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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 4 – is the phoneme on the wall?

More on Amy then some wonderfully confirming research for teachers of junior reading. And concluding with heartfelt thanks to those teachers for counteracting a distortive and arrogant campaign by concentrating on the use of their beautifully judged reading knowledge and sensitive understanding of children. But for how much longer in the face of wider education system changes?

There is more support for what Amy's behaviour tells us about reading. There is a report (now in **Attack! 23**) that provides strong confirmation of the correctness of the New Zealand balanced approach. In a comparison of the New Zealand balanced approach with the Scottish phonics approach, the New Zealand approach was found to be much more successful in teaching reading to all levels of ability and in maintaining in children a long-term love of reading. And in a second study, the reading characteristics of Japanese kindergarten children, Japanese adults learning to read, and New Zealand students taking Japanese in high school as a second language were looked at. The researchers found that the same cognitive processes in learning to read words in an alphabet-based system occurred in children learning to read a syllable-based system, such as Japanese. In other words, the need to convert visual symbols to sound so stressed by the alphabet-based phonics academics is shown to be severely overplayed. This is powerful evidence that human cognitive processes allow and encourage readers to go from visual symbol to meaning without first going through sound, and powerful evidence that the New Zealand balanced approach has it right.

There is no doubt in my mind that the battle over the teaching of reading is a battle for the one remaining curriculum area in which primary teachers still retain the edge in control. Phonics is one way academics can leverage their way into a direct say in what happens in schools – for phonics-focused academics, teachers having the edge in control over reading is akin to there being a power vacuum. Political and socially conservative groups also know that reading, because of its importance to the public and the way emotions can be stirred, is a key to reducing confidence in teachers and their representatives, and to helping them gain dominance over education. As a result, you will find phonics academics sometimes forming an unofficial alliance with conservative elements to further the ambitions of both groups. Teachers need to be on guard against the collusion between phonics-focused quantitatives, conservative politicians, and commercial companies to produce book and computer programmes – programmes always riven with flaws and rigidities. Holistic reading requires highly skilled teachers, in free interchange with other highly skilled teachers in close relationship with their school communities. But these teachers have been seriously reduced in number by the lack of sympathy and understanding of principals, private consultancies, and the education review office.

Now we return to the research of two of the Christchurch researchers. The findings of these Christchurch researchers reinforce the argument that Tunmer and Chapman have got it wrong in their central thesis – the thesis that the New Zealand-style of teaching is failing children who, as Tunmer and Chapman put it, come to school 'with limited amounts of cultural capital'. Fletcher and Parkhill *NZJES*, 41 (2) in the



same volume as, indeed side-by-side with, Tunmer and Chapman's article, present a different perspective. They studied the situation of Pasifika children to establish why some of them had limited success in literacy. Their research raised a number of factors such as cultural identification, self-awareness, and personal safety in classrooms. Then they became more specific. This time the factors were explained as excessive classroom noise; ineffective classroom management; bullying by classmates; and lack of parental understanding and support.

In discussing the matter of helping children with initial reading difficulties, I have already pointed out that there is a need to look at wider issues to get the more specific reading issue right. Children who come to school with good amounts of 'cultural capital' I suggest are better placed to rise above any negative school and classroom characteristics; children who don't, often don't get going. In all of this we need to keep in mind Tony McNaughton's findings *NZJES*, 38 (1) that improving these children's reading is not straightforward. He said that in a research project he undertook, providing explicit instruction in alphabetic knowledge and phonological knowledge soon brought all children up to or near national levels in that part of reading, but what the children really needed was 'explicit instruction in how to deploy and integrate that knowledge into the reading and writing of texts'.

The way forward for these children seems clear – these children need the balanced reading approach with all the literacy cultural capital that develops, but in circumstances that enable them to concentrate on their reading, and bring parents into partnership. I have already advocated schools employing adults to take advantage of RPE (Retiring Principal Effect). But very importantly, there are a number of programmes out there, all of which our treasured teachers have participated in, for schools and the ministry to adopt and develop.

As has been discussed above, in the wider world, the media, and large parts of the education system, academic knowledge will always trump practitioner knowledge. The higher status of those presenting the knowledge and the fawning of the media to those people provides a substantial advantage, especially if the words 'latest research' is bandied around. How can knowledge from classrooms match academic knowledge in such circumstances? The pity is that there are many reading schemes around the country being used in classrooms which have their origin in classroom-generated knowledge. For instance, the brilliant 'Reading Together' programme (developed by Jeanne Biddulph) which enlists the support of parents in the early introduction of a balanced approach to reading. Then there is the 'Hei awhiawhi tamariki ki te panui pukapuka' programme – popularly known as HPP – developed by Colleen Pinfold, Kathryn Atvars, and Annette Stock. At one level this scheme works using techniques common in classrooms and to the 'Reading Together' programme, but for the child in serious difficulty, the emphasis shifts to spending a considerable amount of time discussing the text and pictures before reading begins. This discussion serves to develop sentence patterns and key knowledge for actually understanding what is being read when reading the text occurs. This emphasis is contrary to the emphasis advocated by the phonics-focused group.

The group of treasured teachers I refer to are reducing in number and they are despondent about directions being taken in reading. A key point I want to make now is that the balanced approach, which once dominated in classrooms has proved wonderfully robust. But the growing insistence on words-in-isolation and highly structured approaches is leading to this kind of reading becoming seriously challenged. Reports I am receiving is that there are an increasing number of bewildered young teachers out there, young teachers drilled in the intensive teaching of phonics at a loss to know how to manage their reading; and we know there are diminishing numbers of highly-skilled teachers of the balanced approach available to rescue them.

I have already acknowledged that these writings have a personal motive – an exploration for me to find the truth of the matter. If I had found the New Zealand balanced reading approach was on the wrong track, I would have said so. But this writing, on the basis of what I found, soon developed into a paean to the wonderful junior room teachers of New Zealand – they got it right, and then held their ground in a bitter, distortive, and arrogant campaign against their hard won and beautifully judged reading knowledge. All hail to them.

