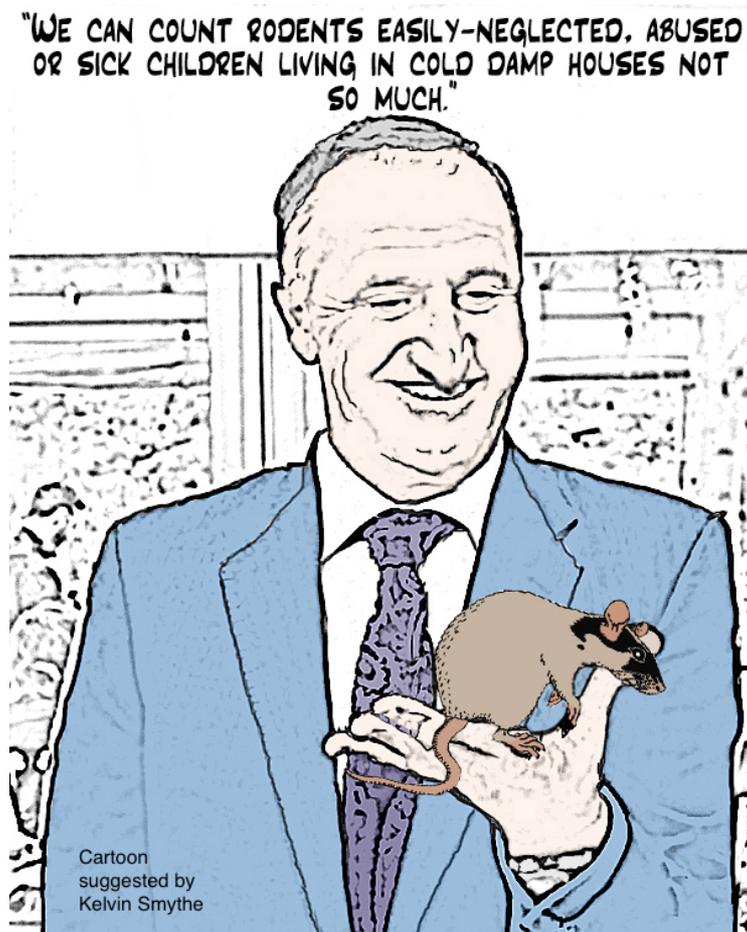




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Welcome to **ATTACK!** a two-page occasional publication. Most of **ATTACK!** will be concerned with the holistic curriculum which, if acted on, is a fundamental way to undermine the present undemocratic education system. Don't be discouraged if opportunities 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>



<http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/84914813/prime-minister-john-key-on-the-wrong-side-of-the-child-poverty-debate>

Attack! 91 Children of the poor: Bitter and cynical strategy on education and poverty Part 1

Whenever the prime minister or finance minister talk about the prospect of government money being allocated to poverty reduction, they always draw from a medley of three rationalisations to justify dilatoriness: yes there is poverty but who really knows how much; the government won't be 'throwing money' at it; and they won't support any policies that can't justify their existence with measurable results. This last draws attention to the way, for the government, measurement and accountability are conceptual tools to use, to reinforce its power. And who is it suggesting that the government throw money at the problem? Surely the policy suggestion would have been in the form of a provision of funding where it could best help lift more families out of poverty. By definition within the government, 'throwing money at the problem' is an expression only resorted to if the matter relates to the less well off in society: if it relates to the moneyed parts it is expressed as an investment in the productive sector – an entitlement consistent with their status. And when the government refers to real results it is referring to immediately measurable results which, in relation to social issues, is a way of distorting and avoiding the inherent nature of such

issues. Such issues are always complex, fundamental, and chronic – therefore not amenable to short-term measures or measurement.

Short-term measurement serves not as a marker for complex social issues but an agent, a device, for making them less likely of solution; an outcome which may not be of particular concern to the government because their lack of solution can be used to political advantage: those in the front-line trying to effect a solution can be held accountable, scapegoated for their failures, especially if they have had the temerity to suggest flaws in the proposed policies; and, the idea that the social issues are beyond solution, given time to take hold, can create fear, insecurity, division, a sense of hopelessness, and moral ambiguity. Mixed in with all this is alarm, carefully contrived by the government that a political party might come along committed to 'throwing money at the problem', their money, as they have been led to believe.

