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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! 93 Pragmatism, positivism, neoliberalism and the undermining of democracy and dismantling of public education Part 1

Part 1 of a three-part series.

It was 1989, and with Tomorrow's Schools imminent, I knew I would leave the formal education system to go out on the road to communicate the pragmatist and holistic message.

*There was an occasion in the mid-90s when I returned home to find my office entangled in a huge pile of fax paper – a former NZEI leader, now no longer with us, had discovered an article on neoliberalism and positivism and had sent it to me: **Did you know about this he asked?***

The tragedy is that the message is just as relevant today as it was in 1988. We still haven't got it.

Read and weep.

Developmental teaching and Learning in Practice, Part 1 (1989):

There are two competing education philosophies in New Zealand, as there are in every Western education system, one dominates: the other is on the defensive – and because that one is on the defensive, teachers are.

The two philosophies are positivism and pragmatism – and it is pragmatism from which the holistic develops.

Positivism is dominant throughout the system, meaning there is a need for those supporting the holistic to be aware of positivism's many expressions, the characteristics that make it dominant, and effects of those on the education system and classrooms.

One of the purposes of this consideration of positivism is to have those new to education, or relatively unacquainted with education theory, to be prepared for the visitation of those messengers of certainty, to be able to place what they say in context and to prevent theories akin to cargo cults developing about origins, motivations, worth, and function.

For a detailed analysis of the positivist-pragmatist debate, reference should be made to the monograph, *Positivism and Pragmatism* by James Marshall (NZCER, 1987). The analytic philosophy fed into positivism which was to flourish in the social and academic environment following the Second World War and gave considerable impetus to the growth of positivist ideas within Western education systems. (Even though analytics were in la-la land with their aspirations – words can never be corralled so completely – and positivists fed on their conclusions; because analytics, as I do, played with words and not numbers, I have to admit a soft spot for them.)

The essential feature of that environment was the rapid growth in technology throughout all parts of society and an accompanying technocratic specialisation of function. Teachers, being generalists, were elbowed aside by specialist academics who through measurement research had acquired a status as experts. Teachers as generalists declined in public esteem – knowledge from observation and experience meant they were at a disadvantage in comparison with specialist academics. And politicians were to take the opportunity to use the status of the positivist academics and their sense of certainty to their own ends, to more firmly control education.

With the growth in academic specialisation came an increased pressure for demonstrable bodies of knowledge to be formed and an increase in the prestige and status of those who developed and controlled that knowledge. The guiding argument was the superiority of scientific knowledge over other forms of

knowledge, in other words, the knowledge of qualitative academics and teachers. My experience of the 1960s, being the period I went to teachers college and university, was that this developed more slowly in New Zealand than, say, the United States of America. The buffer, I suspect, was the creative and imaginative leadership of Clarence Beeby in his long tenure as a director of education and the education culture he developed, along with the largely unwavering support of Labour's Peter Fraser.

Educationists in Western countries sought to establish education as a 'respectable' academic subject with a definite body of knowledge and experts possessing a high degree of specialist expertise. As a result, the post-war period became a time of intense activity in education. An institutional outcome was the setting up of education departments in education and a restructuring of teachers colleges.

R.S. Peters, the leading analytic philosopher (*Ethics and Education*, Unwin, 1966), claimed that he and his colleagues were going beyond a particular view of a concept to what a concept really means, or how a concept should be used. Analytic philosophers as a result, set themselves up as 'judge, or arbiter, on meanings and, subsequently, on matters of truth, value, and methodology.' What the analytic philosophers wanted ultimately to achieve may not have been positivistic in its essence, but the effects of their philosophy are indistinguishable from it.

Some of the tenets of positivism, a term originated by Auguste Comte (for instance, *The Positive Philosophy*, Volume 2), are that:

- Thought in various fields can ultimately be reduced to mathematics
- Observation is superior to imagination
- Facts arising from observation are distinct from explanations
- Observation is neutral towards questions of value and theory
- Scientists have an elite position in relation to knowledge and society in general.

