



Arlene Cairns, College Chair

TARREMAH STEINER SCHOOL

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The Steiner School at Kingston has a reputation for being different. But different in what way? The school tour of Tarremah - which means albatross - seems a good place to start. We begin in the staffroom, with its list of allergy suspects on the wall next to the fridge, just like every other school, and comfortable chairs around an oval wooden table - unlike every other school.

The first Steiner school, our guide John Correy tells us, was set up to educate cigarette factory workers' children in Stuttgart in the 1920s. As if to overturn any doubts we may be having, he quickly adds that although everything taught at Tarremah is based on Steiner's thinking, it's filtered through 'a modern lens'. Now as then, the focus is on the ideal moment in a child's development at which to introduce key experiences and concepts. Timing, for Rudolph Steiner, is everything; immersion from within is favoured over exposure from without.

The teachers at Tarremah, with their deep knowledge of the subjects they teach, use story and example to guide children through their learning. There are, John tells us with a hint of pride, no electric bells. Instead a hand-bell is rung a few times each day - although it's down to each teacher to decide when a lesson should end. The idea is that students should learn slowly, especially in the early years. The introduction of reading and later, computers, is delayed until the curricula has built up to the point that they fit organically into a students' learning - rather than being encouraged from an early age. Media of all forms, it came as no surprise to learn, is actively discouraged in the early years - and introduced later when it's used as a launching pad for discussion.

The physical environment at Tarremah is attractive and at times quirky - every building and courtyard a chance to marry the attractive with the useful, often with input from students. Each primary year classroom is a world unto itself, with children sitting at hand-made wooden desks and chairs, from which hangs large hand-needleworked bags.

Another stand-out feature of a Steiner education is that students have the same teacher throughout their primary years - with all the pluses and minuses that go with continuous intimacy. As John Correy explains, instead of taking the first term and half to work out what the problem is with little Tommy, little Tommy's teacher knows exactly what he or she is in for from one year to the next.

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In a quick but tactical aside, John Correy tells us that his own three sons were all Steiner educated, with his eldest son studying medicine and his youngest just beginning studies at ANU. He also mentions that before 'finding' Steiner he taught at six schools, of every denomination, and that teaching in Tarremah is 'much nicer' than these previous experiences. 'You work harder', he says, 'because you immerse yourself in every topic you teach so that you can make up stories for the children about them' - rather than reading a story from a book, say, before moving on to the next topic.

Asked to teach vertical algorithms to a class of Year 2's, in his early years of Steiner teaching, had John scratching his head. A degree in maths didn't help - if anything it made him appreciate just how complicated the concept could be. Instead he told the class a story about a train full of coins and other treasures, and of bringing the engine into a siding alongside a counting house. Then he asked the children how they might deal with all the coins on board the train, in order to count them. 'Why don't we divide them into bags of 10?' suggested one bright girl, 'and keep them in different rooms of the counting house?' And so they drew an elaborate counting house with chimney pots and window boxes in which to store the bags of 10s and 100s in different rooms. After a few weeks of counting the money into columns using this picture, John suggested that they could start doing away with the smoke from the chimney, the train in the siding, and the window boxes - leaving them with just the numbers in their proper columns.

If, John suggests, you can tell a story that appeals to child's heart, and you can get them to use their understanding of the story in tactile ways (with coloured blocks, say, or sewing or knitting), you can then come in at a later stage with abstract concepts, and for those concepts to make sense to them. The heart, the hand, and only then the head was Rudolph Steiner's preferred way of conveying knowledge.

The Early Years class is writhing across the floor pretending to be crocodiles when we enter, as a teacher pulls out braided bread from the oven for morning tea. After we've tip-toed out again John Correy suggests that children of this age 'still think that trees can talk. They're very much connected to the earth,' he says. 'They'll love playing in all these puddles later - the rain won't bother them.'

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'It's all to do with where a child is at', he says. A significant number of students, he suggests, can't cope with modern schooling - with set classes and hourly bells and multiple demands from an early age. '20% can cope with this, 60% are okay with it, but 20% are made anxious by it. We get a lot of students who've been made anxious by the school system they've left'.

The Year 2's next door are doing numeracy for their Main Lesson - filling large sketch books with wooden pencil drawings. A candle is burning on the teacher's table, desks are in loose rows, and children sit squirming with concentration, colourful socked feet dangling from chairs. Meanwhile the Year 3's in the room next to that are brainstorming what cows do, ahead of their excursion to a dairy - part of their larger investigation into farm life.

