core, The Teacher's Heart is a call to return to what matters most – the relationships that shape lives, the joy of learning, and the humanity at the centre of teaching.*



**Dr Sarah Aiono** is an educator, researcher, and thought leader in play pedagogy and teacher professionalism. As CEO of Longworth Education, she works with schools across Aotearoa and internationally to reimagine education that honours children and uplifts teachers.



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# **The Teacher's Heart: Reclaiming Humanity in Education**

**Free Sample Chapter**

**Chapter Title: Anchoring to the Teacher Heart**

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**This sample chapter offers a glimpse into the heart of the book.  
If you've ever felt like the system is breaking you, you're not alone.  
We hope these words offer validation, clarity and a gentle way forward.**

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# Chapter 1: Anchoring to the Teacher Heart

## **The Girl Who Slept in the Library Corner**

She was six years old, third of four siblings, three at school, one still at home. Every day, they arrived together, sometimes with bags, often without shoes, never with lunch. Her hair was thick with head lice. We suspected they got themselves to school, their parents absent or unable to manage. Her father was a Mongrel Mob member, patched up, physically imposing, and known in the community. Her mother looked lifeless, drained by a reality we couldn't see but could only guess at.

This little girl struggled with her literacy, not because she couldn't learn, but because she was exhausted. Some afternoons she would curl up in the beanbags in our library corner and fall asleep, the hum of classroom activity swirling around her.

I didn't wake her. Instead, I let her sleep. I saw her need for rest as more pressing than the literacy block I was supposed to run. I rearranged her reading sessions to fit around her naps, because I knew that learning could wait; her wellbeing couldn't.

One day, she fell asleep so deeply that when the bell rang, she didn't stir. I gently woke her, told her it was time to go home, and then rushed off to a staff meeting, assuming as I always did, that she'd head home with her siblings as usual.

At 4:20 that afternoon, her dad, patched and puffed up, stormed into school, yelling her name. His presence was intimidating; you couldn't help but feel the tension shift when he walked in. He hadn't found her at home.

I rushed back to the classroom and found her still asleep in the library corner, oblivious to it all. Her Dad strutted into my room, picked her up like a sack of potatoes, slung her over his shoulder, and walked out.

That moment has never left me. School was her sanctuary: a place of warmth, safety, and rest. Sometimes, the most educationally sound thing I could do was simply to let her sleep.

## **Why the Teacher Heart Matters**

Teaching, at its core, is profoundly human work. It is relational, moral, and emotional. Every interaction we have with our students carries weight, not just academically, but neurologically and developmentally. The "teacher heart" - our capacity for empathy, care, attunement, and relational responsiveness - is not a soft add-on to our practice. It is the bedrock upon which effective teaching and learning are built. Without it, even the most technically proficient pedagogy risks becoming mechanical and disconnected from the lived realities of our students.

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And yet, in today's policy environment, heart-led teaching is often viewed with suspicion or even derision. The language of education has shifted steadily towards managerialism: dominated by evidence hierarchies, compliance measures, and data-driven accountability systems. In this framing, only what is countable "counts." Words such as "fidelity," "structured," "benchmarks," and "evidence" dominate professional conversations, subtly positioning relational teaching and responsiveness as unscientific, inefficient, or even indulgent. When policymakers speak of "raising standards," it is almost always synonymous with standardisation, as though sameness equates to quality.

We hear refrains like: *"You can't measure belonging."* And yet, this misses a crucial truth: just because something is difficult to quantify does not mean it is insignificant. Indeed, some of the most impactful aspects of teaching - belonging, trust, safety, and connection - are those least visible in test scores but most visible in children's lives. Neuroscience, psychology, and decades of educational research affirm what teachers instinctively know: learning is an embodied and relational act.

Bruce Perry's (2006) Neurosequential Model of Development articulates this clearly: before children can engage in reasoning or abstract thought, their nervous systems must first feel safe and regulated. His "3 Rs" - *Regulate, Relate, Reason* - offer a powerful lens for understanding why relational teaching is not a luxury but a neurological necessity. If a child's stress response is activated, the prefrontal cortex, the seat of higher-order thinking, literally goes offline. Without safety, there is no learning.

