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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>

The battle for primary school reading – is the phoneme on the wall? Part 1

This writing first appeared in Developmental Network Magazine and was received by junior teachers, leaders of junior classes with thunderous support. I was approached to make sure that the writing was never lost. So here it is in different publication form, but with the same message: all hail to the holistic teachers of junior reading, long may their beautiful work be remembered and acted on, also their courage in the bitter and enduring battle with quantitative academics, the media, and politicians.

This writing is about how a group of women, women in primary school junior classrooms, the ones who have been the heart and soul of junior class reading for decades, have been diminished in status and spirit by phonics-focused academics as an outcome of the bitter and long-running phonics debate. These women are in an increasingly weakened professional situation, and vulnerable to any future undermining by politicians, the media, bureaucracy, education lobby groups, community pressures, and the effects of a changed emphasis in the training of teachers on some campuses. I call this group of teachers the 'balanced reading' group. The philosophical antecedents to balanced reading going back to Beeby.

Please note: the *New Zealand Journal of Education Studies (NZJES)*, New Zealand's premier research publication, is regularly referred to in this writing.

The phonics-focused academics to the forefront of the debate are Tom Nicholson, William Tunmer, and James Chapman. When I saw these three in action at a conference some years ago: Nicholson I described as an academic with a street-fighter streak; Tunmer as austere and reserved; and Chapman as seemingly just happy to be in the company of the other two. Nicholson has led the campaign for a phonics-focused education system, particularly through the media; Tunmer has been very assiduous with the supporting research, and can play the game hard when he puts his mind to it, particularly in research journals; Chapman has also been assiduous in research, most of it in association with Tunmer.

I am writing this series for a number of reasons. The main one is for my self-knowledge – an exploration to find the truth of the matter, perhaps, more accurately, an exploration to be assured of the truth of the matter. I write on the assumption of the efficacy of the balanced reading approach but, as I read the research, talk to people, and reflect on my experiences, I will keep my mind open to contradictions.

Because this paragraph has been written towards the end of the writings I can report, and with satisfaction, that New Zealand's balanced reading approach stands up impressively. This is not directed to my treasured group, but for those still developing the ability in their teaching to piece together the jigsaw that is children's reading. Any attention to letter-sound association is done with a light touch, mainly at the early stages of learning to read, in an integrated way, in other words, in a way consistent with the principles established by the balanced reading group (indeed, some children need only to read words and, with sufficient of them absorbed, be able to draw the implications from them, and fly in their reading like a sea bird). Interestingly, Nicholson, Tunmer et al. at conferences have often said that ten minutes of phonics a day would do it, so what is the big fuss. In their writing, though, they bare their teeth.



Another reason for this writing is to pay tribute to our women junior teachers of reading – you are, and long have been, the heroes of our education system. You are, and have been, collectively yourselves. You are not, and never have been, beholden to central government officials, advisers, official publications, overseas writers (for instance, Susan Isaacs, Frank Smith, Bill Martin, Brian Cambourne, or Kenneth Goodman), nor even to local heroes (for instance Warwick Elley, Ruth Trevor, Marie Clay, or Don Holdaway).

A further reason for the writings is to urge people to be prepared – the phonics-focused group usually gains more traction with a conservative government in power and in less settled economic times. Don Brash's one memorable statement about education you will remember was the need for a return to phonics. (Jane Soler has an interesting article – *NZJES*, 33 (2) – about 'the complex interrelationships between economic pressure groups, political structures, and professionals as they attempted to control and define the teaching of reading ...') As well, there has been a bit of a publicity lull for this group (plenty of positioning, though). It wouldn't take much for it to be all on again.

I am visiting a middle-size school in a Waikato country town as a school inspector. The principal is towards the end of his career and is quite content to run a settled school and to have an uneventful tenure. One thing, though, he greatly enjoys is helping children with their reading. Some of these children are slipping behind in their reading, in other words, potential candidates for reading recovery; others are failing readers. They come to his office on a regular basis, sometimes in small groups, sometimes on their own, to read to him. He is patient, kindly, and interested. No particular reading techniques are employed. The most you could say is that he gives them plenty of time to work out any word they are struggling with. Their reading takes wing with him. The results are outstanding but, to me, not surprising, because I have seen the phenomenon occur many times. If you put a child or a small group of children with a kindly, patient adult, regularly, and in a settled environment, there will be a remarkable improvement in reading. What is happening is reading by words, not parts of them, and in a highly conducive atmosphere.

The moral is: When adults try out reading ideas in such circumstances, the variable that brings success is not any particular reading technique – it is the situation and environment. I call it the RPE – Retiring Principal Effect. This effect comes into play pretty much irrespective of other circumstances, for instance, it can be phonics-focused, Kip McGrath, dyslexic tuition, or child-centred text. Reading in New Zealand is replete with examples of the effect – remember Donna Awatere's reading system? When it occurs, the providers ascribe the success gained to the techniques employed when, in fact, the variable doing the job (along with a bit of Hawthorne) is the individualisation involved and related environmental factors. I, of course, favour the wider reading context for these happenings because it provides a firmer foundation for subsequent reading development. Examples of ways to provide this wider reading context and firmer foundation are the 'Reading Together' (particularly effective) and the HPP programme, both are referred to below.

These writings are not to advocate for pressure on schools in any particular way, if some schools want to go down the phonics-focused route then so be it. (The balanced reading approach is a very broad education church, anyway.) This freedom for schools to work things out for themselves is the New Zealand way. Having said that, one of the objectives of these writings is to lobby the NZEI to be well-prepared to defend my (and their) treasured group of junior class teachers. They are being slowly and slyly undermined with the prospect of it becoming more overt and intensive. A kitset should be available explaining the balanced New Zealand reading approach; experts should be co-opted; articles should be commissioned; media commentators and the media approached and informed; and courses undertaken.

I have visited the classrooms of these women, this treasured group, for nearly 40 years, first as a teachers college lecturer, for 15 years as a school inspector, and latterly as a consultant. These women are good, they do the job, they can teach nearly all children to read. These women, however, have been under sustained pressure as a result of the activities of the group of powerful and strategically-placed academics and associated academics, who can call effortlessly on the services of the media and politicians and just as effortlessly sway public opinion. As well, these academics go for support to other like-minded academics, mainly in America. These like-minded academics have their own forums, conferences, and publications, and they cite the research of each other to support their respective cases. I call this group 'phonics focused' (perhaps 'riveted' might be the more accurate word).

