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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>

### **Attack! 42 I taught as marvellous as a cloud Part 1**

We have ideas about education. When we express them, there is always a metaphor implicit in what makes those ideas cohere. Teachers with holistic ideas about education, if those ideas are examined, will have flowing, naturalistic metaphors. Teachers with divided-up ideas about education will have small bits metaphors, for instance, jigsaw-, step-, and ladder-like metaphors. The metaphors implicit in our present education system are authoritarian, top-down, small bits, based on the idea that someone knows.

First, something about the present life-diminishing metaphors fostered by the current education system.

The small bits metaphor has always had some currency in classrooms but, under direction from the education review office and the reigning management philosophy, is now dominant. Small bits metaphors are characterised by an array of objectives only weakly and sporadically controlled by a main aim. The message is that the sum of the parts will add up to the whole. Also that cognitive and affective functioning works in straight lines allowing learning to be divided into small predictable, measurable parts. Such metaphors suit a system based on centralised control extending to tight teaching control in classrooms. If the aims of the system and teaching are restricted and tightened to fit, they are the metaphors that can make the system and teaching appear efficient and a breeze to understand. What misses out is imagination, exploration, the wider experience, the affective, variety, individuality, and initiative.



It is obvious to anyone who wants to think about it, if life-enhancing education is the aim, then the small bits metaphors for learning are unsatisfactory. No small bits metaphors can have or will ever have sufficient or the satisfactory parts to encompass the infinite complexities of cognitive and affective functioning in interaction with the infinite possibilities resulting from individual experience. But the desire to control is a powerful one in human nature even if it means a significant loss of what it means to be human.

The difference between the small bits metaphors and organic ones (see below) can be seen in a simple activity. The small-bits-metaphor teacher displays three pictures and asks the children which one has been put up as the odd one out; the organic-metaphor teacher also displays the three pictures but before asking the children to make their selection informs them that the pictures have been chosen at random. In the former arrangement the children would concentrate on trying to work out the picture the teacher has chosen; in the latter, the children would explore the pictures freely. And it is in this free exploration that personal knowledge is formed and personal discoveries made.

Small bits metaphors can have their uses for carefully selected parts of learning or for carefully selected children, to disentangle learning confusions or to set up subsequent freer learning. As long as used sparingly, such metaphors have a worthwhile place. But it is the organic ones that set learning free.

Underlying the promotion of national standards is a severely limiting metaphor – the pyramid, another form of small bits metaphor. The idea being that before children can reach the apex of being imaginative and creative they need to have spent years on building the base. In other words, children are put through years

of routine, highly controlled learning before lively, challenging learning can occur. The outcome is usually that children repeat the base learning, year after year, never getting anywhere near the apex. Why then should we be surprised that by the time children reach secondary school many of them have lost interest in learning. The process soon devolves into some children, especially from lower socio-economic classes and certain ethnicities, being stereotyped to a basic education; a second class education. Implicit in this process is the idea that imaginative teaching and learning is mutually exclusive from basic skills learning. Then, in a subsequent strange twist, it will be found that children from all groupings are being drawn into the metaphor, admittedly to a lesser extent, through the application of measurement instruments like national standards or testing (ultimate expressions of the small bits metaphor).

A paradox about the current campaign for national standards, with its declared purpose of preparing children better for NCEA, is it will prepare children worse. The main reason being that a significant group of children, especially boys, fail to succeed at NCEA is not because of a lack of learning skills, but a lack of learning interest. They just don't care a damn and haven't done so for some time. Many won't even be at school for NCEA level two.

I know the metaphor of a pyramid with the attention to the skills' base is initially compelling, which is why it has been easy to sell to governments looking for simplistic answers in education. Rather than immediately setting out the details of the contrasting metaphor, I decided to open it up to readers and invite them to send in their ideas.

A wonderful response ensued.

All of the ideas were around the idea of the 'organic'. The most fitting dictionary meaning would seem to be 'continuous or natural development suggestive of growth of a living being' (*Shorter Oxford*). Organising your classroom or school on such a metaphor would be excellent – but for that to happen in any widespread sense it would need to be the system's metaphor, as well. If that occurred, it would result in the valuing of variety, imagination, difference, local initiative, and light regulatory control.

Shay Noonan, principal, Morrinsville Primary, put it this way:

'Yes, the metaphors we live by ... I'm sure it is the title of a book!'

'Fewer of those metaphors grounded in Cartesian terms, linear, boxed, life-containing. Think outside the box, it could be said.'

'I find organic-related metaphors most useful – sustaining, and responsive to more human dynamic human knowing.'

Kelvin Woodley, principal, Tapawera Area School, was in agreement:

'In response to your thoughts about a metaphor ...'

'I have had similar thoughts and came up with the term 'organic' in the sense that the parts work with and on each other to make a new whole so there is a constant interaction between creativity, skills, and knowledge.'

Well said.

Then Chris Graham, a former art adviser, wrote:

'Good to read your latest posting regarding the pyramid as a metaphor for national standards proponents – redolent of slippery slopes, pointed beliefs, and the *Old Testament*. Also beloved by management darlings who see themselves directing us from their lofty apex. Tolkien's all-seeing Sauron, for instance – Karen Sewell's malevolent gaze from the ministry searching out and trying to crush free thinking, non-conformity, and laughter in schools.'

'An alternative for a wider context of learning? In keeping with the geometric shapes metaphor perhaps the wild honeycomb: hexagonal storage compartments for liquid gold, continually expanding in all directions, mutually supportive; immensely strong and aesthetically pleasing; feral; ancient; a constant presence in the cultural evolution of humankind in their search for the sweet, good things in life. Also, under attack from the blood-sucking varroa. Now there's an analogy for you!'

And it was.

Continued in Part 2



