

TAGARI PROJECT: AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL EXPERIENCE 1974-1977

It was the attempt to offer an alternative within the existing State secondary system of education which prompted the setting up of the Tagari Project. Its genesis lay in the perception of its founders, particularly Mr Michael Middleton, that the average high school was failing, in several ways, to serve the needs of a number of its students, and thus in turn, was failing the community. During the many discussions and exchanges of ideas, which took place over a lengthy period prior to the establishment of Tagari Project it was agreed that there were areas of difficulty common to most high schools. Some of these difficulties seemed to have socio-economic connotations, while in other instances, a gender bias was implied. Most of these problems, however, were believed to be related to school sizes. Pressure of numbers in turn often made administration difficult, limited personal choice in studies and gave rise to tensions, the solution of which was too often formed in the adoption of authoritarian attitudes towards students, and in some cases, staff-members. Indeed, many teachers seemed disenchanted with the roles they were playing; some believed that they were more concerned with "baby-sitting" than with developing the intellectual capabilities of their students. Others were concerned that there was little recognition for the need to develop a responsive awareness towards the needs of others.

Broadly, the areas defined as causing most dissatisfaction were to do with:

- the exercise of control (often referred to as 'discipline')
- student-teacher relations
- the inadequacy of many schools in the formulation of their rules to supply realistic guidelines to their teachers and students
- student absenteeism
- anti-social behaviour of individuals or groups of students
- the self-perception of girls in relation to their stated goals and levels of achievement
- the role of parents in the education of their children.

The major aims, which were evolved for this alternative school were concerned with providing a small group of students, teachers and parents with the opportunity to co-operate in a broadly based educational undertaking for a period of four years. Hopefully, this interaction would bring the greatest benefits, to each of the groups involved, according to its needs, as only one age cohort of fifty students was to be chosen, and no further student intake was to be accepted. The project would span the high school years of these fifty students. Parents were invited to take an active part in the planning and wherever possible, the practice of the teaching programme. By administering and being accountable for part of the school's funds, they were also to be involved in decision-making with regard to material purchases and extra-curricular activities.

In 1974, the Tagari Project began its operation in Wesley Church Hall, Malville Street, Hobart. The school was to operate under the sponsorship of the Education Department of Tasmania, through the Senior Superintendent of Research, and was also to have continuing financial support from the Innovations Committee of the Schools Commission. The name 'Tagari' was suggested by the daughter of the Senior Superintendent of Research, who although not a pupil of the school, had been taught in another school by one of the two teachers in charge.

The name — an aboriginal word meaning 'family', was an excellent choice for a group which increasingly took on the

aspect of an extended family, prone to all the hazards and rewards that are involved when people become closely knit and secure in a relationship.

The aims of the school were fostered through work in basic core subjects and a wide selection of electives. Wherever possible Community resources were used, as well as the Tasmanian environment, in a programme designed to develop the student's self-reliance and initiative and to allow for the widest possible social interaction as a means of promoting social adeptness.

The school was staffed by two full time teachers who between them taught the four basic subjects and shared administration. Elective subjects were provided, as far as possible, to meet student demand. It was in the groupings which evolved around a range of elective subjects that valuable social interaction took place. This was often due to the particular part time teacher, parent or resource person from the community who presented the students with a different set of values or responses to the ones with which they were already familiar.

The exercise of authority within the school was defined in terms of accountability and the acceptance of individual responsibilities towards the larger group. There were no hierarchical ordering in terms of the usual positions of principal, vice principal etc. In accepting responsibility for the day to day operation of the project and the welfare of their students the two teachers in charge shared, turn about, the role of co-ordinator. This included financial management. Largely the authority of each teacher rested in the role he and she assumed as well as in the responsibility of their professional status. Much of each role depended on the personality of the teacher, the ordering of each person's social priorities and, invariably, the male/female stereotyping of social roles. (The latter, though often unwelcome, seemed inevitable and shall be discussed later.)

With regard to staff-student interaction, 'discipline' in the sense of the control of anti-social behaviour, presented few of the problems that teachers had encountered in earlier experiences. Tagari students were by no means a 'special' or selected group of students. "Pupils were nominated by their parents for admission to the school and were selected, in general, in order of application" (excerpt from 'The Tagari Project' Research Study No. 17, March 1975).

This method of entry had, I fear, caused some headaches to the Research Branch as 600 applications had been received to fill the advertised 50 places. When enrolments were completed it was discovered that the highest proportion of students came from the Risdon Vale, Mornington and Warrane areas, with representatives from other areas of greater Hobart as far south as Kingston.