This is echoed in Stephen Porges' Polyvagal Theory (2018), which demonstrates how cues of relational warmth and safety activate the parasympathetic nervous system, calming the body and priming the brain for engagement. Similarly, Daniel Siegel's (2012) work on interpersonal neurobiology highlights that teacher-student interactions can "co-regulate" emotional states, synchronising neural patterns in ways that directly support cognitive growth. These findings reaffirm that the emotional climate we create is not ancillary to learning, it is the very soil in which it grows.

When we ignore the teacher heart, we risk reducing teaching to a transactional delivery model, moving content from teacher to student without attending to the conditions that make that transfer possible. Schools are not factories, and education cannot be meaningfully reduced to throughput metrics (OECD, 2025). Learning is deeply human. It happens in contexts of trust, belonging, and mutual respect. Teachers who bring relational depth to their practice are not "soft"; they are working in alignment with what research across neuroscience, psychology, and pedagogy tells us is both effective and ethical.

This is not indulgence. It is not sentimentality. It is rigorously supported by evidence. In fact, if we divorce education from the heart, we undermine the very conditions that allow evidence-based strategies to function. A literacy lesson is meaningless if the child is too anxious to pay attention. Formative feedback is irrelevant if the learner feels unsafe to take risks. Explicit instruction may clarify knowledge, but without relational trust, it fails to inspire curiosity or persistence. Heart is not in competition with evidence; it is the precondition for its success.

## **Teacher Identity and Purpose**

Educational thinkers like Palmer (2017) have long argued that technique alone does not define good teaching. What matters most is the teacher's sense of identity and integrity, which shape every decision, every relationship, and every moment of practice. However, teacher identity is not a static concept; it is dynamic, evolving through personal experience, institutional context, and sociopolitical pressures. It encompasses how teachers see themselves in relation to their students, their profession, and the moral purpose underpinning their work (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). This identity shapes every pedagogical choice we make, from how we respond to a distressed child to how we navigate policy mandates that conflict with our professional judgement.

Research confirms that strong professional identity correlates with higher resilience, efficacy, and job satisfaction (Day & Gu, 2014). Teachers who feel connected to their "why" are more likely to withstand external pressures and remain adaptable in the face of reform. In contrast, when identity is eroded - when teachers are asked to prioritise compliance over relational care or scripted delivery over professional autonomy - their sense of agency diminishes (Santoro, 2018; Hakanen et al., 2022).

This is not simply about individual mindset; it is also systemic. Teacher identity is nurtured in environments that value trust, autonomy, and professional dialogue (OECD, 2025). When schools create cultures of shared purpose and relational trust, teachers report greater alignment between their values and their daily work, fuelling what Fullan (2020) calls "deep moral professionalism."

Moreover, identity is inseparable from relationships. A teacher's authenticity - the alignment between personal values, beliefs about learning, and daily practice - creates a powerful modelling effect for students. Kelchtermans (2009) frames this as "vulnerability as a strength": when teachers bring their whole selves into their classrooms, they humanise education, demonstrating integrity and compassion in ways that transcend content delivery.

Yet, identity is also constantly negotiated in response to external demands. Recent studies highlight how frequent policy shifts, prescriptive curricula, and accountability

regimes contribute to what Santoro (2018) calls demoralisation: the emotional toll of being unable to enact what teachers know is good and right for their students. Unlike burnout, which is often framed as individual weakness, demoralisation is a structural condition, arising when systems constrain teachers from acting in alignment with their values.

This is why anchoring to the teacher heart is not merely about emotional wellbeing. It is about sustaining professional integrity in a landscape that often challenges it. Teachers must be empowered to see themselves as moral agents, capable of filtering policy through their ethical compass and contextual expertise. Doing so is not an act of resistance alone, it is an act of fidelity to the deeper purpose of education: the flourishing of young people.

