

Article about Alternative Schools, Christchurch Star, 5th August 1978

Staff and pupils have close relationship (at Tamariki)

A school where the rules are made by the pupils, where there is no compulsory attendance at classes, and no uniform, might spell anarchy. But paradoxically, these are some of the concepts that make Tamariki the democracy it is, say the school's three teachers.

There's a distinct difference between licence and freedom, says Pat Edwards, a part-time teacher.

"The trouble is some people can't differentiate between the two. They view a school like this with a kind of terror." But the Tamariki pupils appear no more frightening than those found in any primary school throughout the city.

There are fewer of them too. Tamariki has 29 pupils and it likes to keep its roll around the 30 mark. Any more, and the close relationship between staff and pupils and among the pupils themselves is impaired.

The children at Tamariki range from 4 to 14 years. Most come for the duration of their primary years and then attend a high school. Some come for only a few years. Some find Tamariki to their liking, others do not. Some come because they are unhappy to their place of schooling.

The three teachers at the school — Pat Edwards, Sue Dick and Tony Webster — say that most of the children who attend Tamariki are from homes where the parents are extremely interested in their children.



Maths can be fun (from left): Ruth Catherall, teacher Sue Dick, Peter Croll, Nick Millichip and Lynda McKenzie at Tamariki. "Some people view a school like this, with a kind of terror."

SACRIFICE

Many are not very financial, says Pat, and having their child attend a private school often involves considerable sacrifice. "The parents tend to value social responsibility and their children highly. Their children are a priority in their life. They want to see them develop at their own pace and remain in an evolving process, rather than becoming a static product. It costs \$112 a term for one child; \$220 for two children or \$210 if there is only one parent.

Last year the school operated on a budget of about \$18,000. A 50 per cent salary grant from the Department of Education is included in this total. Even so, the school's teachers all receive salaries which are much lower than for the average primary teacher. "When we advertise for a teacher, we point out that salary is not an attraction," says Pat.

In spite of its teetering financial position Tamariki has survived 10 years. It began following a meeting of a group of parents concerned that their children's needs were not being met. An old house at 83 Rutherford St. was acquired and the school was begun under the direction of Mrs June Bent, who had worked at a similar institution called Summerhill in England.

STEADFAST

Since then at least 120 children have passed through its doors. The school has weathered all sorts of ups and downs and crises and has emerged steadfast in its principles, says Pat.

What are its principles?

"We believe in back to basics," says Sue Dick, "only ours are different from those given so much publicity at present. Ours are that the child develop a good self image, that he realises he is a person in his own right who can learn, and that he feels he is a viable person. Our basic premise is for him to be adequate to the demands of his society in every way. "

"The children have a very strong sense of belonging at the school and I'm sure this feeling is nurtured by the close relationships we enjoy here and the high teacher-pupil ratio."



All concentration . . . Pat Edwards with Douglas Croll, Rachel Price and Duncan

Sue went to Canterbury University and then did a diploma of primary teaching in Adelaide. She is 26 and in her third year at Tamariki. Tony Webster has not trained as a teacher although he has been to university. He became involved with Tamariki because his son joined the school roll and when a teaching position became vacant four years ago, he applied for it. Pat Edwards, a university graduate, attended the founding meeting of the school, has seen her own children educated there, taught there for eight years and has been teaching for the last two years in a part-time capacity.

LEARNING

All three of them feel they have learnt as much at Tamariki as their pupils.

At Tamariki there is a timetable for children to choose from. The mornings are devoted to language and maths, the afternoons to cooking, pottery, science, woodwork, dressmaking or whatever best interests the child at the time. Unexpectedly, say the teachers, the children use crafts in the same way they use science classes to explore the world, rather than to express themselves or release tensions.

They attend the lessons only if they feel ready to, say the teachers — a surprising option for 5 and 6-year-olds, — but because no one wants to miss out on what is happening, attendance is high.

If the children's attention span and demand sees fit, a lesson can run for several hours. The teachers say that the children often learn in bursts. They tell of one pupil who spent all day every day doing maths for seven weeks.

RULES

Though there are many rules at Tamariki none is written down, and any rules can be changed by the children when they no longer work. Everything is voted on by the whole school at meetings which are chaired by pupils.

If a pupil chooses to deliberately break a rule, he comes in direct contact with the hurt it causes to his friends, says Sue. Anyone who persists in behaviour averse to that decided upon by the meeting is asked to explain his action in a group situation, so that a group remedy can be applied.

There are no punishments. "We realise that if a child is being anti-social he is usually doing so because he is unhappy," says Sue. "Perhaps the goals he has set himself might be beyond him. Or he has problems at home. It's times like that, that he needs support, not punishment."

The Tamariki teachers feel that because their children have come to terms with themselves, some interesting patterns in adolescence are starting to emerge. "Their adolescence tends to be less stormy than perhaps usual," says Pat. "Most of their rebelliousness is worked through during the years between 7 and 10. In adolescence many are just concerned in expanding their world," she says.

Testing and examinations play no part at Tamariki, yet their absence does not appear to jeopardise the progress of pupils at high school. From feedback from ex-pupils the teachers say the children have found themselves ahead in some things and behind in others when they start high school.

What Tamariki hopes to have instilled is a desire to learn, to think, to know something about themselves, say the teachers. And if these qualities have been attained during their time there, further education should be a challenge.