A concomitant of short-term measurement is short term measures, which suit the government fine, as short term measures are always cheaper and don't rely on trust, particularly inter-generational trust, of which it is mightily mistrustful. Contemporary Western society – driven as it is by individualism, managerialism, privatisation, accountability, and deep distaste of the idea of public service – is running perilously short of trust, that vital ingredient to a truly healthy social democracy. All the time, of course, while non-solutions to complex social issues are being showily pursued to political advantage, actual solutions are being ignored, leading to the complex issues becoming more intractable and the ostensible beneficiaries of the non-solutions even more disadvantaged.

This writing's opening argument is that in the current political climate, any changes to education or other social policy, whether intended to help the poor or not, will result in making things worse. The government knows this, or goes out of its way not to know it, which is the justification for calling the current policy on poverty, bitter and cynical. That argument leads to the main argument that education policies from classroom to bureaucracies have a central intent – disempowering teachers as part of dismantling the public education system – and what is happening to the schools and education system is largely a contingency to that.

This cynicism is no more evident than in education. The present government's education policy is based on a fundamental lie: that the effect of poverty on education achievement is 18 percent. This a figure borrowed from John Hattie, who actually moves the figure around, with 18% being one of them. Hattie, if he relates the figure to research at all, is talking to the kind of research that is limited in depth and reach – not really about achievement but short-term academic rabbit-from-a-hat duplicity. The classic research carried out in New Zealand has the effect of poverty on education achievement as 70 percent. But there is no chance of the government accepting that figure, because government policy is dependent on 18% or thereabouts to gain license to scapegoat schools and blame teachers for stalled or diminishing learning results. The government, in a similar manoeuvre, uses Hattie's research to poo-poo the learning benefits of smaller classes when the classic research in New Zealand and overseas has smaller classes as an important part of learning improvement. All this is a double advantage for the government's finances not only does the government get-out-from under from pressure to help schools with more funding but also for more funding to alleviate the effects of poverty, a responsibility the government cynically exaggerates in its allocation to schools. While severely underfunding public schools the government cries crocodile tears at the failure of schools to deliver children from poverty: when are they going to get their act together? is the pose. Education is the best way, it says, far better than throwing money at the poor, says the government, laughing all the way to the next tax cut for the wealthy and re-election for retention of power.

Also cynical in education is the effect of imposed measurement on children's learning, such an imposition has the effect of undermining public education, and while not explicitly thought out by the government, more demonstrated as a kind of constructed carelessness, the narrowness and emptiness of measurement-laden learning delivers a devastating blow in particular to the prospects of children needing to catch up while middle-class children, bolstered as they are with cultural capital, are comfortably placed to take it in their stride and proceed comfortably to university. The children of the poor are dependent for education achievement on a high functioning public education, it is the only option they have, it is where they go for recourse. But a public education system of imposed measurement learning; reducing funding; larger classes; multiple deleterious policy changes often introduced as providing choice or increasing efficiency; and of political scapegoating, is not well placed to help such children.

When the needing to catch-up children reach NCEA level 2, but aren't up to it, then the government narrative is: what's wrong with trades or hospitality, and so on? university isn't for everyone. But you see, the whole point of education is for children to have a choice. Primary education and the early years at secondary should be organised and funded accordingly, to ensure children have a choice when course selection becomes especially important to life and vocational prospects. Think of it like this: many Maori children are in the catch-up category – when they get to NCEA level 2, why shouldn't they have the choice to go to university, to be the managers, doctors, lawyers, and accountants – it's not good enough to say: what's wrong with trades?

The especial tragedy is this, there is a group of teachers in New Zealand, diminishing though it is, who know how to do far better with the children of the poor, or with all children for that matter, but it would require relative freedom of action by those involved and, for a start, smaller classes, no more than 18 children for

junior ones. The aims would centre on intrinsic motivation, self-organisation, independent learning, flexible thinking, and creativity. There is no secret how it would proceed, the programmes, one for juniors, one for seniors are described in **Attacks!** 71-90, also reproduced in two booklets. One government will allow only choice to the right, the other only fiddly changes to the left, nothing structural, and both held in sway, consciously or unconsciously, by the idea that social problems are intractable.

In the *NZ Herald* (Wednesday, 18 January, 2012) was a front page story headed 'Poverty trap set at birth, study reveals'. This study, based on the long-running Christchurch research into 1265 children born in Christchurch in 1977, is sub-headed 'Downward Path' and recounts the already well-known effects of poverty on crime, pregnancy, health, and education. Those from poor families, it was reported, were more likely to leave school without qualifications, have babies before they were 20, commit crimes, go on welfare, and have addiction and other mental health problems in adulthood.