In every respect, Tagari was representative of a wide social ordering. Parental occupations reflected working class to professional backgrounds — although not including the legal or medical professions. I believe that the variety of family backgrounds and suburban residency made Tagari a far more representative school than many high schools within the State system. In effect, individuals were brought together to share a series of experiences and to interact within a broad social grouping which would be largely unknown to them in a larger school.

Experience has shown that each student body in a large high school (and, I believe, in other organisations) is made up of selective friendship clusters. These groups tend to be allied on a neighbourhood, or primary school basis and the

composition of each cluster changes little during the four years. Quite often a child may be singled out as a 'loner', operating on the periphery of a group but never really gaining acceptance within it. Again it is common to find a paired friendship, which, although occasionally linking with another pair, or cluster, virtually remains a closed unit. It is possible that the extent of interaction is relatively narrow and that the old cliché 'lonely in a crowd' has greater relevance to many high school experiences than has so far been acknowledged.

Personal difficulties, in larger schools, are often translated into anti-social behaviour and it is extremely difficult for teachers to trace the cause of this behaviour. Many potential problems escape attention until they are escalated; it is difficult for teachers to develop the powers of observation needed to detect the symptoms of disaffection, in the forty or fifty minutes of a lesson period. Students who move from class to class, teacher to teacher, may find it impossible to establish the confidence they need to seek advice or help. In the Tagari group, where a working involvement between student and teacher was extended into a personal friendship through the sharing of many experiences, it was possible to "talk through" areas of difficulty before they developed into problems. It became increasingly obvious that size was an important factor in the necessity for controlling student behaviour. It was also apparent that discipline and control, so often confused in the minds of authorities, were widely separate issues, and that excessive control delayed the development of discipline within the individual.

Lessons were generally lively and gave maximum opportunity for individual participation. The interaction between teacher and student was carried into lesson breaks and lunch hours, as meals, coffee, leisure, were all shared activities. A portion of each day was set aside for group discussion of the day's programme and democratic participation in decision making or planning ahead was encouraged. At all times teachers and students shared the day's activities, as well as the school's amenities and gradually the formality of titles was broken down until 'Mike' and 'Fran' replaced 'Mr Middleton' and 'Mrs Bladel'. Although the use of first names by students tended to arouse some criticism of these teachers by outsiders, it also became apparent that children were loath to misbehave because they saw themselves involved more in a close social relationship than in a formal or artificially devised one. The privilege of using a first name — as a recognition of trust within a relationship, was never abused — but would be difficult to maintain in this spirit, within a school where such relationships have no chance to develop.

Daily group discussions also served to raise any matter of interest among the group, or to attempt to find a solution to any matter which was causing concern. Like any young adolescents, some individual students found social adaptation demanding and sometimes the cause of lapses in self control. Usually, the difficulty had been caused by a lack of understanding on the part of the individual, and frank discussion among the peer group became a greater socialising factor than any authoritarian stance by a teacher. In many respects, peer-group pressure, when founded on positive values, has far greater value than some of the methods of control used as 'connectives' by teachers. But 'positive values' must be learned. When teachers and parents are able to interact at will — without having to go through procedures which may actually be designed to allow only minimal contact, it is remarkably easy to reach an understanding with regard to the best interest of the child. At all times, Tagari students were advised 'to go gently in the world' and to approach their fellows with sensitivity and respect. As there was generally a consensus of agreement between school and family — few conflicts were able to develop that could not easily be resolved.

Towards the end of our first year, it was necessary to change premises. Our first base, Wesley Hall was inadequate for several reasons and facilities became available at the Y.M.C.A. building and the Teachers Centre. Sharing facilities was not always easy. Some adults tend to regard children with suspicion, especially those who appear at unusual times, and who do not wear uniform. The students learned a great deal during their first year with regard to the varying expectations of adults. They discovered that politeness was a means of social access, but also that many adults have double standards. It became increasingly important to share, with the group, the experiences encountered during the day and to receive help from teachers to interpret these experiences.

It also became obvious, that 'school' did not refer to physical structures. Discomfort and inconvenience encountered during the months before we found 'The House' in Hampden Road, had little effect upon the feeling of well-being shared by the group. Vandalism, of the type so often encountered in schools, was non-existent. Scribbling on walls or desks was met with disapproval and those students who had lapsed regained the favour of their peers by correcting the error.

