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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>

Attack! 68 Kath Murdoch and inquiry learning: patches of clear water but mainly murky

I have chosen Kath Murdoch's work on inquiry learning for comment because I consider her account the best available and I find her likeable and authentic. That means I can leave aside concerns about personal motivation, the representativeness of the inquiry example being used, to concentrate on the task at hand.

For decades I have had deep reservations about inquiry learning, a concept which moved into primary teaching from secondary displacing the primary integrated tradition, having previously moved into secondary from American universities. Schools of education became important transmitters of inquiry learning largely, I suggest, because the theory can be set out in cycles and taxonomies, making the idea tidier, more important looking, and more examinable. From my point-of-view, inquiry learning has become even more damaging in that it is the only form of topic learning for which professional advice is provided; the only form of topic learning sanctioned by the bureaucracies. Inquiry learning, indeed, is considerably an expression of neoliberal education thinking: associated with open spaces; the intensive use of computers; behaviourism, skill-based learning (as against key knowledge); broad, abstract, showy topics; and easily observable outcomes for assessment.

Inquiry learning took the place of the integrated learning culture inspired by Elwyn Richardson and Sylvia Ashton-Warner which I consider infinitely superior to the glamorous perturbation that is inquiry learning. And then there is the 'feeling for' approach to social studies I formed with John Faire, developed as something of an underground movement to become widely used in the mid-80s to mid-90s.

A characteristic of contemporary education is that many in bureaucratic control of education lack experience in areas of education now their responsibility. This leaves them, at best, to draw on their restricted experience and, at worst, in Orwellian-style, in the name of the neoliberal philosophy, to make the past forgotten to clear the way for unchallenged control of the present and through that the future. Involved in this process are a small group of selected academic experts, and a large number of bureaucrats: the academics to provide the key justifications (none of it evidence-based if an honest quest for the truth is the criterion); the bureaucrats to exercise a coldhearted cruelty and carelessness against teachers and children they wouldn't entertain if their heads were not filled with neoliberal power-seeking education notions.

One of the difficulties for me in analysing inquiry learning is that I can go through, say, a summary of inquiry learning and find nothing much to quibble at – at an abstract level, it being hard to separate from my wider curriculum ideal – the holistic. But at the detailed level, it is a tumultuous bringing together of lists, taxonomies, cycles, diagrams, claims, directions, and activities that the answer to any question can be found amongst them – and the cause of any problem. (I do want to add that there are some highly catching activities suggested amongst the tumult referred to, and coincidentally and encouragingly a good few activities very similar to or the same as those regularly used in the 'feeling for' approach.)

Inquiry learning presently covers nearly everything because as an idea it hasn't matured; its advocates have been unwilling or unable to define how inquiry links with key ideas and processes from contributing curriculum areas to establish priorities and allow a much needed sorting out and divesting to occur. My suspicion is that the advocates of inquiry learning have preferred to trade on the apple pie connotations of the label 'inquiry' rather than bend to the task of making the hard decisions required to provide a convincing structure for a classroom practice.

The main aim for inquiry learning – *Reflecting on personal understanding* – which is at the centre of Kath Murdoch's inquiry cycle, will not do. What has happened is that inquiry learning, or more accurately inquiry skills, has taken over curriculum areas and their integrations and rigorous main aims, distorting them, displacing the more challenging content or, perhaps, more accurately, allowing that content to be avoided. The central problem is that inquiry learning is paraded as an aid to curriculum learning when it is really a takeover.

To bolster inquiry learning, to provide it with some kind of structure, a pandemonium of ideas and devices is suggested by its advocates but it remains a wild disorder that only now-and-then meets the learning occasion, meanwhile curriculum areas and their integrations and their serious purposes are ignored, left to languish while something occurring under the fruity label of inquiry pervades.

To Kath Murdoch's credit, inquiry learning is not automatically linked to computer learning as it is in New Zealand but that, inevitably, is how it works out. One of the problems posed by inquiry-computer learning is that the so-called clever questions suggested as the basis for inquiry are never clever enough to avoid being vulnerable to a couple of clicks on the computer. Computers have ended, if it ever existed, discovery learning of that sort. The clever questions might be able to be made more complex but all that means is a few more clicks.

Overall, I characterise inquiry learning as a generic study skills approach to learning. Such a characterising, on one hand, goes a long way to explaining its official and classroom popularity and, on the other, its often lack of intellectual and affective challenge. It should be noted, as mentioned above, that a skills basis to learning, as against key knowledge, is central to neoliberal and behaviourist education theories which is why, when considering inquiry learning outcomes, a strong behaviourist element can usually be noted.

The aims of science will not be met by a study skills approach to learning; admittedly there are some soft science topics which can be met that way, but that is the point, inquiry learning distorts curriculum areas towards those topics. In science there is a world of difference between a project and an investigation. Inquiry learning in the way it is functioning undermines genuine science learning, distorting the structure of that curriculum area as it is has other curriculum areas. Social studies, for instance, has been diminished by the study skills approach to topic learning, leading to an avoidance of cognitively and affectively challenging topics (for instance the Treaty of Waitangi or perhaps the equivalent for Kath Murdoch in being Australian, early contact between European and the original inhabitants). Such topics, in particular, need to be organised by a dynamic main aim so that children gain control of sufficient coherent knowledge for the affective and cognitive response to be valid.

In an article 'Busting some myths about the inquiry cycle' Kath Murdoch spiritedly brings up problems about inquiry learning she had observed, bemoaning the many 'bewildering versions or iterations of the cycle that are such a long way off the original conceptualisation and intent.' She then proceeds to explain why and to suggest solutions. But her explanations are declarative when they needed to be analytical as the problems are inherent in the nature of inquiry learning and the overall presentation. It is significant that in the introduction, Kath Murdoch mentions that Donald Graves ('her hero') said that so terrible were the uses of his 'process writing' that he sometimes wished he'd never written it down. The analogy is pertinent but not in ways Kath might find encouraging, that is because in New Zealand it was widely recognised that process writing had a formalism to it that meant it would be unlikely maintain its potential useful qualities against the demanding rigours of classroom practice.

An answer to the problem of inquiry learning lies in the name: there is no such thing as learning that is distinctive to inquiry; as such it can be all learning, therefore largely meaningless as a concept. And while there is talk of integration, that as well needs to be carefully thought through so that what is integrated maintains its validity, gaining from, as well contributing to, the whole. The lists of complex questions, admonitions, indicators, taxonomies (yes – even Bloom's, spare me), complex diagrams, and murmurings of scaffolding are a clutter indicating a half-worked out curriculum idea scrambling for attention and commercial popularity – all symptomatic of a process that too easily allows a way out from genuine learning as against what seems, in actual outcome, a version of swept-up projects.

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