

Tamariki Alternative School, Christchurch

Article for 'Third NZ Whole Earth Catalogue'

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Themes covered (added in 2016);

- A. Tamariki is not anti-disestablishment
- B. Providing an alternative choice
- C. Enabling children to explore choice to understand their own needs and those of others
- D. Learning about the power of people
- E. The teacher's role as observer and protector of democracy
- F. Meetings and rules are used to apply the pressure of the social group and result in modified behaviour
- G. A healing environment



A. In our search for alternatives, be it life-styles, relationships, or school, it is very important that we do not come to a definition of ourselves, solely as the antithesis of the code from which we have departed. Where there is a departure from conventional society — the "establishment" — it is very easy for our new expression or manifestation to be an angry reaction against the constraints and conditionings which we are rejecting. As such it does not constitute liberation or freedom, for we are still controlled and defined, albeit negatively, by the very constraints from which we wish to be freed. An expression which is creatively unique will combine an undaunted acceptance of the old world with an unselfconscious emerging of an essence which can indeed be liberating and transforming. This expression can exist alongside, yet resist depending upon the old world and as well can speak to the old world with more clarity and conviction than any angry indictment. It has some precepts which it claims positively to be its own rather than defining itself negatively by that which it rejects.

I used the word 'unselfconscious' in relation to our expression because too often nowadays, alternatives are characterised by superficially impressive changes coupled with powerful rhetoric,

which sometimes constitute merely a colourful subterfuge or deception — for it may be mere conservative ignorance and fear parading as an alternative freedom. Just as alternative lifestyles don't necessarily have anything to do with leaving the city for country communes, rejecting the nuclear family, giving up working for money or wearing "hip" clothes, so alternative education doesn't necessarily reject authority, encourage children to be "into" bread baking, candle-making, batik, etc. or have anything to do with Departmental battles.

Tamariki is not a commune school; yet it may embody many community-oriented purposes. It does not reject authority as the scourge of childhood and the bane of mankind; it finds some authority useful. It does not groove on Departmental hassles, yet periodically we meet and try and further mutual acceptance. It does not limit our children to a narrow range of fashionable activities; but it makes provision for these, should they be amongst the children's choices.

B. Alternatives must go beyond these superficial traits and seek a purpose founded in the essence of liberation. Look to our motives — people! Are we making choices by setting up alternatives, or are we determined by externally (or subconsciously) compelling devices which we are afraid of and which make us angry. For if our actions are bound by fear and anger, so too will our children be bound; but if our purpose involves making choices and asserting independence thus will our children be inspired.

C. Tamariki has to do not so much with *what choices we make*, but rather *how we make them* and the political implications of them. What we choose has to do with people's preferences, tastes, fashion etc. How we choose has to do with morality, ethics and politics. At Tamariki children learn firstly that one is allowed to choose; that one is not going to be told what to choose. Next comes a complex exploration and testing of what is involved in choosing: How does one decide what to choose? What do I like? Will certain choices make me more acceptable? What are my motives for choosing? Which motives do I trust? What do I fear most in this world of choices? How much should I allow them to? How do my choices affect others?

Of course, when I talk about choices I am not referring to a mere choice of activities. I am talking about choices of actions, feelings, interactions — choices about living.

From this exploration of choices, children will come to have an understanding of their own needs — the most fundamental of these being a need for each other. But at the same time that we recognise a need for each other, we have to learn that we can never take each other for granted; that every person is different, has different feelings, different pleasures and different needs himself. We learn to take responsibility for our needs and the actions that rise out of them, and have regard for others' rights and feelings. We have a responsibility not only for our own actions but also to set the comfortable limit for others' actions toward us. We must learn not only to seek the fulfilment of our needs in relationships but also to assert the space we need in which others cannot enter.

D. What children have discovered at this point is that people have power — not just adults, but people: You have a little, I have a little and what we do with it we must answer for, to ourselves and to the group we belong to.

How much power we all have depends on our needs. Often conflicts arise and differences appear. The world seems too small to accommodate us all. But the power swings in gentle balance — to give and take occurs — generosity and patience make room for insecurity and fear.

Some will want to abuse the power and exploit others. They will try and rob others of their power by fear tactics. They may try and destroy the group. But a well-balanced and strong group will disarm such a person; will show him that they will not be frightened into relinquishing their claim to a little piece of power. And the person who attempts to destroy will learn that his needs will never be satisfied if he can frighten or threaten the group — he will only feel secure if they make clear limits for his needs and behaviour.

