BRENDAN MURRAY SEES A WAY OUT

SUBJECT
Brendan Murray

OCCUPATION
Principal of Parkville College

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"In our first year we had kids who were refusing to plea in remand, because they were worried about being sentenced and missing out on school."

I first heard of Parkville College when an old friend rang me at Dumbo Feather, wanting to know how to get his students involved in our high-school writing competition. His pupils were curious and willing, he told us. "There's just one thing. These boys are in prison."

Parkville College is Victoria's youth justice centre for people aged 10 to 18 who have been sentenced to time in custody. Almost all of the students are from low socio-economic backgrounds, and more often than not have committed serious crimes in drug- or alcohol-induced states. Many of them are reoffenders.

Before 2010, Parkville was the end of the line for many teenagers who were likely to spend the rest of their lives in and out of jail. But four years ago, an ombudsman's report on Parkville revealed appalling conditions, breaking of state legislation and abuse of a fundamental human right: education. Children in most need of attention were being locked up and ignored.

Today, inside a classroom at Parkville, the first thing you would notice is its outstanding educational model. Using the method of "unconditional positive regard," teachers meet behaviour problems with compassion, rather than punishment. A focus on individuality and liberty means that before each class students have to agree to what and how they will learn. It seems a radical model for teaching any teenagers, let alone criminals. But in the last few years, the students have shown rapid progress and genuine interest in their studies. A number are completing their Victorian Certificate of Education.

After some conversations and preparation, we decided to work with the students to create a publication, rather than have them enter Dumbo Feather's competition. We were warned the boys might make lewd comments or taunt us when we first met them. But we were reassured it would be in good nature. It was just a test of trust. These teenagers had been let down too many times.

After a few months of hearing about the principal and the way he had revolutionised the school, I finally meet Brendan Murray. As we speak, we walk through the leafy Melbourne suburb of Parkville, whose grand old buildings stand in stark contrast to the prison complex. Walking along the train line, Brendan describes how he had once been a promising AFL player when a family tragedy made him realise that he wanted to do more than chase a ball around a field for the rest of his life.

Today, Brendan tirelessly leads a school for the sidelined and forgotten. Not only has Parkville transformed the educational outcomes for its students, it's trailblazing the way for other schools around the world as well. Inhumanly hardworking, yet somehow still open and endlessly giving, Brendan doesn't gloss over the fact that his students are criminals. He is keenly aware of the terrible things they have done; the impact they have had on the lives of others. He doesn't forgive violence, but knows that to change things, bad behaviour must be met with help, rather than exclusion.

BRENDAN MURRAY: Do you mind if we do this walking?

LIVIA ALBECK-RIPKA: Not at all. It's just nice to get out, to be outside of the walls. You don't want to become institutionalised, you know? I think it's just healthy, psychologically, to be aware of that, for longevity in this sort of work. It's something that can creep up on you. It's not normal for people to have their liberty taken away.

It's true. The work must have a great impact on you—psychologically. How long have you been doing it for? The school started in 2012 here at Parkville. There was a 2010 ombudsman's report into the conditions and it was damning. There were 27 recommendations, three of which pertained directly to education provision. It was identified that, particularly

children in remand—in the care of the state who were not found guilty of any crime but were detained in custody—were receiving no access to state curriculum or to registered teachers.

While there was a TAFE operating for sentenced boys in here, the legislative requirements just weren't being met. No one was getting a full-time education. So in 2011, I had the opportunity to come up with a model within the Department of Education to see if we could get a school up and running here. In 2012, we ran a pilot school, focusing on kids in remand. Day one, we were exceeding expectations. We had these children reading, doing schoolwork, and progressing rapidly. Two years on, every child detained in custody in Victoria attends our school. It's full-time education, academic and vocational, directed towards the full development of the human personality.

Having worked with some of the boys, they seem so keen to learn. And from what you say, it sounds as though they improve pretty rapidly for a group that didn't necessarily excel in their education before this. I imagine a lot of people wouldn't have faith in these kids. What gave you that faith? Well I had experience in state schools in the communities that were working with those same children. The biggest issue was everyday attendance. And children being fed.

