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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://networkkonnet.wordpress.com>

The battle for primary school reading Part 2 – is the phoneme on the wall?

In which the aggressive practices, motivations, and behaviour of the quantitative academics are laid bare.

Quantitative researchers in reading like Tunmer, Chapman, and Nicholson, always face difficulty in establishing their preferred paradigm. To standardise their methods they have to exclude a lot of variables – variables which are often of great significance to New Zealand teachers of the balanced reading programme. Quantitative researchers concentrate on words, parts of words, and parts of words of words, even parts of words of words of words. New Zealand teachers undertake close and continuous evaluation of children; the evaluation of quantitative researchers is spasmodic and artificial. New Zealand teachers because of their close and continuous evaluation of children can choose the most productive teaching and learning moment for teaching a particular skill; quantitative researchers work to more ordered timetables. New Zealand teachers are looking to make learning joyous and spontaneous; quantitative researchers avoid such conditions because of the variables they occasion. New Zealand teachers do not use the academic word metacognition as a licence to burden children with the technicalities of reading; they gain particular gratification when children learn for themselves (in response, of course, to setting up prime conditions for such learning to occur). Above all, there is a world of difference between carefully controlled experimental teaching and the hurly-burly of classroom teaching. Under classroom pressure, it is my observation that phonics-dominated programmes become increasingly sterile, inflicting long-term harm for very little short-term benefit.

The attack by Nicholson, Tunmer et al. on the New Zealand-style of teaching reading leads to a strange situation. These individuals unrelentingly condemn 'whole-language' teaching which is their disparaging epithet for the New Zealand-style.

In a recent article *NZJES*, 41 (2) titled 'Literate Capital at School Entry Predicts Later Reading', Tunmer and Chapman say that the results of their study 'suggest that the learn-to-read-by-reading whole language approach predominantly used to teach reading in New Zealand is generally beneficial to children with an abundance of literate cultural capital at school entry ...' On the other hand they say that it is 'disadvantageous to children with limited amounts of literate cultural capital ...' Reading failure for these children, they say, is 'likely to be triggered by a constructivist, whole language approach.'

Three Christchurch College of Education researchers – Faye Parkhill, Jo Fletcher, and Amosa Fa'afoi in *NZJES* 40 (1) – investigated the primary school literacy environment in which Pasifika children learned best. How would quantitative researchers (Nicholson and Tunmer, for instance) control the variables these Christchurch researchers suggest as being important for the literacy of Pasifika children? The Christchurch researchers said their study 'highlights ... the importance of home-school relationships, the central role of the church and the maintenance of cultural identity ..., the centrality of parental support and love, the importance of high expectations from school staff and parents ... and, to a lesser extent, the value of an ICT-supported learning environment.' At the very least I call upon quantitative researchers to be a little less tendentious in presenting their results, and a little more humble toward our classroom practitioners.



Research has similarities with a fiction writer's plot line. In a fiction plot line there is always a situation important to the story but not believable if considered objectively. Much of the skill in fiction writing is disguising this situation and making it believable. Research findings in education should be approached in the same way. There is always a weakness in any research – it might be going into jargon over-drive to hide, or admitting to it as being a weakness but which has been taken into account in the interpretation. On the whole, I prefer to follow education issues that are expressed through logic, derived from premises that are overtly declared. The occasional flick to research would, of course, be part of the process for academics.

A starting point to get research and academics into perspective is to recognise that academics are human with all the characteristics and motivations that people anywhere, anytime exhibit. And they are exhibiting these characteristics in that most value-laden of undertakings – education. I suggest you listen to education academics with the same degree of scepticism you listen to politicians. Don't let the specialised language and the references to research overwhelm you. These are people at their vocation with the usual mixture of motivations you expect from anyone similarly engaged – they can be expected to be seeking such things as the truth, satisfaction, recognition, promotion, money, status, domination, and power. Similarly, like most people, academics want to make a difference and make some mark on posterity.

There are some academics who choose to work alongside classroom teachers and together with them organise and systematise the knowledge gained. This is to be commended. But for academics, the greater source of power comes from generating technical, jargon-laden knowledge and setting themselves up as experts. Only they have access to such knowledge and the ability to express it in that technical and jargon-laden way, with the opportunity to set up research projects to give it extra weight. The latest American darling of the New Zealand phonics-focused group is Louisa C. Moats. The name she chooses for her latest book inadvertently lets slip the way knowledge-generation is taken away from the classrooms of teachers to the offices of academics. The book is named: *Teaching reading is rocket science* For the teachers of reading this would seem to be bad news because rocket scientists are thin on the ground in primary school junior rooms; by implication, though, there is good news for some, they are, apparently, much more common in the education departments of our universities.

The importance of researchers sharing power with teachers is reinforced by research conclusions from the three Christchurch College of Education researchers referred to above *NZJES*, 40 (1). It should be noted that their ideas on sharing power means far more than working in schools with teachers on a set of teaching ideas for the teachers to implement, and report on. The Christchurch researchers called 'for participatory research that forges effective partnerships amongst educational providers, the Pasifika community and the ministry of education, so allowing the power and control of the research practices to be shared in a positive and inclusive manner.' Giving teachers and the community shared ownership of the nature of the research and the outcomes appeared, the writers said, to provide schools and their communities 'with a better understanding of the influences of their own approaches to, and understandings of, effective literacy practices that benefited their children in particular and their families in general.'

There is another way the phonics-focused academics diminish teachers and their classroom-generated knowledge – it is by condescension. For instance, a tactic by the phonics-focused academics is to cull through official and other publications, selecting what suits as a means to set up straw arguments as their way of establishing what teachers do. Teachers, as a result, are portrayed as puppets to official strings, or to some overseas writer (for instance, Goodman). When teachers protest that, as a rule, official policies have little effect on what they do in reading, that is ignored. Just as ignored is their protest that overseas writers may be inspirational, but that does not mean they have a dominating effect on practice. The teaching of reading in junior classrooms is a philosophy and art passed on from one generation of teachers to another, while, all the time, remaining open to new ideas.

This group of junior teachers, in their professional lives, live for the teaching of reading. When I think of the teachers of reading I have seen at work, the academics in question come across to me as pipsqueaks, technically-loaded admittedly, but still pipsqueaks. Which brings me to another of their expressions of condescension. A significant amount of phonics occurs in the balanced approach to reading. This was made clear to the academics. They then changed their charge to the need for phonics to be taught intensively and systematically. Translated that means a large amount of mat and word list work. Teachers of reading are pragmatic: they don't disagree with the academics because they are academics; they don't care about ideological debates or controversies; they have not resisted the so-called systematic phonics approach to reading because they haven't tried it, don't understand it, or want to be difficult; they disagree with the high intensity systematic phonics approach because their balanced way is better, has been shown to be better, to their satisfaction, for decades, in thousands of situations where it matters, in the complexity of classrooms. When it comes to what works and what doesn't work in reading I can assure you these women are beady-eyed and nobody's fool.

