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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 Part 3 – is the phoneme on the wall?

How the battle was waged by the academics but concluding with how the teachers of junior reading held their ground with Amy and Greedy Cat and its implications.

The more recent move by the academics (Nicholson in *Set 2, 2007*) in line with the teaching of reading as rocket science is to move on from phonics to stressing the teaching of phonemes and morphemes as essential to successful reading programmes. As well as phonemes and morphemes, children should also be able to identify whether words have Greek or Latin origins; closed, open, or diagraph syllables; inflected verbs; bound roots; and derivational suffixes. What age children should be taught these is not made clear. However, because most children can read well by the end of their second year at school; if these things are so important, then it would seem logical for them to be taught at least early in their second year at school. With a casual arrogance Nicholson concludes that 'The present results suggest that teachers, not just in training, but even out in the field, may not be best equipped when teaching students reading and spelling.'

At one level of education, the professors have received a frosty reception. In addressing education and reading conferences the reception has, at the very least, been unsupportive. Some pointed questions from, say, Warwick Elley or Geraldine McDonald, usually summing up the mood of those attending. I sensed, however, the academics gained motivation from the hostility, low-key as it was, that prevailed. After all, they were engaged fulltime in the controversy, they had highly placed academic positions, they had the status, they had access to the media, they had academic journals available to carry their ideas, and they had access to the next generation of teachers of reading, not only in schools but also in tertiary institutions. They felt, I'm sure in the end that they were on a winner to everything.

The intensity of feeling engendered from both sides of the phonics controversy might surprise those outside education. (I am tempted to call them 'camps' not 'sides', but while the phonics-focused side is a camp, the other side, in battle terms, is scattered opposition because they are otherwise engaged.) What needs to be appreciated is that most academics decide early in their career what they are going to base that career on; they then give what they decide a tweak, and for the rest of their academic lives depend on that tweaked idea for conferences, publications, promotion, and sense of power and fulfillment. It is understandable in these terms that when you criticise their idea, you are criticising more than an idea; when they are defending their idea, they are defending more than their idea – you are criticising, and they are defending, a major life's purpose.

For a number of reasons the wider leadership of the group of women has been weak – one of those reasons being that the academics set out to undermine that leadership. They, of course, would simply say they were engaged in academic discourse. The main source of leadership for the group of women referred to came from reading recovery. It is significant that the genesis of reading recovery, which was synthesised and systematised by Marie Clay, came from the classroom activities of the group of women we are talking about, aided by the inspectorate. A sustained campaign by the academics has wounded reading recovery. I can remember on a number of occasions sitting by those involved in reading recovery and seen them consumed with frustration at the lack of academic challenge to addresses, in particular, those by Nicholson. Clay sometimes attempted a response but she was too allusive and gentle to be



effective. For the three academics, the success of the attack on reading recovery served a double purpose, it was a warning to any academics who might be tempted to be outspoken against the phonics-focused group. Academic controversies are disruptive to collegiality, emotionally wearing, and distracting from further research and writing. In the end, Clay cried off from full engagement; Elley, McDonald, Libby Limbrick, though, and some others undertaking the occasional minor ambush.

Two parts of the campaign by the academics for phonics-focused classrooms and against the balanced reading approach are of particular interest to me. It appears to me that they emphasise failure in reading in our schools for reasons of professional self-interest. I know from their point-of-view they would see what they were doing as providing a necessary balance to the debate. There has been, however, much to celebrate about New Zealand reading. In reading their research and contributions to the media, my overwhelming impression is that they are unrelenting merchants of failure – perhaps summed up by the headings in two contributions by Nicholson: 'The best in the world?' (*Metro*, May, 1994); 'Our illiteracy?' (*North and South*, November, 1993).

The second part of their campaign of particular interest to me is the way Tunmer and Chapman have concentrated in their research on showing that initial reading difficulty, if not picked up and corrected early, will have a harmful and compounding effect on self-concept and subsequent school performance. There will not be anybody disagreeing with the idea that reading difficulty needs to be picked up early, but how to respond is the point at issue. There will be strong disagreement with the implication that the phonics-focused academics provide anything even close to a solution. But I want to go further. I have commented above how academics can do elegant research but still twist things to their own professional advantage. By concentrating on one aspect of the lives of the children who subsequently do poorly at school, that of difficulty with initial reading, the academics, as merchants of failure, can pin the blame on teachers, and in particular on the teachers' teaching of reading. Having done that, they can then present themselves as the people who know – the people who know how to solve the problem. I am sure you have spotted the flaw in the argument of the academics. Many of the children having difficulty with initial reading are also having difficulties in other parts of their learning. Learning difficulties that could have been contributed to from not feeling safe and secure at home, poor nutrition, or lack of parental understanding; or at school, from an unsettled environment, irregular attendance, behavioural traits, and social relationships. As well, each child brings a range of particular social and cultural characteristics – both the school and child, as a result, need time for adjustment. I am making two main points: if you look more widely at a child's life there are more variables than difficulty in initial reading to explain subsequent poor school performance (it may be a good predictor, but so are some other variables); and if the phonics-focused academics think that a concentration on phonics in reading is going to turn a child around in reading or anything else, they are exhibiting wilful naivety – the net of practice has to be cast far wider.

The self-serving unwillingness of the academics to recognise the weaknesses in their arguments against the New Zealand balanced approach, and the strengths of the arguments in favour, is near farcical. At a very basic level there is the unwillingness by the academics to recognise that most of the same children who are struggling in reading are struggling in nearly everything else, mathematics, for instance. The learning difficulty is clearly general, not a matter of insufficient attention to phonics. Then there is the condescension bordering on arrogance in the matter of the so-called failure of reading recovery. The teachers involved in reading recovery have an intimate knowledge of the children who go through the programme and would be very well aware if the programme was not doing its job. To imply otherwise is truly insulting. Then there is the fuss made by the academics of the performance gap in New Zealand between high ability readers and low ability, as shown in international tests, the implication being that New Zealand teachers are doing poorly with the low ability children. A proper and objective study needs to be made of this, including the effects on test results of the mix of ethnicity and poverty, the degree of comparative poverty, also the comparative education funding. What needs to be recognised, though, is that while the gap between high and low ability is significant, New Zealand's low ability group is doing better than most other countries' low ability groups.

Then there is the complex matter of how children learn to read: there is no convincing evidence that comprehending alphabetic print requires readers to first convert visual symbols to sound; indeed there is accumulating a large amount of evidence to the contrary. I invite readers to consider again the writing now in **Attack! 7 Greedy Cat**. There is more going on in Amy's fascination with *Greedy Cat* more learning occurring and more strategies being employed than simply converting visual symbols to sound. Amy is insisting on putting meaning first, ahead of any concern for developing decoding skills. Amy – as is natural for human beings – has gone directly to the search for meaning, using such things as: visual symbols, including the visual symbol of C-A-T, pictures, syntax, and prior knowledge. As well, Amy was of a time when opportunities for producing sound to print would have been provided, allowing her to write her thoughts and validate her ideas and experiences. Such an experience, though, is a delicate operation requiring skilled and systematic teaching – skill now in very short supply.