From this kind of 'give and take', children can risk making concessions and be generous. Sensitivity and understanding are born. Children learn to trust themselves and others. They learn that they can explore their realms of necessity and need safely because they can rely on others to establish the limits and protect them from impulses which they can't control. They learn to take one another into account. They find ways of resolving their differences and conflicts, and understand the delicate balance between achieving individual fulfillment whilst maintaining group responsibility. Above all, they find liberation from fear and guilt and find security.

E. This kind of purpose in education places adults and teachers in a rather different role from what one would normally expect. The 'give and take' I have been describing is not something which can be 'taught'. It is something which children, given a flexible environment in which to explore, will come to understand together. So the teacher becomes more of an observer and protector. The word 'protect' is often open to misinterpretation. We talk of a 'protective' mother and usually mean one who wants to mislead a child about the nature of reality — soften the world in an unrealistic way because she herself is bound by fear. But the teacher as 'protector' is not there to mislead children. Sometimes it will involve exposing a child to responsibility and group feelings. If the role seems more passive than one would normally associate with teachers, it does not indicate an unwillingness to get involved or take responsibility. As George Dennison says in *Lives of Children*: "The non-intervention of the teacher is not a passive or nothing-at-all sort of thing, but exerts a particular kind of influence on the children."

F. It demonstrates irrevocably that it is the inducements and pressures of the social group to which the children belong which will be most effectual in modifying behaviour — not the insignificant opinion of some adult authority figure. So at Tamariki there is some reluctance amongst adults to intercede in conflicts and try to resolve them in our naively benign manner. At most what we can do is remind children of their rights and of the rules and meeting system to which they have recourse to solve conflicts. For at Tamariki there is a complex network of rules and meetings which clarify the individual's rights, the group's rights and provide for group feeling to ~~the~~ be aired publicly. In the ten years Tamariki has existed, these rules have become a kind of love, never written down, but passed on by word of mouth because, they work in experience and the children feel secure with them and need them as much as they need the group. The rules are their own, not prescribed by some distant authority, and they are founded within the child's experience of himself and the group. The rules have become a code by which the children understand the give and take of play and living.

As a teacher at Tamariki I know that it is not my prerogative to resolve other people's conflicts. I cannot speak for the group or any individuals. All I can do is act as a protector for the wheels of democracy to turn. The meetings bring the voice of the group to bear upon individuals who infringe the safe limits. For any child it is the pressure of the group which will help it to grow. All the children need the group and want to belong to the group and gain acceptance from it. Many may be prepared to forego some of their infant needs to gain this. By withholding judgement, and by constantly making appeal to the children to resolve their conflicts, adults can place the child in touch with his own independence and show him that the answers lie in his own measure of comfort and safety. Answers to any questions about ethics or morality must come from the experiences themselves and how the children see these, rather than from some adult figure of authority.

This kind of relationship with children is not easy. I understand more about it than I can practise. Yet above all we must be aware of our own needs and growth as something separate from our children's. If we are still in part driven by our needs we will cease to see clearly what our children need and we will be competitors with them rather than their protectors.

G. In *Lives of Children* George Dennison describes what he calls a "healing environment" — what **I hope all our schools could be.** I would like to conclude by quoting him: "If we were to imagine a neurotic or unhappy child, and were to begin to name the qualities of the environment we might wish for him, we would list the things I have been describing. We would say, let it be an environment that is accepting and forgiving, and let it be one that takes him out of himself and involves him in group activities; and let the inducements to sociability be attractive and vivid, yet let them be measured accurately to his own capacities; and let there be real pressure in the environment, let it make definite and clear-cut demands, yet let the demands be flexible, and let there be no formal punishment or long-lasting ostracism; and let there be a hope of friendship, and hope of praise; and let there be abundant physical contact and physical exertion; and let the environment offer him a sense of the skills and the varieties of behaviour that lead to greater security ... and let the rewards for this kind of growth be immediate and intrinsic in the activities themselves."

"These activities of a healing environment are almost self-evident. Surely it is evident, too, that this environment is precisely the ordinary one of children at play among themselves."

Tamariki School has been in operation since August 1967, and is (was) at 83 Rutherford St, Christchurch 2.
