



94

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! 94 Pragmatism, positivism, neoliberalism and the undermining of democracy and dismantling of public education Part 2**

*Part 2 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 (1989):*

There is tension between a system that is increasingly positivist and teachers who are essentially pragmatist. The main aim of this booklet is to empower classroom teachers to give them the confidence to act on what they know about how children learn and not to be undermined by the behaviour and actions of some outside classrooms, especially academics armed with special knowledge, special knowledge that is 'scientifically' produced by positivistic academics. If what academics say about their scientifically-produced knowledge is right in what it reveals about how children learn, then teachers are at a severe disadvantage because teachers do not develop such scientific knowledge, do not feel comfortable with it, and are not are well enough placed to adjudicate it.

A domination of classrooms by the positivist interpretation of how children learn and what children should learn will lead to university education departments being dominant in the knowledge that decides education 'truth'. The kind of university-developed knowledge I see as undermining teachers is not of the sociological and qualitative sort, indeed, that kind of knowledge can be a valuable source of classroom insight and protection for teachers. It is something of an irony that education needs more academics – but of the sociological and qualitative academic sort – to act as some kind of restraint on the rampant behaviour of other some academics, positivist ones.

For a democratic, participatory education system, production and validation of knowledge should be shared amongst a number of groups. One of the reasons why New Zealand primary school classrooms function as well as they do is because of the checks and balances inherent in the system. Those checks and balances derive from the relative co-operativeness in the way groups relate to one another. No group can carry out its functions without the support of a number of others, and no group can force its will on another. Ultimately, though, it must be acknowledged that what the government wants, the government gets, but what the government wants can be modified by educating the public to influence the government – success in doing this being the measure of teacher organisations. But that basic consideration aside, university lecturers, department of education, district inspectors, those delivering advisory support, publishers, school boards, research organisations, service organisations, and teacher organisations – all these groups are to some extent dependent on other groups for carrying out their functions. In the absence of the inevitable conflict and control behaviours generated by a strict hierarchical system, these groups have been able to remain mindful of the need to negotiate in a spirit of goodwill to be able to proceed.

But that democratic, participatory education system, under the spur of positivism, is at risk.

In a national education system, to argue against a substantial exertion of hierarchical control is a contradiction in terms. But because bureaucratic control begets bureaucratic control, a democratic education system needs a strong dispersal of power to schools and classrooms to help establish a finely graded system of checks and balances. It may not result in a system that meets the highest standards of efficiency for, say, an industrial product but is, it is suggested, the most efficient way for administering value-laden education systems. A paradox becomes apparent: reduced orthodox hierarchical efficiency can lead to enhanced pedagogical effectiveness.

Teachers are unsettled by the possibility of curriculum and administrative ideas being able to be passed quickly down the hierarchical chain without those ideas requiring teacher involvement at all stages of development. The best ideas for education come from teachers and those close to teachers. The part of the education system that is important to teachers is the part close to them. The part further away has the capacity to do much harm, but little capacity to do much good. The nature of the education system should protect teachers from hastily conceived ideas – no matter their potential benefits. Good ideas are only good if the process for their development has been good. The last thing teachers want is the kind of efficiency that has someone in the hierarchy having an idea and then using the chain of command to force it on them.

So we are talking about a co-operative education system.

Co-operation occurs in system and institutional relationships when the opportunity for dominance is structurally reduced. It is not talking about co-operation to bring about co-operation. Indeed, the more conflict inherent in structures, the more co-operation, as a cover, is likely to feature in talking. Co-operation only occurs over the long term when the structural realities encourage and enable it.

The production and validation of knowledge should be shared amongst groups, with teacher groups major participants. Education knowledge should not be dropped impositionally on classrooms or a cargo cult mentality will result. Teachers should not be forced into a position of having to develop their explanations about the source and significance of education phenomena that others have decided should appear amongst them. There should be a stop to the condescending description of teacher produced and validated knowledge as subjective and intuitive. It is time for teachers to come out of their classrooms and to be more assertive about what they know about how children learn. They should be assisted in this by being given more opportunity to observe, reflect, discuss, and write, and to have their judgements listened to respectfully

If teachers continue to be in a position of disadvantage in relation to knowledge, then they will continue to be at a disadvantage organisationally within the system. That is not good for teachers and children. What is the good of every other adult group in the system – including principals who identify more with the hierarchy – having a great time, when it is teachers who, in the end, deliver the goods?

My attention to positivist research is not to put it down, or be indulgently iconoclastic, but to embolden teachers with what they know, so they are in a position to better hold their own against the scientific conceits surrounding positivist research and its use.

Improvement in education best comes from ideas generated by teachers not researchers. There is no best way of teaching, certainly not for every child; that is why teachers should be the linchpin of education. If researchers were willing to get beside teachers, listen to them, and test their ideas in general class teaching – research outcomes might develop more credibility amongst teachers. Genuine engagement in class practice, however, is time consuming and awkwardly disruptive to fixed research notions, and unlikely to gain the plaudits of other researchers who are more concerned with research elegance than classroom reality.

Classroom teachers conduct research of high significance every day they teach. The process of planning, trying things out, evaluating children's responses, and picking up learning nuances – is research. To get the best out of teachers when they talk about their work requires sensitivity in the listening. Any hint of condescension by academics and teachers go into themselves..

Teachers are unsettled by the way research can be used selectively by positivist researchers and their political and bureaucratic clients to justify administrative decisions. For instance, research purporting to show that lower teacher-pupil ratios do not lead to improvements in learning has been used to justify inaction in reducing class sizes. Or the effect of poverty on learning achievement is some ridiculously low number undermining the main argument for directing extra funding to the children of the poor. On examination, however, the research concerned will be found to be based on both an extremely narrow definition of learning and narrow learning's constant companion – standardised achievement tests. It is an example of the way positivist researchers and politicians and bureaucrats collusively feed off each other to the advantage of each other and the disadvantage of children.

Kelvin Smythe 1988

To be continued

