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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>

Attack! 95 Pragmatism, positivism, neoliberalism and the undermining of democracy and dismantling of public education Part 3

Part 3 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):

Teachers are bemused by the emphasis in research on highly-structured approaches to teaching. They can understand why, as elitists, positivist researchers are seduced by the delights of the esoteric, the complex, the refined and confined – but regretful that so much energy is expended on matters of so little classroom significance. They are intrigued by the way politicians and bureaucrats make constant reference to research to justify arguments when everybody else knows that there is research available to support any argument under the sun, including that which is diametrically opposed. And why don't researchers use language that makes their ideas more accessible? Is such opaque language necessary for conveying meaning or to obscure the lack of it? Is such impenetrability an adornment to distract from ideas that are startlingly ordinary, repetitive, or impractical?

In what ways can research be helpful to teachers? First, the sociological perspective of how schools work as institutions and relate to their social context is an important perspective. Second, as long as it is used as a guide not a destination, analytical models provide a useful way to think about teaching and learning. Third, ethnographic research provides insights into teacher and child relationships sometimes obscured by the hurly-burly of everyday practice. Fourth, research findings should be reported tentatively in recognition of the approximation that research always represents. Fifth, important research should be communicated directly to teachers and their representatives as a stay against politicians and bureaucrats using it selectively and exploitively.

The gap between the pragmatism of those in classrooms and the positivism of research, politicians, and bureaucrats brings difficulties to teachers that might appear subtle in description but are powerfully pervasive in effect. There is a reality to the teaching of New Zealand children – a reality teachers have to negotiate every working day. Teachers need considerable protection from the buffeting of education ideological swirls to allow them to get on with the task of working with children in reasonably settled conditions. The various challenges New Zealand children bring to school; the things teachers are trying to do for New Zealand children; and the circumstances under which children work – all need to be communicated to the public with care and sympathy by those in leadership positions. But those in leadership positions tend to have a different view of teaching, a positivist one, resulting in teachers being seen as part of the problem not solution. Academics, politicians, and bureaucrats become especially frustrated with teachers' suspicion and lack of ready acceptance of their ideas. As a result, teachers, who want to feel secure and appreciated, find themselves at the butt of the education hierarchy

Education is a value-laden exercise. What works in education is best considered a compromise. That should not be seen as a compromise between what is best and what is not so good. It should be seen

pragmatically as something that is continuous, evolving, in a state of flux. From that point-of-view there is absolutely no known best. If the 'compromise' works in relation to aims, and the aims are well-based, then that in itself should be good enough for the moment. The compromise may, indeed, be the best – but who, except for the positivist, will ever know (or more accurately have the cheek to say so). The important question is: does it work? This, I acknowledge, is a neoliberal catch phrase, but aims define a category and I am assuming they are pragmatist. If it works – fine – however, teachers should never stop looking for something better.

The analytic philosophers gave a lot of attention to criticising the education use of the term *needs*. Their point was that this was very likely saying more about the person making the judgement, than about the child being judged. The point is archetypically positivistic. Implicit in their argument is that if the analytic approach is used, a scientific judgement about the precise state of affairs will result, not a generalised 'subjective' statement about needs. In contrast, Dewey, for the pragmatic view, said that education does not make aims, people do. When teachers find their ideas being challenged as subjective – the reply should be: 'So what – isn't everything in education.'

There is no one 'best'. What is best for one child will not be best for all children. What one parent considers best will not be considered best by all parents. That is why the education system needs to be flexible and, within nationally-set aims, to allocate considerable decision-making responsibility to classroom teachers. Those in the hierarchy should cultivate a humility towards classroom teachers. For parents and children, the education system is good if the teacher is good, and brilliant if the teacher is brilliant. The system and the schools can contribute to increasing the chances of this goodness and brilliance by validating enlightened teacher behaviour, getting the philosophy right and, above all, trusting teachers and allowing them substantial control over what happens in classrooms. Teachers are the ones who are there, on the spot. Only they are in a position to make fitting decisions: decisions that fit nationally-set aims and locally residing children.

Being informed of the positivist-pragmatist debate should help teachers be more aware of the ideas that will control their professional lives, ideas that will nearly all come, whatever the government, from the positivist rule book, a rule book governments will be happy to follow because they know it will be about certainty, top-down imposition, and control. Ideas derived from positivism will be widely considered a given, and the modern obsession with scientific certainty and one-way Jose will prevail.

