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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! 92 Children of the poor: Bitter and cynical strategy on education and poverty Part 2

But the tragedy of what is happening daily in our classrooms. I have been there when a boy has received his reading national standard and at that moment knowing that for him, at six years, reading was over, not only because of that dispiriting information but because I knew he was fated to be subjected to a programme of intensive phonics. Remember how teachers battled against phonics dominating reading, arguing the case for reading being based on meaning, interest, and in context; remember the Nicholsons and the Tunmers, the conservative politicians, the newspaper editors, the received public wisdom, and Grandma Moses from Kapiti Coast (there's always a local amateur who has discovered the reading elixir)? For years teachers held off the damage wrought when the phonics academics overwhelm the classroom developed knowledge of teachers. But now phonics is making a strong comeback as it always does under conservative governments, always looking for formalistic education answers to intricate and subtle education questions. This despite recent compelling New Zealand-Scottish comparative research unequivocally demonstrating that the New Zealand reading tradition was absolutely on the button, that New Zealand children performed well ahead of the phonics-taught Scottish children, and even more significantly, that phonics teaching left a deleterious footprint on the later reading. Once again, the main victims of the swing to phonics will be the children of the poor because they are the ones more likely to be without the cultural capital to rise above the effects of the misguided teaching that intensive phonics represents.

The alliance of quantitative academics and conservative governments in the matter of phonics is a natural one in the Aotearoa version of class war; the simplistic nature of phonics, and what appears commonsense, is just what conservative governments are looking for to undermine public education, their thinking always towards the idea that anybody can do teaching: it is all very straightforward, so why not cut back on teacher training and education, as well, it allows the appointment of bureaucrats with no background in education to feel comfortable and righteous in commanding what teachers do. The conservative governments for confirmation of their view of education then go to a handful of quantitative academics like John Hattie, Tom Nicholson, and Bill Tunmer who, because of their obsession with measurement become honorary members of the power elite.

The return of the narrow version of the 3Rs, with the associated reduction in cognitive and affective challenge as the basis for preparing children for life, is hugely unfortunate for all children. But it is on children of the poor that the burden falls most heavily. It is reminiscent of the gardening policies for Maori children at the turn of the century before last. When it is appreciated that such a policy is an illusion disguising a vacuum, the policy goes beyond being hugely unfortunate to a bitter and cynical strategy. And, beyond the school gate, is the twisting and turning of the government to avoid doing something genuine about the growing gap beyond rich and poor. The return to the narrow version of the 3Rs should be seen as a cynical strategy put forward as an all-purpose cover for doing nothing of significance. The idea that the 3Rs is somehow separate from the whole curriculum is a damaging fallacy. The 3Rs – and thinking, exploring, imagining, and expressing are intrinsically interdependent. The idea, openly acknowledged in present policies, and implicit in the idea of league tables, is that teachers should first get the 3Rs in place before attending to the wider curriculum. If the 3Rs are considered in this way then what happens to children, mainly those from poorer families, is an extended repetition of formalistic 3Rs programmes to year 8 and even beyond. Such a programme is condescending, limiting, boring, and has the effect of setting up children, especially those from poorer families, for almost certain failure.

In cynical manner the government expressed concern about the education of children from poorer families as a pretext to impose the concept of provider capture on school education, to devastating effect on those children. What its use has done is remove teacher knowledge from policy making, leaving the field open to politicians, bureaucrats, quantitative academics, newspaper editors, and that entity known as the public (whose voice is interpreted by these groups). By removing teacher knowledge from policy making, the

government has been able to get away with the duplicity of bringing in a raft of policies with the ostensible purpose of benefiting children from poorer families, often at little taxpayer cost, that actually disadvantage children from these poorer families while, to some extent, advantaging children from wealthier ones. Children from poorer families, through the obsession with a narrow, standardised, one-pace-for-all education are condemned to a repetition of such a programme through their primary and intermediate schooling years – an education devoid of imaginative, rich, and cognitively challenging contexts. As a basis for learning, it is a sure way to limit the development of children from poorer families and a recipe for them to fail at secondary and to rarely be in a position to contemplate tertiary. Meanwhile, children from wealthier families will have the cultural capital to draw on to shrug off a fair bit of exposure to this literacy-numeracy obsession, serving to increase the gap in performance between children from poorer and wealthier families. As well, more children from wealthier families will attend private schools and quasi-private schools to benefit from the freer curriculum, smaller classes, and higher level of funding.