(Please note: There will be regular references in this posting to children from wealthier families and poorer families. To be more accurate the references should be to the degree of cultural capital within these families. As well, referring to children from wealthier and poorer families has a jarringly deterministic flavour. However, I have persisted in using these labels as a shortcut – a shortcut I request you interpret in the light of the foregoing comments.)

From the school point-of-view the relevant matter in the report is the reference to the effects of cultural capital on education outcomes. The report writers said that 'it could be that competent, bright families transmit their skills to their children' and that 'being bred in a high income family provides children with role models and resources for both educational achievement and career success.' This is fair enough, the report writers are, of course, on the right lines, but what they say doesn't really capture the half of it. There is a kind of clinical distancing in tone. The conditions in the home of so many poor are chaotic, making somewhat awry, clinical references to such things as the transmission of skills.

It is so easy to sit in an academic office or a political office and see things generally, acknowledging the problems, as this report does but, in my view, failing to grasp anywhere satisfactorily the disorderliness and fantastical limitations, the mind-numbing and overwhelming triviality of many children's experiences, the violent haphazardness of events. Compare the richness of conversational exchanges between adults and children in some houses and the shouted, impatient, at-wits-end verbal scatterings in others; compare with middle-class families the insubstantial, unhealthy food-preparation-on-the-run in these houses; the never being on your own and the accompanying clamour and disorder; living in cars, garages, tents, and multiple families to a house; the catch-as-can family sleeping arrangements; the transience; the multi, precarious, low paid, all times of a day jobs involving both parents; the broken nights from people returning from pubs, parties, and night shifts; the ugliness of backyards; the grinding effects of poverty; and the hopelessness of ever finding a way out.

And when things go wrong in poor families, they often go calamitously wrong. Martin Thrupp's excellent book, *Schools Making a Difference: Let's be Realistic*, based on close and continuous observation of a student population of a school, details the extreme vulnerability to turns of events of children from poor families. Disruptive events are, of course, more likely to occur anyway in the lives of children from poor families and when they do, the effects are far more devastating.

When the children of poor come to school, however, the mothers have mostly done their best with them, the children scrub up pretty well, keen to learn, and, after all, they are just children, so they are often lifted in the company of other children and their teachers. Indeed, a hopeful perception, might well be that somehow on their delivery to school gates, the children from poorer families would perform equally as well as children from wealthier families, and, indeed, so they will as long as they also have had years of intensive adult-child discussions, visits to many places and experiences, people around who read newspapers and books, association with people who have had academic success, a room of one's own, ready access to computers, a healthy diet, regular health checks, and social stability. But what chance?

The initial approach to the children from poorer families should be that their capacities are the same as other children which, of course, is the initial expectation all teachers should have of all children but, in general, these children are likely to need greater patience; more individual attention; an emphasis on building fundamental concepts and experiences; an avoidance of cramming so that bad, hard to eradicate, learning habits, are not engrained; and a sense of individual success and progress.

The teachers know, of course, what some of these children from poorer families are going through. You see them comforting these children – violence at home, a father in jail, a family separation, all sorts of things that are just a happening too far – yes, I see the teachers comforting the children at crisis moments, hugging them, reassuring them, making sure during the day that some sense of stability is provided. And for these children, in general, I see teachers preparing special programmes, giving individual help, allocating teacher aide time to them as available, setting an appropriate pace for their learning. I see them providing sublime patience while they artfully build up children's confidence, experiences, conceptual understandings, and learning skills.

But look where education is being pushed: a desiccated wasteland of learning. Teaching is becoming formalistic when it needs to be flexible and imaginative; narrow when it needs to be spacious; standardised when it needs to be diverse; a soulless learning cram when it needs to be based on understanding; and leached of real world reality when it needs to be cognitively and affectively rich. Children need the kind of reading and writing programmes developed by our fabled stjcs with their emphasis on the 'I can read' (and 'I can write') approach; to experience learning as something they have a say in not something that just happens to them; to be stimulated imaginatively and intellectually challenged – and all this from their first years at school. It is children who experience this kind of learning throughout their primary years who will still be enjoying learning when faced with secondary examinations; and it is this kind of experience that will contribute to whatever schools can contribute to lessening the social reproduction of disadvantage so manifest in our current system.

To be continued