Because we were housed in areas where numerous safety hazards existed, either because of proximity to city traffic, or age of building, it was necessary to devise acceptable school-rules to maintain personal security and facilitate co-operation and the preservation of individual rights within the group.

Without a school uniform, teachers had no onerous tasks of compelling students to wear the 'non-compulsory' attire. In the formulation of rules, consideration was paid to establishing a minimum number of rules not as repressants but as necessities, and all acceptable within the particular environment in which we were operating. On each new venture, camping trips or field study excursions, a series of guidelines were devised, again to give full protection to the individual and the environment. These rules devised to serve the group were applicable to all members, on the basis of shared responsibility; teachers were not excluded from their operation — a compelling factor in the devising of sensible and limited numbers of guidelines.

A major objective throughout the operation of the project was to assist each student in the acquisition of social skills by providing a variety of experience. Through a series of camping trips and visits to locations where specific learning programmes were carried out, students were placed in unfamiliar surroundings or in contact with strangers in situations which potentially contained some elements of stress. It was necessary, in many instances, for individuals to evaluate for themselves, the effects of their behaviour on others. Particularly in the early life of the Project, when sleeping over night in a strange environment presented all kinds of exciting possibilities, there were many complaints regarding the over-exuberant behaviour of certain students. By the third year, a great deal of responsibility had developed in respect to the preservation of another's privacy. These types of social skills had been painstakingly acquired. If lapses had occurred in individual behaviour, that person was encouraged by teachers, and by peers, to re-assess the situation and the points in which he/she had failed to cope. No student was ever discouraged from entering into a new experience even when a previous occasion had been difficult to handle. Indeed it was believed that only by giving such students opportunities to test themselves in various situations, and by showing confidence in them, in doing so, would they develop the necessary social adeptness. Away from home trips with Tagari students became a rich learning experience for all involved.

It had become apparent, quite early in the life of the Project, that the community had very mixed attitudes towards children. It is usual to see school children, only at certain times in the city and usually identified by special clothing, the school uniform. Tagari students were often challenged by bus-drivers or members of firms with regard to the 'legality' of their presence in the city in what were normally regarded as out of school hours.

The city provided a large number of resources for individual or group learning programmes. It also provided temptations which placed demands on the self-control of some students. The losses incurred by many businesses, through children stealing, are great. Perhaps these firms, through the type of advertising they devise, and the lavish display of their wares, are, in part, responsible for the seduction of these young offenders. Advertising places great pressures on young people to conform to a 'popular' image. That image is created by the need of firms to sell particular products and the acquisition of these items is made to appear almost obligatory — if one is to be acceptable to one's peers. Depending upon a child's own sense of deprivation, the need to acquire a 'proper-image' may become urgent, and rules of conduct abandoned accordingly.

Because parents were part of the Project, it was possible at any time for a parent to come to the house and discuss any problems that may have arisen, either at school or elsewhere. The need for easy access to teachers is vital, if parents are to play more than a nominal role in the education of their children. Where schools overly formalise relationships between parent and teacher, the efforts required by parents to approach the school may appear daunting, particularly if they remember their own school days with distaste. Because a sense of responsibility and concern for the child was accepted by staff, the task of parents, in many respects, was made easier because there was no sense of philosophical separation between the child's two most influential environments, home and school. Despite material differences between the Tagari families — which included an ordering of priorities and objectives for their own child, the acceptance of a belief that all people are responsible for children, united the members of the group into a truly supportive community.

During the four years of shared experience, many individuals began to question or revise their previously held assumptions. The implicit values of paternalism which underlie social institutions, including education, became increasingly open to question and to scrutiny.

Because Tagari was a family, the roles of the co-ordinators took on overtones of 'mother' and 'father'. This, I believe, became one of the strengths of the community. Responsibilities, burdens, work loads were shared equally. The image of 'mother' had very different overtones to the stereotypes by which children, particularly girls are influenced to accept passivity as a woman's greatest virtue. From the inception of the Project, opportunities to participate in all experiences were equal to both boys and girls. A parent, male, became the girls' hockey coach. A girl displayed such skills in cricket that a brave attempt was made by her male friends to have her included in the school roster team. Boys and girls shared camping trips, played together, worked together — in every sense equals in choice and relied upon, individually for their particular strengths and talents. The curriculum was structured in such a way that free choices could be made, by all students in manual subjects or other electives which are often arranged in a way that forbids participation by one of the sexes.

