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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! 44 The Rock Lady

The third-former from the largely Maori-attended secondary school checked the notice on the door – **SPECIAL NEEDS TEACHER** – then knocked.

'Come in Ruia.'

Ruia came in and stood there shyly, unsure about what to do next.

The teacher put her arm over her shoulder and guided her to a chair, and then sat down beside her.

On a desk to the teacher's left were piles of PA Tests and Burt scoring sheets.

'Here we go again,' thought the teacher – steeling herself to do what a special needs teacher needs to do.

The girl's reluctance and apprehension were clear.

In the teacher's two months in the job, this kind of situation had already occurred many times.

'First experiences are so important, yet this is what I'm putting them through.'

In frustration, she pursed her lips, breathed in deeply, and looked away.

Her eyes lit on some rocks on the top of a bookshelf beside her. She acted instinctively.

'Here, what do you think of these?'

Abruptly she thrust a rock into the girl's hands.

It was a rock she'd brought back from a weekend yachting expedition to Copper Mine Bay.

'Oh my god – what have I done now?'

Ruia, startled, held the rock out in front of her.

The teacher plunged on, 'Imagine I'm blind. What have you got there? Describe it to me.'

She waited with a sense of hopelessness for what she knew was going to follow or, more accurately, wasn't.

'Well ... well ... ah ...'

At least she was trying.

'Well ... it's ... it's jagged ... with ridges. There are some flat places, but ... mainly ... mainly ... angles. It's quite close together ... and while it's not light ... it's lighter rather than heavier. It's green, but with reddy brown streaky parts. The streaks run into one another. And ... and ... and ... if you move the rock around, the green and the red are different in different lights. And it reminds me of the colours on some birds' feathers. I like it.'



Shades of Sylvia Ashton-Warner.

Her job was never the same after that.

From this spur of the moment experience sprang a very different style of being a special needs teacher.

Network talked to the teacher.

The best way to draw the children out, she said, was to start with something like: 'Have a look at these rocks. Choose one you're interested in and talk to me about it.'

Following that, to ask a question similar to the one asked in the situation recounted above: 'Imagine I'm blind. Describe the rock to me.'

I became known as the Rock Lady.

The process was so revealing. At first I went very analytical. I tried to put levels on their responses.

However, I found it better to record their exact words and phrases and simply ponder the significance later. There was more insight mileage in doing that, than in forcing myself to place children in this or that category.

The words and responses they used gave me an excellent insight into their vocabulary range, their conceptual thinking, and the breadth of their experiences.

Sometimes the use of one word or expression told volumes.

Questions I had about the children were usually answered by my discussion. The proof of the answers being provided by subsequent performance.

I can remember a child considered as having limited ability in reading and language saying very first thing: 'What an interesting crystal formation.'

Dollars to donuts that such a response is an indication of untapped potential.

On the other hand, if a child's comments are restricted to ones like: 'It's a rock, that's big. It's black' and so on – well, the likelihood is that the child needed particular teaching too, but of a different sort.

In other words, I was helped to detect those children who were slow because they were slow – and likely to remain so; and children who were slow – but with a capacity to learn much faster.

Mind you, I never made definitive judgements on a child; the obvious informality of the use of rocks was itself a guard against that. When you use formal written tests, the tendency is to give them some special, and often deceptive, objective quality.

Sometimes I challenged children further with a question like, 'What are some things you could do with this rock?'

The rock discussions gave a flavour to my overall dealings with children. A co-operative, even conspiratorial, atmosphere was engendered. They gave a simplicity to proceedings. What is more elemental than a rock? There was the child, a rock, and me.

When the children came to me for follow-up attention, they often went straight to the rocks before we settled to some other work.

I don't think people outside classrooms realise that formal testing is such an unfortunate way to begin a relationship (and to continue it). The effect of this kind of beginning persists. A whole set of messages is conveyed by such experiences.

Teachers' informal observations are so much better than standardised tests. I didn't go into my special needs work thinking that, but it was the way I came out.

Repeatedly I found that what the rock revealed was supported by children's subsequent performances. Not only performances achieved immediately with me, but with other teachers, and in much later years.

Sometimes I used the formal tests, but I found they added nothing.

A conference a psychologist came up to me and said he'd heard very good things about what I was doing, and about the Rock Test, and could I tell him where it could be purchased.