There are a number of reasons why the National government is so set on excluding teachers from policy making: it should first be noted that the idea is drawn from the neoliberal philosophy and is part of that philosophy's elitism and antagonism to democracy. In education, the use of the concept of provider capture can be regarded as a particularly cynical ploy because all it does is allow the more intensive capture of education by other groups – groups other than teachers: in particular, of course, the various agencies of government, which are left with near untrammelled power. Why the government has sought such overwhelming power is often rationalised as needing to be in full command to properly represent parents in getting the best possible education for their children. But that argument is a facade, the government's real reason is not to get the best education for children but the worst for public education. It is not that such a perception has necessarily been consciously thought through, it is more likely derived from an absorption of values from others in the power elite or an attitude of mind derived from the power elites' neoliberal ideology. This writing argues that children and the curriculum and teachers' teaching are all contingent to the drive for near untrammelled power, and that the primary reason for that is to divide, destabilise, slur, and disempower teachers to remove their voice, from agitating for increased funding for public education and to obstruct its systematic dismantling.

I have been questioned about the degree of cynicism I assign to the government. Surely the government would be delighted if its education policies worked. I agreed it would be, as is proved by the considerable effort it puts into presenting the failure of those policies in tests and exams as success. If success wasn't spun then calls would come for change in those policies and horror of horrors more funding for public education and things that directly matter to children and classroom teaching.

A great irony of national standards, purportedly intended to keep parents and the government better informed, is that the reverse is occurring. More information will, indeed, be provided but, because of high stakes surrounding the production, it will become highly inaccurate – all the supervision, moderation, and computerisation won't make a jot of difference. Also, any drop in learning and accomplishment, where and when it occurs, will be managed by the government – is being managed by the government – through its considerably increased command of the education system. The government already has almost complete control of university quantitative research with its contractual agreements; and control of qualitative reporting through its highly ideologically charged organisation of the bureaucracies – meaning the education system is already close to being hermetically sealed. When test results become politically sensitive as they increasingly are through the extreme politicisation of education, the government is easily able to change the nature of the tests to its advantage, the test processes, the marking procedures to improve or worsen the results, and the interpretation and reporting of results.

Similarly, any education policy that has choice embedded in the associated rhetoric will end up favouring children from wealthier families. For instance, much is made of parents looking up review office reports and choosing schools on that basis – this is a major distortion; much is made of parents choosing religious schools because of the supposedly more ordered environment – once again, this is a major distortion. Since the year dot of education choice (1989), choice has overwhelmingly been about flight from brown faces. If pakeha and Asian parents could get past this, they would find, as I did in my years of visiting schools, a significant number of schools with a predominance of brown faces where all children received a brilliant education. But over time, the movement away of so many of the most able children has a wearing effect on the functioning of the school and the quality of the education for those left remaining. If choice is available, it is understandable and right that parents should make choices for their children according to their own lights, but it is the responsibility of governments to ensure that the availability of such choice, in its exercise, doesn't work to advantage one group of children at the expense of another.

For the government, measurement is an instrument of delay, distortion, advantage, and oppression. Such measurement is always short term while social issues are always chronic so there is mismatch from the outset. Measurement of social issues is never a neutral, it is always value laden which is why the government is so commanding in its control of measurement and the interpretation of results. This means, amongst other distortions, that the government can declare an issue more or less resolved when it isn't or, as more often is the case, far from resolved, allowing the government to scapegoat those it chooses to blame. An outcome of all this is to create a sense that certain social issues will always be with us, incapable of resolution, thus creating a moral ambiguity about social issues, reducing the will to do something

profound in response. In education, the imposition of a measurement-based system and the accompanying narrow formalistic curriculum has had a corrosive effect on learning especially for children from poorer families; children from wealthier families are subjected to the same system but they have the cultural capital to rise above it. To oversee the measurement-based system the government has established a hierarchy of rigid controls and fear-driven conformity. As part of this, a simplistic view of what education is and teachers do has been propagated. The main argument in this writing is that the government's motivation for imposing such a system and being so fixed and relentless about it, no matter the contingent damage to the children of the poor, is to undermine and weaken teachers' resistance to the dismantling of the public education system thereby providing an unobstructed path to propagate and act on the pervasive neoliberal ideology.

Though the attention in this writing has been to education, to make sense of it all, education has been placed alongside other social policies in the much wider context of attempts by the government to maintain the present economic and institutional status quo in the face of axis-shifting political and economic realities. What is happening in education in New Zealand and in other Western countries is unfathomable if not seen in the context of governmental and public responses to significant economic and political change. And, as could have been predicted, the government is using the opportunity to place itself to strategic economic advantage and satisfy a deep-seated emotional drive to take it out on the poor and keep them in their place. Using the powerful tools of propaganda and persuasion at their disposal, the government, by playing on fear and insecurity, has been able to convince large sections of society to work against their own interests to the particular detriment of the poor.

Everybody knows that the dice are loaded
Everybody rolls with their fingers crossed
Everybody knows the war is over
Everybody knows the good guys lost
Everybody knows the fight was fixed
The poor stay poor, the rich get rich
That's how it goes
Everybody knows

Everybody knows that the boat is leaking
Everybody knows that the captain lied
Everybody got this broken feeling
That's how it goes
Everybody knows

Leonard Cohen