As Kelchtermans reminds us, teacher identity is shaped by community, by stories shared in staffrooms, and by the collegial trust that allows teachers to navigate complexity together. Schools that intentionally invest in these relational infrastructures, such as collaborative inquiry, peer mentoring, reflective dialogue, do more than boost morale: they affirm that teaching is a deeply human profession grounded in shared purpose.

The teacher heart, then, is not a sentimental metaphor. It is a professional necessity. A compass guiding us toward practices that are evidence-informed, ethically grounded, and attuned to the lived realities of our students. When we are anchored in our identity and purpose, we resist being reduced to technicians. We remain whole educators, able to integrate research and humanity in service of the children entrusted to us.

### **Protecting the Teacher Heart**

Anchoring ourselves to our teacher hearts is not passive work; it requires deliberate attention, reflection, and supportive practices. What follows are evidence-based strategies that are both research grounded and practical ways to sustain our identity and purpose in teaching.

### **Revisit Your "Why"**

Reconnecting with your purpose is a powerful buffer against the emotional fatigue of teaching. Ryan and Deci's (2020) concept of *self-concordant goals*, those aligned with our core values, demonstrates that when we operate from intrinsic motivation, our work feels more meaningful and energising. For teachers, this means regularly reflecting on the reasons we entered the profession and identifying the moments that affirm our impact. These acts of "purpose recall" not only combat the sense of futility that can arise under high-stakes accountability pressures but also reinforce identity coherence: the alignment between who we are and what we do (Day & Gu, 2014). Simple rituals,

such as ending the week by journaling one interaction or breakthrough that rekindled your "why," shift attention from deficit-driven narratives to purpose-driven practice. Over time, these reflections create a protective narrative of meaning that strengthens resilience in the face of policy churn and external scrutiny.

### *Micro-Moments of Joy*

Barbara Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build Theory highlights how small positive emotions accumulate to build lasting psychological resources (Fredrickson, 2001, 2013). In teaching, noticing and savouring micro-moments—a child's spontaneous laughter, a "lightbulb" moment of understanding, or a thank-you note from a student—reorients our attention away from the stressors that so often dominate our cognitive load. Psychological research shows that our brains are wired with a "negativity bias," meaning negative events are more salient and sticky than positive ones (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Intentionally capturing joyful micro-moments counters this bias, rewiring neural pathways towards optimism and broadening our emotional bandwidth. Keeping a "joy journal" or sharing a "best moment of the week" with colleagues creates a culture of noticing what is working, even in difficult contexts. This practice is not frivolous. It is a scientifically validated way of building emotional endurance and maintaining hopefulness within demanding educational landscapes (Fredrickson, 2001, 2013; Rozin & Royzman, 2001).

### *Boundaries as Care*

Boundaries are often misunderstood in education, framed as reluctance or lack of dedication, when in reality they are a form of professional stewardship. Skaalvik and Skaalvik's (2021) longitudinal research demonstrates that teachers who lack control over workload boundaries experience higher rates of emotional exhaustion and intent to leave the profession. Protecting time and energy is an ethical act because it safeguards our capacity to show up fully for our students. Prioritisation tools, such as distinguishing between urgent and important tasks (Covey, 2020), help teachers focus on what truly matters: core teaching work and relational interactions that drive learning. Learning to say a "strategic no" to non-essential demands, such as unnecessary paperwork or meetings detached from classroom impact, preserves energy for high-value work. In schools where leadership models this behaviour, cultures shift to view boundary-setting not as resistance but as professionalism in action.

### *Self-Compassion Practices*

Self-compassion is more than a personal wellbeing strategy; it is a professional survival skill (Neff, 2021). Teaching is inherently relational and exposes us daily to vulnerability, uncertainty, and imperfection. Neff's model focused on self-kindness, recognition of shared humanity, and mindfulness, offers a framework for reframing failure or difficulty



without harsh self-criticism. For example, after a challenging lesson, a self-compassionate response might sound like: *"This was tough, but I'm not alone in this. Many teachers experience moments like this. What can I learn and carry forward?"* Research shows that self-compassion correlates with lower cortisol levels, reduced anxiety, and greater persistence in the face of setbacks (Neff & Germer, 2018). In teaching, where emotional labour is intense and mistakes feel highly visible, these practices restore equilibrium and help us recover quickly rather than ruminate unproductively.