Being fed? Sometimes kids come to school hungry. They're starving, they can't learn properly. Kids are drug-affected, they're in crisis, they're homeless. So the school that I worked at prior to this, the Pavilion School, had a lot of success. I thought to myself, *We have the same kids coming in here. Imagine if attendance could be 100 per cent. Imagine if they weren't drug-affected, imagine if they weren't in crisis, imagine if they're fed and washed! Wow, the potential for learning!*

It seems in some ways they're better off here than they would be in their home environments? The sad thing is that that's a huge dilemma for us. We had a boy come back in yesterday and he's happy to be here. He's happy to see us, happy to see his teachers. That's far from ideal. In our first year we had kids who were refusing to plea in remand, because they were worried about being sentenced and missing out on school.

So what do you do about that? I don't know. I'm not really entertaining the idea of diminishing the quality of education in here. If you saw downstairs, there were some people moving boxes. We're opening a school on the outside, starting in term two.

An open school? Only for kids coming out of custody.

Wow! It'll be a select school—just like Mac.Robertson and Melbourne High. The entry requirements are that you were enrolled at Parkville College while in custody. So a child across the road can't just say, 'Look, I'd like to come to school here.'

We want to continue quality education in the community. We want to make sure that kids who leave here aren't discriminated against. It's easy for a school to say, 'No, sorry. We think we'd be setting you up to fail.'

And will this school take them right through to Year 12? It can. It's only a small school, so ideally, no. We would like to reintegrate children back into the community, back to their local schools. But a school may be apprehensive about taking a kid who's coming out of prison, which I understand. So we might say, 'Look, they'll come to us for four days and you for one. Let's see how it goes. Let's see if we can work out some sort of smooth transition, so that it's not just straight from the prison walls into school.'

You spoke about the kids having this desire to come back. How does that affect you? Do you meet particular kids that you see potential in, or feel emotionally attached to in some way? Like so many of the teachers who create a secure attachment with their students,

when we say, "Goodbye," we're genuinely saying, "I hope to never see you again."

So many times I have to say to our frequent fliers, "I hope you understand that in one way, it's really good to see you, but not under these circumstances," without trying to make the kid feel too bad and to shame them. I had a kid who came in yesterday and I said to him, "Mate, how long are you here for this time?" He said, "Oh, I could be doing years. Honestly—I just woke up in here. I didn't even know I was in custody." He would have been so drug-affected, I imagine. He doesn't know exactly what he's done.

How do we keep kids out of that cycle? We try to equip them with the necessary tools in the time that they're here. But of course it's really hard. We have a greater opportunity with kids who have really long sentences.

Which is kind of ironic. It is! You know, we have boys and girls at the moment who are doing VCE and Open University. Our highest academic achievers are those that would be regarded with the most severe sentence, for the most significant crimes. The frequent fliers are the ones that come in and out through remand, released into the community, that are seen to automatically regress. I don't know how to repair that. Honestly.

Are you hopeful that it will be repaired? Yeah, of course I am. But it's dependent on so many factors: Families, communities, opportunities, motivation. I am aware we have six hours a day of education for kids and they're progressing rapidly in their reading levels, maths and achieving more than they've ever achieved in their lives within an education setting. But if a kid gets out of here and things go wrong quickly, or they think, *You know what? I'll just use those drugs, I'm going to have a party for the first week and then I'll pull my head in*, they're in a lot of trouble. Chances are we will see them again.

Are most of the kids you have in here from a lower socio-economic background? Yeah. Almost all of them. I'd be lucky to have two per cent within custody that don't fit that profile. I think at the moment we have about 60 per cent that come through the child protection system. So they're here for whatever reasons: neglect, abuse, parents in prison. It's hard to have a lifetime turnaround in a six-month period at the age of 15 for someone who's had a lifetime of trauma that's beyond comprehension.

I'm looking around at this area, Parkville—it's beautiful. Nature and beautiful old buildings—it's an incredible contrast to the prison. I've had teachers come in who feel very committed to the education of these students, very passionate. I've had two so far who have come in for a day and just said, "You know what? I actually don't want to be a part of this site. This is going to be too much for me I can't deal with it."

Are there ever moments when you feel like you can't handle it emotionally? No, not at all. Quite the opposite. I'm really proud of what we're doing. You know what?

