



9

Welcome to **ATTACK!** a two-page occasional publication. Most of **ATTACK!** will be concerned with the holistic curriculum which, if acted on, is a fundamental way to undermine the present undemocratic education system. Don't be discouraged if opportunities to teach holistically are limited, do your best, be a guardian, and act as a witness to this culturally significant and inspiring way of teaching and learning. **ATTACK!** is a partner to <https://networkkonnet.wordpress.com>

Teacher Diary 1

William had finished his poem; the topic he had chosen was a thrush. There was the usual lack of spark in his writing made worse by his insistence on rhyming. [I made a mental note to myself to stop reading heavily rhymed poems to the children, particularly poems written specially for children.] He brought the poem and his lino cut to me (the one from his third attempt). I acknowledged his work, preferring, though, not to say anything direct. Better for him to work things out for himself. He went to Catherine and asked what she thought of the lino cut.



What about some branches to fill up that gap?

Yes, indeed! Discussions like this with other class members offered good possibilities for improving art work, perhaps because of the understandings that had been developed as a result of whole class discussions. With art, however, they seemed to know what they liked and, to a certain extent, why; but the possibilities were not so good in language because of children's seeming lack of discrimination in the area. But what to do? I didn't want to give instructions to them about what topic to choose, or to give them instructions before they began writing; nor did I want to lay out the starting point for them. Sometimes the starting point would be art, the form mainly at their discretion; sometimes it would be writing, once again, the form mainly at their discretion.

When they began lino cutting a few weeks ago, as was my practice in art, I didn't suggest a topic for them. I was, however, taken aback by the clichéd outcomes: yachts, aeroplanes, and stick figures. As well, large areas were unfilled, and there was a lack of balance. This was all the more surprising because they were the same children who had done such impressive pots. After a number of attempts, however, the children slowly tired of working at the clichéd level, and began to take more interest in filling in the blocks. This allowed me to begin praising the good things that appeared. Soon I found that the children were noticing good things, too, and were pointing them out. I was relieved to see some of them using topics from the environment, for instance, trees, houses, and flowers.

It looks as though the regular environment walks had begun to pay off. I noticed as the walks accumulated the children becoming more perceptive in their observations. In an oblique way, I encouraged them to use their senses: what they saw, heard, smelt, and touched. On one occasion, a child changed perspective by lying down and looking up; other children immediately followed the lead; changing perspective was to become a regular part of their walk routine. Whatever we did look for, or concentrated on, nearly always came from the children. I didn't want to take away from them discovery opportunities. Sometimes they searched for tiny animals or felt the wind. Trees were a favourite: they looked at shapes; they felt leaves and trunks; they noted branch patterns; they became excited at buds appearing, leaves falling, nests, or bird inhabitants. Clouds and shadows were also favourites. On one occasion we put on our raincoats and explored gutters and observed rain hitting, flowing, and accumulating. Small animals began to be noticed: spiders and their webs, worms, snails, slaters, moths, butterflies, bugs. When a child remarked on an interesting shape or pattern, the children were soon looking for similar shapes or patterns.

These walks were intended to be an overall programme stimulus. Just this week, a thrush had become a focus, as did some snail eggs, a fern-shoot uncurling, and the leaves on a cabbage tree. They were getting better at 'seeing' things. Individual nature interests were taken up by the children mainly by writing poems and doing lino cuts, though three children did clay work. I often undertook short lessons on topics that arose from these walks. This week I took a short lesson on snails. The children were interested, but only a handful chose snails as their topic – which pleased me. A number of the children went to other sources for more information on their chosen topics (books, computers), which I neither encouraged or discouraged. At

this stage, I really wanted the children to observe directly, do their own thinking, and develop their own knowledge. (On balance, I probably discouraged.)

Most of the early work they did with lino cutting was incomplete and done with the same-sized cutter. I was surprised how long many of the children continued in this fashion. To encourage the children to move forward I drew attention to Thomas who had used several different cutters and filled in the areas satisfactorily. In our regular end-of-the-day discussions of work, there was attention to balance in pictures. The children were soon pointing out the effectiveness of well-filled blocks and pictures.

But what to do about their written work? The children had produced many pages of clichéd written work to go with their clichéd lino cut and other art work, but the lino cut and other art work had improved. Then Anna wrote a short poem about gum trees which had a subtle internal rhyme and a welcome accuracy to its description. This was a fillip. I urged myself to be patient. These, after all, were early days, such a poem represented an encouraging breakthrough, and perhaps there had been a reduction in 'aeroplanes-in-flames' kind of writing. This was the nature of teaching, the way forward not always being clear. What I knew, though, was that I didn't want to change philosophy radically and become directive with the children.

We continued the practice of the children's work nearly always being presented in some way or other to the class. As well as the discussions being helpful to the children in their work, it gave me an insight into the quality of their thinking. I was encouraged by their improving ability to make judgements on the basis of the qualities of the writing and not current attitudes to the writer. The children did make allowances it seemed to me for writing that was a good effort for a particular child. There was, though, an increasing lack of tolerance for lazy expression. All this, however, had not yet led to a marked improvement in their writing.

I decided, after considerable hesitation, to become more engaged in the children's writing, albeit subtly and temporarily. I felt the children, especially the older ones, would benefit from more direct questioning. I did not do this with any expectation of a quick and substantial lift in the quality; indeed, I expected the immediate outcome to be a fair amount of contrived writing but, it was hoped, with sufficient flashes of sincerity to justify the intervention.

Charlotte had written, '*The black vine weevil was starting to make its home. I thought it was going to have eggs.*' [Transmission of knowledge like this is an example of an uninvolved writer.]

'How did you feel about the weevil and what it was doing?'

Aroha had written, '*If you look at a flax plant you will see it wave in the breeze.*' [The use of 'you' rather than 'I', and the indefinite article 'a', are indications of an uninvolved writer. She is unlikely to have had a particular flax bush in mind.]

'Did it really wave in the breeze?'

'Were you thinking of a particular flax bush?'

'Go and have another look.'

John had written, '*The caterpillar looked funny.*' [Children using words like 'silly' or 'funny' are not making an effort to find the right word.]

'Why did it look funny?'

Mere had written, '*I saw the wind catch the pine trees. It blew them from side-to-side.*' [I praised Mere for the metaphor 'catch', but questioned her about the description of the tree's movement.]

'Did the trees really move from side-to-side?'

'Next time you see wind blowing into the pine trees, look carefully at how the trees really move.'

Michael had written, '*Once we went fishing and saw a baby shark.*' [Using 'once' was the way he regularly began stories.]

'Why don't you give me more precise information? When did you go fishing?'

He wrote, '*Last Monday we ...*

Improvement will not be easy; teaching, I have found, is not best done to a recipe. My emphasis will still be on us responding sensitively to work produced – delighting in magic moments when beauty and truthfulness are expressed.

