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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://networkonnet.wordpress.com>

Avoiding the hollows

I first visited Gail Loane when she was a teaching principal at Puriri, a three-teacher school near Thames. It was immediately clear that she had a firm grasp of the central idea of expressive writing – that of getting children to write with particularity, with an eye for detail – whether describing objects or their own or others' feelings. And the way she did this was to challenge children's thinking, providing them with new sources of stimulus; new ways to reflect on experience.

The idea of being an author prevailed amongst the children, also wanting to write, caring about their writing, and getting satisfaction from writing. When a child wrote something distinctive, and it was shared with the other children, there were nods of appreciation all round – writing was highly valued.

Formative influences? First of all playcentre, said Gail in response to my question. I was particularly interested in the parent education side – grappling to find ways to draw parents in and give them an understanding of what we were trying to achieve: Lex Gray and his playcentre philosophy, Montessori, Gwen Somerset, Elwyn Richardson, and Bruce Hammonds – anything to do with children's discovery learning, those kinds of things took my attention. I found a university course on children's literature particularly stimulating.

Following her time at Puriri, she was appointed to a junior class advisory position, and then, when *Tomorrow's Schools* came in, she was available as a person to share her learning insights.

It was Dorothy Heathcote, however, she said, who was pivotal. There was her stress on excellence. I came to appreciate that in my teaching I tended to rely on a lot of tricks. Something more substantial was needed. A key statement of hers was, 'Do not leave children with hollows'. Meaning all learning should be quality learning. That statement has continued to mean a lot to me.

I can remember how frustrated I felt with a child who had high ability but who persisted in writing in flowery language – the stars always glittered.

'How would you go about challenging that child now,' I asked.

Recently, a teacher asked me to take a language lesson with her class. During the course of the discussion a child said: 'Autumn's coming'.

I said, 'Why don't you all go outside, stand there, and use all your senses. When you have one really good sentence come back in.'

Back in they came.

'The yellow, red, and brown leaves are fluttering to the ground.'

'Is that true?'

'Are the leaves red?'

'No.'

'Did you see any leaves fluttering?'

'No.'

'Out you go again.'

'Inside they came.'

'That tree over there has yellow on top.'

'Could you say that better?'

'The oak is tinged with yellow.'

They had concentrated, and the result was a few interesting sincere sentences.

Keeping those hollows away is hard work – you can never take quality in their thinking for granted. I took a class to look out over the sea. Out came superficial responses. How disappointing.

Then a child said, 'A pencil thin line divides the sea from the sky.'

This observation lifted the whole class, especially after they registered my delight in hearing it.

Getting young children to see themselves as writers can be difficult. I can remember an encounter with two children – one a boy, the other a girl.

'Today we're going to write a story all by ourselves,' I said in that teacher-tone of voice.

'I can't,' said the boy. 'I only make mistakes.'

I shifted my attention, 'What might you write about?' I asked the girl.

'My daddy shot his foot with a gun.'

The boy contemplated for a moment; clearly he wasn't going to be outdone.

'I had a bath.'

'Great!' I said. 'Were you just tricking me before?'

Off he went with a piece of paper and a few squiggles appeared.

A key way for me to tap into children's experiences is to use literature. For instance, there is a piece of writing I feel is particularly effective – 'Through the Tunnel' by Doris Lessing (*School Journal*, Pt 4, No. 2, 1977). [This story will be posted in **Attack! 32**.] After watching other boys swim through a long hole in a rock, a boy overcomes his fear by eventually giving it a go. The close description of the boy's feelings and the attention to detail, contribute to a strong sense of tension.

At the end of the story we reflect.

'What was the story really about?'

They responded with things like: 'Plucking up courage', 'Showing determination'.

Those contributions were fair enough, but only a few children had anything to say – something further was needed. That something was getting personal – through hearing a personal story. In this case, it was the teacher's personal story. If you want children to reveal more of themselves, you often need to reveal something of yourself. I have learnt to tell stories; a skill all teachers should develop.

I asked the children to sit in a circle then I said: 'Turn to a partner and tell him or her about it.' (With junior children I say: 'Go knee to knee.') They don't have to write about what they discuss, but, inevitably, it has some influence on what is produced.

Touch them personally; get them to dig in; and avoid the Heathcote hollows.



'A pencil thin line divides the sea from the sky.'