I want a better society. I want these children to have greater opportunities. I want them to have better rights.

I think, *At least if a kid comes back, I want a diminished crime*. If it's an assault that the child's in for, I'd really like property to be the next one.

Sometimes you get the question: "Why would you help these people?" I used to get it when I worked in adult prison. But as much as it is for the person, it's really important for the victim too. You know, we're teaching philosophy to every kid in custody now.

That's amazing. What kind of philosophy do they start with? VCE. It's an internally marked subject so every kid in Parkville and Malmsbury Youth Justice Centre now does philosophy and legal studies VCE. They do legal studies because we focus on criminal justice, and they know it really well. So we figure, why not get the marks for that? I told the kids recently, "Not everyone in the community knows what a contest mention is." They were like, "You fucking kidding?"

I know! [*Laughs*] I found that amazing! That's their language, but they're more educated than most of the community here. They sure are! Also, in philosophy, we thought we really have to focus on rehabilitation. The subject that we picked in philosophy has a focus on ethics and morality; how your decisions and your actions have ramifications on others.

Does that get through? Yeah, it really does. And rather than run it in a classical, group therapy session—where sometimes people opt in and sometimes they won't—we thought, *If we do this as a legitimate VCE subject, it really forces deep consideration, real critical thinking about, 'What am I doing as a human being?'* For some people it's a revelation. They're developing empathy. Because they're really considering how their actions may cause harm to others. They don't really want to think about that as children. Not to say that it won't happen again, things can go horribly wrong. I would take a punt that at the moment most kids in here commit a crime, they're significantly affected by drink and drugs. You're not making sound choices.

I want to talk about your teaching method of "unconditional positive regard." What does that mean?

Well, it's just taken from a therapeutic counselling model. Carl Rogers established these core ingredients for person-centred therapy. So unconditional positive regard is one of those elements for transforming a relationship—that you have a regard for that person. Really simple. I could talk about the theory at length, but if you're not feeling judged, if you're feeling like someone has regard for you as an equal and sees some positive aspects in you, then you're willing to make changes with them.

And have these methods taught you anything about dealing with people in your personal life?

Absolutely. I wouldn't be where I am unless that was the way I've dealt with people. I realised this doing social work in adult prisons, and in homelessness. We didn't really have a solid framework at the time for how we would operate with the clients. I came to the realisation, *Hang on, this is how the workers should all be operating amongst each other and the organisation as well.* The more time goes on, the more I realise this is probably the best way to operate amongst all people at all times.

It's funny how sometimes organisations—at the grandest level in politics—can preach these ideals of morality and justice, but within the organisations themselves... They don't demonstrate that.

No. I think that's the model of leadership that we're looking for from the top tier of teachers, the team leaders: to be lead practitioners in this area all day, every day—to be demonstrating respect, empathy, unconditional positive regard, genuineness, sincerity, congruence at all times.

A counsellor would be looking at the context of the person. A major focus would be your demeanour and your approach, so that you can be a part of transformative change. But in teaching it's thought, *I'm an English teacher, rather than a teacher of people.* There's no focus on how to run a group.

Obviously there's a certain type of person who has those qualities by nature, who might be drawn to teaching.

That's right.

But also, they're things that you can learn.

Absolutely. I'll say to a teacher, "The best thing that you can do to show a bit of respect before you start is go down to the unit, introduce yourself to everyone, shake everyone's hand, and tell them, "Thanks for coming to school, I really appreciate it." It goes a long way.

Could these things be brought into the broader education system?

That's part of my hope.

If we can show that we have success using our teaching strategies, then there is no reason they can't be used in any school.

At the moment we're working with Melbourne Grammar, which you might consider are our polar opposite on the education spectrum in Melbourne. But we're closely aligned, and we've been training their teachers within custody. I imagine a school like Melbourne Grammar has worked out how to get the top results for its students. Now they want to have resilient, well-rounded, compassionate people. They want to see them reach their full potential. It's not just all these soft, cuddly types giving positive praise all the time. When I talk about being "genuine" and "sincere," we're very much saying to kids, "I've got a lot of time for you, I think you've got a lot of

potential, but you know when you just tipped the table over and told me to get fucked? That's not okay mate, I don't know if anyone's ever said that to you." Because we've got a relationship, they'll drop their head and go, "Yeah, fuck, I know."

