

CLARE
DE LORE

Diamond in a paper bag

The school of hard knocks helped shape an award-winning career in education.

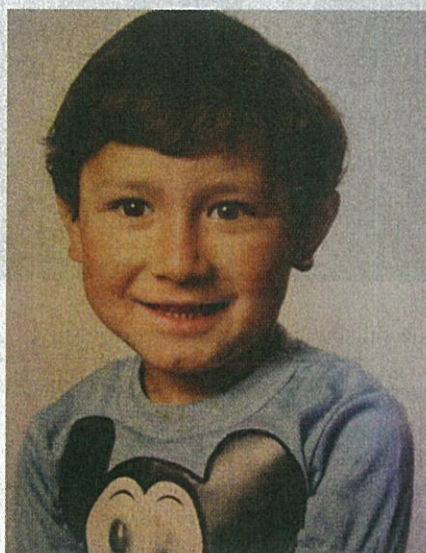
Stan Tiatia's life could so easily have turned out differently. Violence, alcohol abuse and, at best, indifference were the staple ingredients of a rough childhood in Invercargill. He often went hungry. He found school a waste of time and no one noticed if he disappeared for days on end.

Three decades later, Tiatia, now 47, is the principal of Te Puna Wai Ora, Invercargill Middle School, which was this year's joint winner of the Prime Minister's Award for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. He and his wife, Sharon, have two sons, and when time allows, he takes to Southland's open roads on his beloved Harley-Davidson.

His team at Te Puna Wai Ora have developed an oral-language programme aimed at students for whom English is a new language, as well as at underachievers or those shy about participating in class. The programme, which seeks to build student confidence, has raised literacy levels among the school's 170 pupils.

What prompted you and your teachers to come up with a new way of getting pupils engaged and learning?

We have some opportunities in our community, whether it's international students coming in or kids with low oral-language skills or low confidence, and we asked, "How do we build students up?" In developing it, we asked ourselves, "How would this look in the classroom?" From there, we developed some prompts for kids, some sentence-starters, so they could get some power in class discussions.



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What sort of things?

"I wonder ..." is a sentence starter, or "I agree with so and so, but I would like to add ..." and they have additional ways of building on that and getting their confidence in class. They use visual prompts – there may be a talk in class and they can start visualising, showing that they agree, they understand, or perhaps that they don't. At assembly now, I may find half the students are giving me some sort of visual prompt or response to show what they are picking up.

Can you measure how much the cues and signals are helping your students?

There is the qualitative data that comes from discussions about their self-esteem, but we also have written data showing big increases in their ability to be able to form sentences. If you can do this orally, you can do it when you write. Literacy – reading and writing, coding and decoding – is interconnected with oral language.

When you can speak in a full sentence in discussion, you have an idea of sentence structures and you can then put it into your written work. That is measurable.

Is this a more freewheeling and integrated version of the more formal speech and drama lessons of the past?

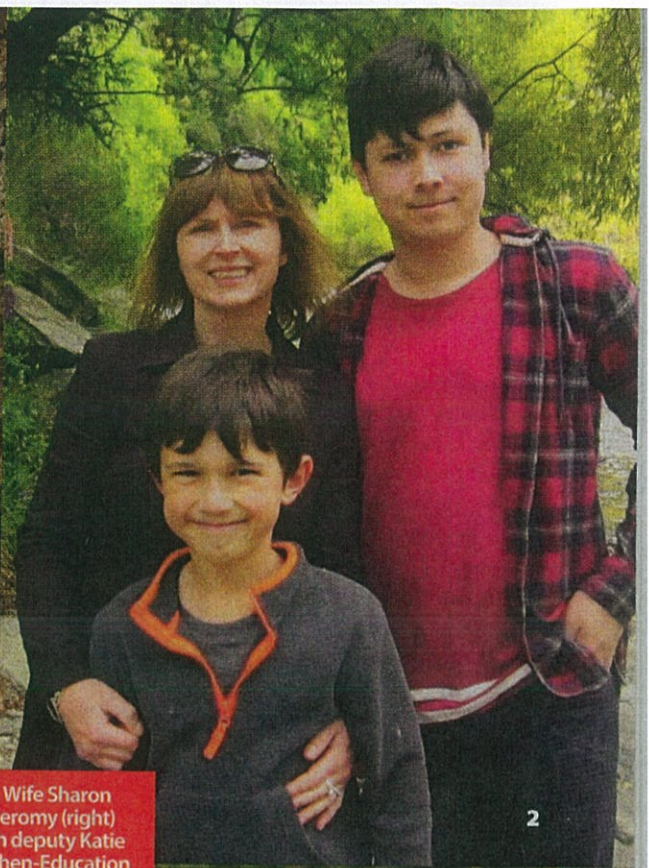
It is similar to that. Perhaps because there are so many screens in our lives, we have lost oral language. All teachers say that they struggle with oral language in their classrooms. In our school, we have changed mindsets. It is research-based. Associate Professor Mere Berryman at the University of Waikato is a mentor. She and [Te Puna Wai Ora deputy principal] Katie Pennicott are some of my favourite authors. We have just finished a chapter in the *Handbook of Indigenous Education*, and it brings joy to me every time I read it. It outlines what we did and exposes in a raw way the values we want to enact in our schools.