In every possible way, and by every means open to its participants, Tagari school served its community. The beliefs that had generated the project, sustained it and were continually reinforced during its operation. The project was suc-

cessful, partly because it became integrated into the community and reflected its values while serving its aims. Socially it became a respected part of its neighbourhood. Academically, its progress was monitored and found in some cases, to have maintained a higher record of achievement that had previously been expected.

The social attitudes of its students again were monitored (The CAVE STUDY, Report submitted to the Schools Commission. William Ramsay, University of Tasmania, September 1978), and reflected a high degree of responsibility, regard for the law, and social sophistication. It is to be hoped that somehow, a similar, school experience, may follow the example of this project, and serve the needs of many communities, where, for many of its children, the future is bleak and the routines of their daily existence, hold few rewards and little meaning.

Fran Bladel

PLENARY SESSION — THURSDAY 16th AUGUST 1979 (Afternoon Session)

This plenary session was spent in general discussion.

There was considerable interest in the concept of the school community worker. It was queried as to whether the arrival of the community worker meant that teachers had less contact with parents and were less liable to make home visits. The answer was to the contrary; the community worker facilitated the relationship between teacher and parent, particularly when the parent felt overawed by the professional teacher. The community worker programme also helped the teacher to "tune in" to problems of difficult home life. In answer to a question, the school community worker for Acton Primary, Mrs. Marge Sweeney (who was present in the audience) replied that the school had managed to encourage many fathers to come in for voluntary assistance with teaching and other informal work around the school. There was a question to Miss Miller about the problems of children in trouble who attend the school. In her reply it became clear that the community worker helped to co-ordinate all the agencies involved with the family. Miss Miller entered a plea for better co-ordination between Housing Department and Education Department over the siting of schools in relation to the homes. She considered that 350 students was the maximum number that school should cater for and Ms. Bladel agreed with her.

There were many questions of Ms. Bladel about the Togari experiment and it seemed from her replies that the Togari system was as near to perfection as could be expected.

There were some questions of Mrs. Campbell-Smith about her paper of the morning. In reply to those on teacher training for the development of the specific skills mentioned, she reported that some was carried out on a voluntary basis in Launceston. There had been considerable discussion with the Education Department and the College of Advanced Education and she was hopeful that a policy about this was coming a little closer. She was also asked whether the disadvantaged child in a class of 30 or 35 could manage in so large a group, or whether smaller groups would be desirable. The answer was that, even with a large group, given time and continuity of work throughout the years of high school, worthwhile results could be achieved with such a child.

There were questions to the whole panel. One was whether outside speakers visiting occasionally were a good thing for educating children for living. The consensus of the panel's views was that such speakers were valuable if they were coming in to speak to a group already formed and which was ongoing. There was a question as to what primary schools

and secondary schools can do for the child who is left behind in all spheres, eventually truants and then may become deviant. The answers indicated that more work had to be done with the child and the family, and here of course was the value of the school community worker first, and later the guidance officer.

This was an exciting session with some new concepts in the field of education presented to the delegates. The plenary session was well attended and many were involved. The Chairman for the afternoon summed up and expressed gratification that education at last had secured a place in the deliberations of the A.C.P.C. The afternoon's papers and discussions emphasised the very vital role that schools can play in the community and it seemed certain that the school of which Miss Miller is Principal operates as a community centre and that there is good liaison between school and family.

**FRIDAY 17th AUGUST 1979
(Morning Session)**


From the programme:

"Hopefully, by this stage of the Conference, we shall have

discussed ideas freely and come up with interesting innovative programmes for influencing our society. How can we translate these recommendations into action? Are bureaucracies too inflexible to adapt to new ideas? Can they make the necessary decisions to implement them? Can National and State planning bodies effectively influence the bureaucracy for long term crime prevention? This is the subject of our final session."

Influencing the Bureaucracy for Better Planning

- CHAIRMAN:** Mr. J.G. Mackay, Chief Probation and Parole Officer, Tasmania.
- 9.00- 9.45 am Mr. W. Clifford, Director of the Institute of Criminology, Canberra.
- 9.45-10.15 am Mr. Peter Grabosky, Director, Office of Crime Statistics, South Australia.
- 11.00-11.30 am Report of the week's proceedings by Conference Rapporteur, Mr David Biles, Assistant Director (Training), Institute of Criminology.
- 11.30-12.00 Final Plenary Session.



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