And I will be sitting at my kitchen table scratching away and scrambling around the country, yes, to some effect with teachers, but in hopeless odyssey as to ends.

Dewey seems to be yesterday's hero, but no matter, his thinking will always have force for those to whom democracy is precious. In arguing the pragmatist case he rejected the view that any group or philosophy had the final say on education matters. He believed education ideas should be tested in practice and that knowledge cannot be separated from the social circumstances of its acquisition. Because education takes place in a social context, Dewey saw it as necessary that education be collaborative. However, the pragmatists' emphasis on collaboration should be approached with caution. A strain of romantic obscurantism dogged the Dewey pragmatists of the 1930s in their striving to put the pragmatist philosophy into action. A more hard-headed appreciation of the pitfalls of collaboration, and the circumstances in which it works best, would have aided them in their efforts. The pragmatist idea of what works in practice should have been, and should be, rigorously applied.

[Speaking from now, 2016, I cannot remember what occasioned the chilling accuracy of what follows. I don't know whether it was some particular government policy or just occasioned by deep distrust of Lange's education policies in general. Picot to me was the Midas with the hierarchical touch.]

For instance, in contemporary circumstances, the collaboration amongst all those involved in the kohanga reo has been constructive and liberating. In third world countries, locally-based and collaborative structures can be educationally, socially, and politically potent. In technocratic, affluent, individualistic societies, however, collaboration, in the way it comes out in practice, seems to lead to schools becoming subject to an extension of hierarchical lines of control. It can lead to positivist thinking being imposed on teachers and children in suffocating proximity. Collaboration is undermined when some of those involved, mainly the government and its agencies but also principals, government-organised parent groups, even teacher organisations, have strong sanctions of one sort or another over one group in particular, namely classroom teachers.

I have a dream.

Perhaps ways could be developed, for instance, to have teachers, in partnership with communities become their own employers. For teacher-community collaboration to work it should be seen as a true partnership with only the lightest of regulatory frameworks; a partnership in which teachers and people from the community work together in classrooms. Structures would be needed, but the emphasis would be on matters being sorted out informally. Decisions would be made only by people directly involved in the work in classrooms, who work with children. (I accept that secondary schools would require much more structure and that collaboration would have different expression.)

Two other kinds of collaboration are a prerequisite for teacher-community collaboration: collaboration between teachers and principals; and between teachers and children. It is a research commonplace to say that the principal is the key to an effective school. While this is largely true (I have seen wonderful schools carried by senior teachers even by the teachers), it does not mean that the powers of principals need to be increased. Any increases could be counterproductive. It may be that it is when principals don't have strong automatic statutory authority, when they are more part of teachers rather than part of the hierarchical line and have to work for respect, that effective leadership results.

With a genuine collaborative environment established, teacher-children collaboration would thrive. Children would learn that education is not something that happens to them but with them and something for which they need to take considerable responsibility – the inevitable and vital outcomes being self-motivation and independence in learning

Collaboration requires true partnership amongst those involved. This partnership would mean group relationships being less reliant on formality and uniformity and more on negotiation and variety. In such an agreement, no one group would have the power to impose its ideas on a strongly resisting one, or have its knowledge by dint of origin considered inherently superior. Power would be more diffuse in the system, meaning more power available for teachers and children in classrooms. These ideas might seem out of time and place as governments are set on extreme dominance over schools, but that is my point, it will be found that such dominance will not work for children, especially for children most in need of it working. Because governments, entrenched interests, and agencies will fight tenaciously for what they have, the public education system will fragment, resulting in parents and teachers leaving to devise their own solution. The strength of New Zealand's primary system of education relative to its overseas counterparts, has been the high level of co-operation within it – that has compensated for the low level of funding – but New Zealand schools are now set to be reduced in both. Lange's education system will eventually fail, but too many people will have a stake in the status quo to accept any lessening of their power or even allow a trend in that direction, so the system will gradually fall apart. New ways will need to be sought and I see those as schools being freed, or more likely freeing themselves, to work with a high degree of collaboration, based on the pragmatist philosophy at the local level.

Kelvin Smythe 1988

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

February 1988

