

Introduction

I opened the door to the storeroom and shoved him in. His eyes were like big brown marbles and his mouth was wide open. I'd forgotten the fluorescent light had been dead in that old room for weeks. But that didn't matter. 'Wait in here,' I snapped. 'I'll be back in a minute.'

Gerard Campling had come to me with a note from his teacher: 'Alan, please talk to Gerard. He's been swearing at me in class again.' Gerard had one of those I-don't-give-a-stuff smiles on his face as he'd handed it to me. It's the kind of smile you only have when you're the school football star. I didn't have time to deal with him during the morning rush, so I'd put him in the nearest storeroom to make him think about his actions.

Four hours later, when I returned to get some stationery, Gerard was still there. I had forgotten the door had a handle which could only be opened from the outside. In fact, I'd forgotten entirely about him. I opened the door to his wide-eyed stare. He wasn't sure what to do or say and neither was I. His cocky smile was gone and I was as shocked as he was. 'Now, don't do it again,' I said, pretending that all my actions had been intentional. He blinked twice at the afternoon sun outside, rubbed his eyes and walked off

in silence. No-one but Gerard knows exactly what he went through during those long, dark hours in the storeroom, but he never swore at a teacher again.

I had developed a bit of a reputation as a hard-line principal. Teachers sent their most troublesome students to me because my strategy was simple: be the biggest mongrel you can so they don't get the better of you. My signature moves were to bluff, bluster and bully. I'd be in their faces before they could get in mine. There were no grey areas in my harsh black-and-white discipline regime. Gerard had mostly experienced the black. I was the principal of a big Queensland high school in the early 80s, where teachers had to be tough and principals even tougher. If we weren't, we'd lose them. And I wasn't about to lose anything.

My aggressive approach towards schooling reflected my attitude towards life at the time, which was constantly driven by a personal fear of failure. I would have liked to believe this fear came from my own teachers, who never made me feel like I was good enough when I was at school, or from my father who always seemed to expect more from his eldest son. But I think it was from more than that. Deep down I was scared of being found out that I wasn't as tough or as smart as I was pretending to be.

My strict ways with wayward students and a few lucky escapes from departmental admin and lawyers accelerated my career forward on a fast and straight path. After just five years I had taught and fought my way to becoming an inspector of schools: I was no longer just disciplining students, but bringing entire schools to account, teachers and all.

Ever since I started teaching, I'd thought of inspectors as figures to be feared beyond any bad kid or Friday afternoon playground duty. Some smaller schools considered them somewhere up there with education royalty. I soon experienced this reverence for myself, as fresh lamingtons were presented to me on my arrival as an inspector, sometimes accompanied by a welcome song from the school's very own choir and a cup of tea poured by the principal.

My new role meant I had the power to tell principals they were wrong. I could walk into any classroom in my district and teach any kid what I thought they needed to know. And I'd do it better than any teacher, of course. At times, students and teachers alike might have taken a second glance to see if their shirts were tucked in properly. I was living in a nirvana of power and respect and my ego was loving it – down to the last crumb of lamington.

The Education Department had even given me a brand new company car to go with the new job, a navy blue Holden Executive, which felt like the most modern machine in Queensland. When the lady from the fleet management called and asked what extras I wanted with my car, I said 'The lot.' As a result, my car had mafia-tinted windows, sports suspension and a 'roo shoo' front bumper which, despite being designed to repel wayward kangaroos, acted as a mating call for every sick marsupial from Monto to Mount Warning. It also came with one of those in-car mobile phones, which I used for the evil purpose of declaring my visit to a school within minutes of my arrival – barely enough time for the principal to get the chewing gum scraped off the desks or warn the teachers they'd be having an 'important visitor' from the Department.

The phone gave my kids a good laugh if they were ever ready early enough to get a ride to school with me. ‘Call Mum on your Batman phone, Dad,’ they’d say.

After only a year or so in my new job with my new car, the Batman phone rang – and unfortunately, it wasn’t Robin.

It was my kids’ school principal and a good friend of mine at the time, Lindsey Keen. He called me Alan instead of the usual ‘Al’. Immediately, I could tell he wasn’t calling to talk about the weather or fishing plans for that weekend. He spoke in the familiar slow and steady tones of any principal calling a parent to report a bad incident. I couldn’t wait to hear him out. ‘What is it, Linds? Spit it out, mate.’

He told me the youngest of my four children, Greg, had been showing signs of acute learning difficulties, or what was otherwise known as dyslexia – an innate inability to read, write and therefore learn like normal kids. He said they’d suspected it for months but had just finished testing him to be sure.

I can’t remember putting the phone down. I cowered back into my leather seat and cursed into the new car smell. I looked up at my reflection in the rear view mirror. There I was, ‘Al the all-powerful’, ‘Mr Educator’ in his fancy new car, who could teach anything to any kid in the world.

Except his own.