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The Year 7's are making balsa wood lanterns, some of them incredibly elaborate, to illustrate an important aspect of geometry. 'And the Year '8's?' one of our group asks. 'They're currently revolting', John Correy jokes. 'And so they're studying the role of revolutions in Modern History'. Finally, in a spanking new wood-sprung floor Hall, the Year 10's - in their final year - are acting out mitochondria in small groups, wearing blue and green uniforms they helped design. At first they look like any other Year 10 class - except perhaps that there are no surly students backing away from the task.

There are no electives at Tarremah. Everyone does Japanese, German, Woodwork, Craft, and Art. Everyone learns the recorder in Year 1 and takes up a string instrument in Year 3 or 4, once they're better able to form notes. There is, by design, much less choice than in other schools. Learning is structured and activities are introduced once students have reached a point where they're optimally receptive to them. Reading, considered by Steiner to be highly intellectual, is only introduced after many steps have cleared the path. Equally written language is introduced

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in a natural way, slowly at first and then expanded on - rather than relying on memory to do much of the work.

In theory Steiner Schools have no Principal, but rather a rotating Chair. However recently there's been a shift towards a semi-permanent Chair, a role ably filled at Tarremah by Arlene Cairns. After 15 years of teaching in mainstream schools in South Africa, Arlene Cairns felt that something was wrong. From a young age she'd wanted to be a teacher, making her disappointment with the reality of becoming one in a mainstream school all the more acute. Having been cajoled by a friend into attending a Steiner Open Day she signed up for the training there and then. 'This', she said to herself, 'is where I'm going to find out what I need'. The training did give her what she needed, and she's never looked back. 'I've loved every minute of it', she adds, although her expression makes this obvious.

And yet the prospect of bringing up two white male boys in South Africa, with no clear future, was unsettling. Around this time her sister-in-law in Hobart saw an opening at Tarremah, and urged her to apply for it. Walking into the school for the interview, she again felt an immediate sense of oneness with the aims of the school, just as she had years before at the Steiner opening day, and again she hasn't looked back.

Youthful, lithe, and switched on, Arlene Cairns isn't comfortable being top-down and authoritative in her role as School Chair. Instead she sees herself at the base of an inverted triangle, with her decisions in the service of everyone above her. This gives her strength to do all the things required of her as Chair, and to withstand the pressures that any head must accept - for example taking the flak when things go wrong, and making tricky phonecalls to parents whose expectations for their child are at odds with what the school feels is appropriate (an occupational hazard in every school).

What distinguishes a Steiner School from other schools, in her mind, isn't so much the content of what children learn, but its delivery. John captured this well during our tour of the school. At the beginning of each school year, he sits the children down and talks to them. 'There's a story I'm going to tell you over the year, and out of this story, by the end of the year, you'll get all the knowledge you need'. And because children have the same class teacher for up to 8 years, any part of the story they don't grasp or miss, can be reintroduced and added to the following year. In this way, by emphasizing process, how things are done, and a slow awakening to complexity, students are given a strong base from which they can later address abstract and moral questions.

Most people, Arlene Cairns admits, view a Steiner school as a closed and sheltered world. 'But actually', she points out, 'it's the opposite. A Steiner education encourages students not to look inward but outward, into the surrounding culture, and to feel responsible for what happens there'.



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Recently the Federal Government commissioned a survey across all schools to tease out the issues that most concern this generation of teenagers. What they found is that students in mainstream schools are overwhelmingly interested in issues of direct concern to them and their future. Their responses were far more personalized than was the case with Steiner students, whose focus was on things outside themselves - the environment, poverty, and climate.

When students leave Tarremah she describes how many students 'go on to do incredible things'. By not training them to conform, and by educating them to make their own decisions, to evaluate situations and to do what's right as individuals, Steiner students are, she believes, uniquely equipped for life. School and university selection committees can invariably pick the Steiner students. They're the ones who look the committee in the eye and ask questions when they need to, and who, not expecting to be spoon-fed, 'just get on with what's expected'.

Because Steiner students are treated as a whole from a young age, and learn from within a secure base that adapts as they mature, most school-leavers emerge from Tarremah with a genuine sense of confidence. This protects them from being easily intimidated by life and others. It also means that they're willing to make do as best they can when sticky situations arise, or to run with an opportunity when it comes their way.

And the result? There's no prescribed path for Steiner students, their paths are varied. Some enter further education, some follow their parents' footsteps, while others strike out on their own. And yet all of them know that they have what it takes to walk The Overland Track, to camp and to cook each night, and to come out smiling.