Many of the characteristics of the current New Zealand education system are now positivistic in nature:

- The elitist relationship of those in administration and universities to the classroom teacher
- The hierarchical and technocratic trends in education administration
- The role separation of administrators, teachers, and evaluators from each other
- The supremacy of the scientifically developed knowledge of experts over the knowledge developed by teachers
- The belief that what is to be learnt by children can be validly broken down into their analytic parts and expressed in behavioural objectives
- The trend towards measurement of education outcomes.

The holistic and its classroom expression derive from the other philosophy, the one on the defensive – the pragmatic philosophy; a philosophy given powerful expression by John Dewey in the 1920s and '30s in, for instance, *Democracy in Education* (Free Press, 1966).

The following are some of the characteristics of pragmatism:

- Education is not an absolute practice – it only makes sense relative to its social context
- The organisational structure and administration of education cannot be separated from the curriculum
- Teaching and learning are not reducible to mathematical formulae
- Education should be co-operative – work on the basis of agreement amongst those involved
- Learning occurs best when teachers have substantial control over what and how they teach
- Children gain a multiplicity of meanings, personal to them, from information they receive and experiences they have
- Learning occurs best when children's affective processes are considerably involved
- Learning occurs best when children see learning as having considerable intrinsic value
- Learning occurs best when children have considerable control over their learning.

In a sense we can move on from the analytic philosophers to the education group their ideas fed into – the positivist academics. In regard to this group, I have spent considerable effort trying to communicate the message that the way positivist academics function and the way they are socially and politically received is not only dangerous to education but also democracy.

Take note of the following about the analytics and apply it to the positivists in the way they function today:

The analytic philosophers saw it as their task 'to clarify the criteria used in the use or application of concepts by clarifying the rules or conditions under which concepts were used or applied.' This led them to feel confident enough to make judgements about what constituted absolute truth or good. In relation to education, however, the concern was not so much with how this fitted into classroom realities but with the consistency, elegance, logic, and clarity of their arguments. And, in their own way, this is exactly how positivists have acted on their scientific findings: their concern not with the classroom reality of those findings but with the consistency, elegance, and logic, and clarity (I would say certainty of delivery) of those findings.

The effect of positivist academics on Western education schools has been dire, associated as they have been with the power elites and the degrading of public schools. This is not the place to go into it in detail but there are and have been academics who have used the characteristics of positivism as described above not only to wield the outcomes of carelessly dishonest research for international pop star academic status but also to become embedded pundits on education, speaking out on education on the basis of status alone – all the time crowding out and putting down teachers' voices. This has been and is destructive to teachers and children and to democracy. Positivist academics if they play their research cards right can deal themselves near unbridled power; a very different game from the pragmatist idea of its sharing.

The chasmic power difference between positivist academic and classroom teacher has had many unfortunate effects: one being the mainly unchallenged confidence academics have developed in the efficacy of their findings and pronouncements; another not being sufficiently brought to the bar of reality and basic honesty. When teachers have failed to act on the advice of academics, the tendency of academics has been to look to failings in teachers, rather than failings in their theories. I have detected in much academic writing a barely concealed impatience, condescension by academics to what is seen as teacher conservatism and lack of perspicacity. This attitude leads to academics readily blaming schools for not achieving learning achievement, or social and cultural equality. And it becomes an easy move from there to an advocacy of wholesale education and impatient top-down imposition.

The analytical philosophy and positivism have become education's expression of society's technological, specialist and elitist trends. The concern is that it will lead to the homogeneity of education practice based on a narrow measurement curriculum which will tie into the political philosophy of neoliberalism and its drive to control of education to, amongst other things, prevent union agitation for increased funding for the poor (poverty being sure to increase under that ideology); to the de-professionalising of teaching by laying out the curriculum in uncomplicated measurable fragments; to inculcating the neoliberal ideology both through narrow curriculum content and a system structure based on hierarchy and authoritarian certainty; and to the internationalising of education to allow it to be made into a product for international capital to invest in and international positivist academics to proselytise for.

Kelvin Smythe 1988

To be continued