So we go to areas that schools and counsellors wouldn't normally get to with the kid, because we have an established relationship. There's trust and confidence in that attachment. I had a kid tell me to get fucked yesterday because he wasn't happy with the timetable. When I tried to explain it to him in class he got really angry. Afterwards I went to him and said, "Look, mate, I'm really sorry about how that went. I don't think I handled it so well. I shouldn't have taken you on like that in front of everyone." He said, "No, listen, it's not your fault." This is 30 minutes later. "It's just I get really frustrated sometimes. I'm fucking locked up in here. I was just in a shit today, I'm sorry about that, it won't happen again." We shook hands.

Wow. When you said that to him, did you genuinely feel that you hadn't dealt with it in the best way?

Yeah. He was telling me, "You do this and you do that." And I said, "Oh sure, no worries boss," in front of the other kids. They laughed a little bit. I knew straight away, *I've sort of shown him up, and I could have done that a bit better.* But I was just tired of him, you know, being abusive, mildly—that's mild. This is a boy that's been in and out of here for three years. So he just took the lead on that and said to me, "You know what? I'm just really frustrated. I'm really sorry." And I said, "Mate, it might happen again, that's okay. As long as we can always talk our way through it." He finished off the class really well by the way. He did some really good work. I'm sure you saw that sort of thing within our classes?

Yeah, I was amazed. So what else do you learn from the kids here?

I think that the kids, their experiences, teach you what's actually important for education. You ask anyone: "What is education?" It's this very vague term that everyone thinks they understand, sort of like "leadership." Everyone knows what it is until you ask for a definition. And then it's really hard to pinpoint. It's really hard to say what education should be directed towards.

Right now we have, at a federal level, and at sort of a state level, we're looking at being ranked in the OECD with a PISA score that's comparable to South Korea. We want to advance in literacy and numeracy—it's why we're doing all these NAPLAN tests. But if you ask people why that's important, people can't go much further than that. When we were starting this school, and when I started the Pavilion School with a friend of mine, Josie, we started off with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We thought that would be the best place to start as an international aspiration that we've all agreed to—everyone has the right to education. These kids, they reaffirm that.

I don't think that just because a kid tells me to "get fucked" in class, I've got a right to deny that child an education. In fact, I think they need a little bit more of an education.

Article 26 says that education should be "directed towards the full development of the human personality, and that education should promote respect, tolerance and understanding amongst all people."

Ambitious!

Yeah, of course!

"The full development of the human personality." Do you think any of us ever achieve that?

No, but I sort of agree with the idea that that's what education should be directed towards. I don't think it's saying that we should all achieve this sort of Nirvana state, yet we compartmentalise—even within schools—that this is a teacher's job. Social work is somewhere outside. Everything is fractured. The teacher's role is instructional within a classroom. But is it instruction in maths? Should it be in behaviour?

Well, no. We all know that the greatest teachers lead by example.

Yes, of course. Your teacher in the classroom—what they demonstrate is as important as the knowledge they're transmitting. If you think back to school—I don't remember lessons being taught, but I remember teachers and how they interacted with me.

Exactly.

I suppose for these kids, what they teach me is what's actually important in education.

I know reading and writing's important, we put a massive emphasis on that, but I also think it's our job as educators to help them interact with their peers.

I don't know why, within education, we sort of take the foot off that. We start with that in prep and Grade 1. At my children's school everything is about being safe, fair and friendly. By the time you hit Year 7, the huge focus becomes content knowledge. Just like Melbourne Grammar at the moment, we need to shift the emphasis to how you operate amongst others within your society.

So how did you originally get into social work? I know that you were a promising AFL player—and you kind of dropped it all to pursue this?

Yeah. It's true. My parents were cleaners. They had the contract for Gordon House, which was the largest homeless shelter in Melbourne in the late '70s and '80s. So when I wasn't at school I was with them, roaming around Gordon House. It was like a second home for me, and it was a very different culture. There were people coming out of prison there then.