### Collegial Connection

Teaching is too often described as solitary work, but it thrives within relational ecosystems. Hakanen et al. (2022) identify collegial trust and shared purpose as critical predictors of teacher wellbeing and retention. Connection is both protective and generative: it buffers against stress while also fuelling professional dialogue that refines practice. Intentional spaces for collegiality, whether informal coffee catch-ups, peer mentoring pairs, or structured story-sharing sessions, reinforce that teaching is a communal endeavour rather than an individual struggle. Collective efficacy research (Goddard et al., 2015) shows that when teachers believe their colleagues share responsibility and capability for student success, both morale and outcomes improve. Investing time in collegial relationships is not a distraction from core work; it is part of the infrastructure that sustains it, enabling us to draw strength from each other in ways that no individual self-care strategy can replicate.

### **Teaching With Heart**

Anchoring to our teacher hearts isn't naïve. It is an act of courage and professionalism. In an era increasingly defined by metrics, compliance, and standardisation, choosing to lead with heart is a radical reaffirmation of what education is truly for: human flourishing. It is how we sustain ourselves as educators and how we create classrooms where children are seen not merely as data points or test-takers, but as complex, vibrant learners shaped by context, culture, and lived experience.

Heart-led teaching does not stand in opposition to rigour or evidence. On the contrary, it enacts the best of both. Neuroscience and psychology affirm what teachers intuitively know: learning is relational and embodied. Before the prefrontal cortex engages in reasoning or problem-solving, the nervous system must feel safe. Before children can risk error or stretch themselves cognitively, they must trust that they belong. By approaching teaching through a *regulate, relate, and reason* framework, (Perry, 2006), wellbeing is not an "extra"; it is the prerequisite for every other educational aspiration.

This perspective reframes our priorities. It means that pausing to comfort a distressed child, investing time in building connection, or even letting a tired six-year-old sleep is a

diversion from "the real teaching", it *is* real teaching. These moments lay the neurological and relational foundations upon which literacy, numeracy, and every "academic" skill depend. As culturally responsive pedagogies remind us, identity and belonging are inseparable from achievement (Bishop 2019).

Teaching with heart also demands discernment. It challenges us to critically filter policy, pedagogy, and research through the lens of humanity. It invites us to ask: *Does this practice serve my students' holistic development? Does it align with my professional integrity?* Evidence is indispensable, but without context and compassion, it risks becoming hollow. When we teach with heart, we bring evidence alive. Not as scripts to follow, but as tools to be adapted in response to the children before us.

In doing so, we reclaim teaching as both intellectual and moral work. We resist the reduction of our role to technicians delivering predetermined content and instead embrace our identity as responsive professionals - people who hold both expertise and empathy, analysis and care. This is the balance that sustains education systems capable of preparing children not just to perform, but to thrive in an uncertain and interconnected world.

Teaching with heart ultimately calls us back to our purpose: to nurture children as whole humans. It reminds us that academic progress is inseparable from safety, connection, and joy. It is in the quiet, relational acts: the encouraging smile, the patient explanation, the moment we let a child rest, that the true work of teaching resides. These moments are invisible to performance dashboards, but they shape lives in profound ways.

Anchoring to our teacher hearts is therefore both a personal and collective imperative. It sustains our sense of meaning, buffers us against burnout, and reaffirms that education is not merely about transmitting knowledge but about cultivating capacity, resilience, and hope. When we teach with heart, we choose to see beyond tests and targets to the enduring impact we have on children's sense of self and possibility.

And sometimes, that begins in the simplest acts: sitting beside a child who feels unseen, laughing with a class at an unexpected moment, or letting a tired six-year-old sleep in the corner of the library because we understand that learning will wait. Her need for rest cannot.

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