What else have you read that's had an impact?

The Tipping Point, by Malcolm Gladwell, explores the small things you can do that make a big difference. Sharon Creech's book of poetry, *Love That Dog*, shows



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1. Stan Tiatia. 2. Wife Sharon and their sons Jeromy (right) and Joel. 3. With deputy Katie Pennicott and then-Education Minister Nikki Kaye when they received the Prime Minister's Award. 4. Ann and Graham Smith mentored the troubled teen. Far left, Tiatia at 7 in 1977.



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how progress and expression in life can be developed by supporting others and building levels of competence and confidence. And it's a cliché, I know, but in his biography *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela provided an example of maintaining progress "up the poutama" [stepped pattern of tukutuku panels and woven mats that symbolises

genealogies and also the various levels of learning and intellectual achievement] that speaks to me. He believed in social justice, and paid for it by spending decades of his life in prison, but also, when he was released, he didn't say, "That's enough, I've done enough." He went on to help bring in political and social reform.

Describe your leadership style.

I am a feminist. There is so much we miss out on as a society if we don't acknowledge and value women. I have been blessed with strong women in my life. My wife, Sharon, is amazing. One of the items I treasure is a patch, with a date, that goes on my leather jacket. It records the date she said something that

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really empowered me, that she saw me as "a diamond in a paper bag" – meaning that the packaging isn't important, it's what's inside that counts.

What about your background?

Mum and Dad split up when I was 10. I was very happy, over the moon, because of the violence and the horrible things I had seen happen to my mother. Mum had me when she was 16, and it was rough for her. She now has some great connections and a loving husband. Dad is in Hawaii and remarried, and he has changed, softened and developed a good family. I lived with him when he and Mum split, and then with Mum, but I didn't get on with her then boyfriend. I went back to Dad when I was 13, then Mum disappeared with her boyfriend and my two sisters and brother.

What was life like with your father?

There was poverty, even though there was money in the house. Dad was paid once a month, and it was gone in two days. For three weeks of every month, I didn't have any food in our house, so it was tough. There was a lot of violence, fear and uncertainty. I could disappear for five days at a time and Dad would never ask where I was. People in the community helped me. During those three weeks [without food], I had a house to go to three times a week for food; different families would feed me. One of them was my friend's mum and dad, and on Mother's Day I still drop in there.

How did you break the cycle and go on to have a family, an education and a career?

I was determined quite young that this wasn't going to be me. I knew it wasn't right. And I came across adults who opened up their lives to me. My father ended up in jail, so I was sent to a boys' home. That was where I saw life could be different and I came across the man who was later best man at my wedding. He was the leader at the boys' home. I discovered I



Left, astride his beloved Harley-Davidson with Joel; below, the cufflinks are a private joke. "I never wear them," Tiatia says.



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could learn to love and be gentle and deal with anger in a different way. And a couple called Ann and Graham Smith – she was a teacher and he the manager of a trust – invited me into their house when I was 15 to live with them while I was doing School Cert. I had no idea how to study, and she helped me. They showed me you can have a family without violence and a family without addiction – a family where people care about one another.

A number of objects are important to you.

Let's start with that pocket watch. What's its significance?

It's from Vladivostok in Russia. I took a team from Living Hope, an organisation

that works with street kids, over there for three weeks and it really touched us. We ran a fun programme for children in an orphanage, which worked well, and we were then asked to go to a children's prison, and, believe me, these are real prisons. These were children aged from eight to 15, who were in there simply for being street kids.

What about the little container of sand?

I have lived a bit of a Forrest Gump life. I have played rugby, I've done boxing, and after a friend encouraged me to go for a run, I just carried on. I have done one run after another, just kept going. I've done the Kepler Track twice, which is 60km over a mountain, then entered the Coast to Coast. I collected sand from each beach.

The cufflinks are intriguing. What's the story?

Katie gave them to me. We'd been joking about titles. I don't wear them. I keep them in a cabinet.

Tell me about your ongoing friendship with the Smiths and the Harley-Davidson connection.

When I lived with Graham, he got me a 175cc motorcycle to get around town and it started me on a love of motorbikes. When he got older, Graham bought a Harley and came down to Invercargill with it. He let me ride it around the block. I had no idea what they were worth, but when I came back, he told me to keep it for the day. I built my own Harley – I finished it this year. One of my happy places is on the bike.

Where do you go?

Just wherever. Up to Queenstown, Te Anau, Milford. Beautiful open roads.

What do you think about on those long rides?

I'm grateful for where I am at, the people I am connected to, loving what I've got and being able to make a difference.