I'd never really realised what impact that had on me, but my first job that I got as an adult, at 18, while I was playing football, was working behind the bar at Gordon House. So I was telling homeless blokes who had come out of prison when they'd had enough to drink. I suppose that's what really formed my outlook. These people that I, in a way, grew up with, I had a lot of regard for, and as time went on I became more and more interested in ensuring that their rights were met.

What were your parents like? Did they also have this strong sense of social responsibility?

They did. Not as strong as my own I think. But yeah. My father was Irish. And one of my earliest memories is of a bloke at Gordon House who was also from Ireland. He had been there for a long time, and we were really close with him. So I'd spend a lot of time with him watching English soccer and wrestling in his room. I'd ask him all about his tatts. One day, my father said to me, "Look, Jerry's actually dying, and we just want to talk to you and your sister about him coming to live back at our house to see out his days."

Wow.

"But in doing that, we'd have to ask you to give up your room for him." I was thrilled because Jerry was coming with a TV.

[*Laughs*]. How old were you? I think Grade 6. So I loved it, right? I loved him. So he stayed with us, and then we had a shed out the back and dad said, "I'll knock that up nicely and you'll have a bungalow." I thought, *Wow, this is incredible!* It was really cold, but I was quite happy with it. Anyway, my father came and woke me up one morning and said, "Jerry's died and I want you to come down and say goodbye. You don't have to go to school today." I remember standing in front of him, really upset. He spoke to me about how proud we should be as a family that Jerry finished his life within our care and that as a child I gave up my room. I still am proud.

That would be a lot to take in as a 12, 13 year old. It was. I used to think that maybe I fell into welfare after football. I imagine I gravitated towards it without realising how much that experience had shaped me.

So when did you quit footy? Tragedy hit when I was 15. My father killed himself. He jumped in front of a train at Victoria Park, where the football ground is. He became really unwell with a mental illness. So I would stand in the middle of the ground and see the trains going by and couldn't help but think, *I don't know if I really want to do this.* I'd decided to finish football at 19. It's hard to go into it in depth. But I used to think, *Did that happen, didn't it?* It didn't seem real. When you're faced with looking at trains every day, you think about it more and more.

That's just unimaginable. Yeah. But on top of that, while I loved playing football, I actually didn't like the bloke culture that much. I mean, I did like a lot of people I played with. But once I got to playing with the adults at Collingwood, there were a lot of things that I didn't really like. After a while I just thought, *It's pretty absurd that we're chasing a ball around*. I still love football, and I've had plenty of regrets about not continuing.

Really? Of course. I still love it. I have plenty of friends that were very successful in football. There were times when I thought, *Geez I shouldn't have done that. I should have kept going*. Growing up in Collingwood, when I told people, "Yeah I'm not playing football anymore and I never will," they'd say, "You fool!"

Because it's the Australian dream. That's right. I was on the senior list for Collingwood. I just thought, *You know what, I've made it, and actually, this isn't what I want.* So I'm very happy that I didn't—I walk without a limp! [*Laughs*] I can lift my children!

Do you think your father's death also put into focus what was most meaningful to you? And the shortness of life? Definitely. I think I had a very different outlook on life as a child to many other children. I still think of that, and this is not an easy job—working in prison, trying to get the best out of kids with education. So many people have so many challenging days. But I think, *You know what? This isn't so bad. Like, you can get through this. Together.*

It's very inspiring. How do people react when you tell them about your work? I actually go out of my way not to talk about it too much, because then it tends to dominate the conversation. You know, if I'm at a dinner party, I like to say I'm a teacher. And hope that'll just...

You don't enjoy being the centre of attention? No, not so much. Because I need to cut off from work, and so many people are so intrigued. "I didn't even know we had kids in prison. Where?" "In Parkville?" "Parkville!" "Where?" "So they're locked up? What sort of crimes?"

I guess that was my reaction. I think that in itself comes back to what you were talking about with Melbourne Grammar boys—that for the privileged part of society, we just don't even know that this is going on.

Yeah I know. But I suppose that's why I'm not afraid to do this interview. Because I know that this will spark interest. People will come as a result of this and put phone calls through and say, "What can I do?" And that's great. But you know, for myself personally, this really consumes my life. I need to go home and actually be a parent to my kids. And that's the dilemma that I have. Sitting on the computer typing out emails about this and that and taking phone calls, and I put my child in front of the TV and I think, *What am I doing? Looking after other people's kids and I'm neglecting mine slightly.* Not enough to call DHS, but...

[*Laughs*]. I'm really torn about that, because my kids are like, "Come on, stop working!" And I'm telling people all the time how to care for kids.

I think all great leaders have that struggle in a sense, between the broader social responsibility and their personal lives. I went to India this summer and we went to the place where Buddha gave his first speech.

Been there. Sarnath?

Yeah! And there was a little museum there and it told the story of Buddha's life. It said that after his wife gave birth to his son he had some sort of "enlightenment"—from a modern day perspective you probably would have called it a mental breakdown—and he left! In the middle of the night, he left his wife and new-born child. He went on to become this incredible spiritual leader but then, when you look at his personal life—I found that intriguing. It made me think about a lot of the great leaders. It does take some sort of sacrifice.

Yeah, look, it does. I'm not willing to sacrifice my kids and my family. But it's a continual struggle. I need to really put an effort into my children as a priority. I'm very mindful with all of our staff that they do that as well. If someone says, "I've got children to pick up," you say, "Of course." Imagine as a boss saying, "Oh look, you can't, sorry, you've got to look after these kids." I've got to make sure that people are prioritising themselves, their lives, because I also know that if you don't, you are going to burn out. And that will be detrimental to these kids, ultimately, in school.

Do you have any teachers who really struggle?

Most teachers have a period of "it's really difficult." We employ a psychologist to come and work with all of our teachers on Fridays. That focuses on vicarious trauma and children with attachment disorders. It's hard because you can get a new kid come into your unit of kids that you teach, and they just throw the dynamic.

What's that like? Having kids constantly coming in and out? It must be really challenging for the teachers.

It is. But because we've been operating at remand longer than anywhere else, our teachers are probably the most comfortable—they've worked out how to adapt, and to be comfortable with that. If you're sort of psychologically stable, if you're feeling well, then a new kid yelling at you isn't going to affect you so much.

I guess when we came in to work with the students I felt really surprised. Initially, I thought, *My God, teenage boys at any school!* But they were more focused and committed than I remember the kids being at my school.

Yeah, that's right. They appreciate their opportunity. But we also speak with them about it. I often talk with the boys—particularly if a teacher's having a difficult run—and just say to them honestly, "Boys, I don't know if you know this, but not too many people want to work with you. Like, you were the result of teachers retiring and you were a nightmare for teachers at school. Correct me if I'm wrong here," and they just go, "Yeah I was a fucking nightmare, yeah, yeah, you're right." And I say, "I'm getting really good people to come in here, who have a lot of belief in you. We're not coming in here to make life worse for you. We're trying to make it better for you. Improve your lives, do the right thing by your families and those around you. So if we treat you with respect, you really have to give that same level back. If my teacher's abusing you, telling you to get fucked, putting you down, you come and tell me and we'll work out something. But if I have someone coming in who's 24, 25 that you could tear apart in a normal mainstream school, understand that they've made their decision to come in here to work with you guys. How about that as a starting point to give them a little bit of respect?" And they do.

When you walk in here, it just looks like a normal school, and for me at least, it was almost possible to forget that fundamentally, these kids have had their liberty taken away.

We make our classrooms a classroom that you would want to be in. And we treat people in a particular way, where we ask, not tell them what to do. Respectfully. I suppose we're allowing them freedom to an extent and creativity in that space because, as you would have seen, they're getting to select their content. They're getting a degree of control. That's been thoughtfully facilitated.

What's the most exciting thing for you about what you're doing?

I really like the idea that our children here are exceeding everyone's expectations. There's been quite a bit of research done by a professor at Melbourne University, John Hattie, which shows that the greatest positive impact on student outcomes is their ability to exceed their own expectations. Every staff member has come here and had the same experience as you and thought,

Fuck! Can I do this? Some kids have murdered. Their crimes are significant. Every kid's been expelled from school.

I don't yell, I'm not tough, I have my own vulnerabilities. I'm just me. So it's very exciting for me to see that everyone who comes in, can. They also exceed their own expectations. I'm very excited about the future with education for these young people. Because I actually do think we can create a better society. I think people are starting to believe that you don't have to be so reactive. It doesn't have to be just control and containment for kids in custody. That we can focus on education, development, that we'll have kids leaving Malmsbury with a university degree.

It gives me so much hope for society because our education system's pretty fucked. Teachers don't get paid anywhere near what they should be. And it's amazing the standard of people that you have coming in here to work.

Well, we're smart about it. I pay well. So I get someone great and I pay them $20,000 more than they would get anywhere else, because I know they're not leaving until the job's done. They believe in what they're doing, they're committed. They're not going to let these kids down and will uphold the ideals of state education in here. So we provide them with better conditions, better opportunities, leadership opportunities, and it's my hope that the team leaders here become principals throughout the education sector in the next few years.

Yeah! That's a great goal.

We've got a group today called People Measures. They're largely an organisation of psychologists who work with big banks and big corporations. They've offered pro-bono support to the school. We've targeted our

team leaders, all 13, and our aim is that within a two-year period of them coaching and creating a framework, that it would be almost impossible for them to not win a principal's position, regardless of the fact that they're 30.

Imagine that! The best schools in the country!

That's our plan here—that we improve education across the state. So far, we have had the New Zealand education ministry write a report on our school, and we've been part of the consultation process for some of their schools in custody. There's a lot of interest across the country.

Incredible. What do you think the fundamental difference is between your model of education, and what we are currently doing?

Well, inclusion. Right? I reckon that's number one. You've got to have a commitment towards inclusion. If I fall over and I'm in acute need, you call an ambulance and the red carpet comes out. I bypass triage, we go into emergency and no one says, "Oh, should they get all that support?" If they're a drug addict or this or that, we just accept, this is our health system, and it's really good. We have a kid who is behind their reading levels at Grade 1. And as a society, we make a decision that they need extra support. So we put in reading recovery. We put interventions in at around age six, one year into primary school. If a kid picks up a chair and smashes a window at the same age, then they'd begin a process of exclusion. Why? I don't know. For kids who I think are in most need, who are most acutely unwell, we have a system where we exclude them based upon them not being at a behavioural norm for their age. When we do that, we begin to create all sorts of areas that we can exclude.

We exclude kids with disabilities: 'You go to a special school, it's better for you.' Why is it better? 'Because they have more resources there, they're specially trained.' Why can't all teachers be like that? I don't believe in that. Unless that child can live in that little bubble, with those kids, how is that better? So for our kids here—every kid's been excluded from school. Everyone. They'll be told it's their fault. But we rarely say, 'It's the role of our education system to look after these kids, to give them extra education.' So we made a decision that everyone has the right to education, and if you get really angry, if you pick up a chair and throw it through the window, we're going to take that as an overt request for extra support. If you really mess up in class, we're going to give you extra support. And we don't have so many critical incidents. It's really simple.

It's mental health! But obviously, it's an issue when your mental health has an impact on other people.

Yeah, of course. But you can stay in the class. If the rest of the class feels unsafe, you say, 'Look, mate, I can't have you in this class at the moment. But I'm going to take you to here and we're going to make sure your education keeps ticking along. I'm going to keep reintegrating you. Maybe during sport time. You like sport, don't you? Let's have 10 minutes of success back in the class and then back out.' So in a way, you run your own sort of internal suspension. We've got to a calm, safe, supportive environment for everyone. So that's what I think—inclusion. The principle of inclusion, to wholeheartedly believe in that and commit to it, is probably the key difference.

I noticed that around the school you have written the words, "He who opens a school door closes a prison." What does that mean to you?

When I met Maddie, our education consultant, in the States, they had a lot of positive affirmation on the walls. Very American, you know? But I quite liked the idea of having these universal declarations on the walls, so there's that Victor Hugo quote. Education is the answer to closing prisons. Simple as that. It's a constant reminder for everyone, 'This is your way out.' And I don't mean, you get your Year 12 and everything's going to be fine. I mean, educate yourself so that you can function amongst others peacefully. That's your answer to not being locked up.