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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! 106 Things are not OK

This is a quiet posting in response to a serious situation: the state of school education.

I want the real state of school education to be recognised – recognised as an impetus to much needed fundamental change to the structure of the system. This is not to be a slugging of teachers and schools – I am on your side, you know that, but, in the long term, the only way to be really on your side is to be on children's, because teachers and schools will be judged by how well children are doing.

Things are not OK.

In listening to school education leaders (will the current president of the Principals Federation break the mould?) they seem not to grasp the fundamental seriousness of where school education is, oh yes, they refer to concerns, but fail to give it priority, urgent priority, and bring it to attention with heart and soul. It would seem an adjustment here and an adjustment there and some more funding pretty well everywhere would do the trick. They have been content, I suggest, to be taken in by the propaganda, deception, and spin of the minister and the education bureaucracies. After all, recognising fundamental fault would make it incumbent to really get cracking and, heaven forbid, make themselves unpopular with their Wellington friends in the ministry and the bureaucracies. (Bureaucracies of whatever sort residing in Wellington, whether government or otherwise, find themselves sharing values and attitudes, giving comfort, and bemoaning the irritating and unreasonable who reside elsewhere.)

School education is off its axis.

Other postings have detailed the reasons and the possible solutions so it is not my intention to go over those again in depth; my intention is just to remind ourselves of where we are as a spur to action.

New Zealand primary and secondary school education relative to how hard teachers and principals work, their good intentions and sincerity, is falling short of where it should be. Relative to where we should be, we are in decline. It is a fault of the system not of schools and teachers, though by carefully applied pressure, schools and teachers are being cleverly inveigled into playing a part in the resulting cover up.

This decline, I know, is not immediately obvious when visiting schools – the children are happy and involved enough and the teachers and principals are working their butts off.

What we have in New Zealand school education is a secure though sterile framework for people to work and children to learn within – it is the national standards framework. Some teachers in the system know no other system and they have become culturated to national standards values and practices; some know there is something wrong but are confused and simply fall into complying; others chafe – all children, however, are being taught short.

And many primary principals have come to a kind-of Faustian agreement with the bureaucracies that have the two working together in some kind of complicity but with the final pay-off being borne by children, especially children from poorer families.

A characteristic of a national standards curriculum is top-down bureaucracy and that by definition means no meaningful discussion. The lack of meaningful discussion means changes brought in or imposed by the bureaucracies – even those with potential value – do more harm than good.

Two examples: computers need to be in classrooms, have to be in classrooms – but the question on how they are being used at the moment leads to the key question: how can computers be used so as not to

harm learning? That should be the first consideration: to do no harm – yet computers are cutting a swathe. I accept they need to be there as part of what children should learn about at school. (One clue: in the presence of computers, teachers tend to go to pieces and stop teaching – leading to the key question: where is the teaching?)

And then there are open space schools. No matter the acronym, for teachers to get open space schools to the potential learning level of orthodox space schools requires teachers to work that much harder and with that much more perspicacity.

And when you combine the two (computers and open spaces) Oh dear!

Enough – now to work.

For what they are worth, the latest international tests show that New Zealand is near or at the bottom of results from Western countries.

The gap in results between New Zealand's top marks and lower marks has closed but only because the top marks have fallen.

The huge irony is that national standards were brought in to tell us where teachers and children were but never have we been more at a loss about where that might be. That is because we have high stakes testing which always brings mark distortion (upward).

I have already written of the conscious and unconscious way marks, in general, are comfortably ahead of children's actual achievement. Pity the poor intermediate principal tempering the wild enthusiasm that characterises the marks for the first year intake, only to be caught in the upward frenzy for the second year departees.

Let us go to the National Monitoring Study of Student Achievement (NMSSA) whose task is to assess student performance across the y. 4 and y. 8 alignments as set in the *New Zealand Curriculum*.

NMSSA results are produced by government contract out of Otago University by a team of quantitative academics. Their results are expressed in a complex way perhaps to protect the minister, who never refers to their work, but the nitty-gritty is there.

Take y. 8 reading as adjudged by schools: in 2014 **77.64%** of students achieved 'at' or 'above' the national standard; as adjudged by the NMSSA: **59%** of students achieved 'at' or 'above' the national standard.

Or y. 8 mathematics as adjudged by schools: in 2013 **68.90%** of students achieved 'at' or 'above' the national standard; as adjudged by the NMSSA: **41%** of students achieved 'at' or 'above' the national standard.

Secondary ... primary:

The government has declared the Level 2 NCEA to be the key indicator of the success or otherwise of the New Zealand education system. It has also approved a system in which the testing and marking for that level, in particular, is largely left to the schools. At NCEA Level 2, the high stakes effect is revealed in a marking rort and the diversion of children to peripheral units. This very high stakes assessment distortion at Level 2 NCEA has implications for the school system right down to the first year at primary. The 'success' by high stakes assessment (of the sort pertaining) at Level 2 NCEA means no signal is being sent throughout the school system that when children arrive at secondary they are arriving considerably unprepared for that level of schooling. In return, there is also very high stakes assessment in the primary system which means no signal about unsatisfactory performance, even if of only the unsatisfactory national standards variety, is being emitted.

The story of high stakes assessment needs to be traced back to primary school, where the government has imposed an education system to serve its ideological and fiscal purposes. When these children arrive at secondary, many, especially children from lower socio-economic environments, have little chance of meeting the demands of an authentic NCEA Level 2, so an unauthentic one is provided instead. The lack of preparation for secondary education is most seriously demonstrated in children's lack of genuine interest in learning and a lack of development in intellectual challenge and flexible thinking. (As well, there is a growing number of children who can read but aren't readers. And we won't even mention mathematics.)

I acknowledge that one of the main reasons secondary teachers don't want to change the NCEA Level 2 situation is their understandable feeling for social justice – wanting a broad range of children to leave secondary with accreditation. They point to how much it means to some children, and how substantial failure for a large number of children would be a return to the old exam days which made school certificate such a harsh exercise in social and vocational sorting. The idealism is admirable but misplaced. One of the

functions of schools, whether schools like it or not, whether idealists like me like it or not, is social and vocational sorting. However, the whole system should be geared, right from primary, to give all children a better chance and a wider variety of choice, authentic choice, when that sorting occurs. As well, the basis for the sorting must be fair, transparent, and inclusive. And as part of that, there being some kind of official accreditation for every child who demonstrates a satisfactory range of qualities, but it must be authentic.

The answer to why primary schools are moving so many children on to secondary unprepared for genuine learning is complex but can with some degree of comprehensiveness and clarity be reduced to three main characteristics:

First, education has been organised to a narrow version of reading, writing, and mathematics, and narrowed even further by the high stakes national standards measurement education. **Undertaking a curriculum activity for measurement is not one of first teaching that curriculum activity then measuring it – it is to change substantially that curriculum activity both prior to the teaching and during it. Those who support national standards cannot have it both ways: when an area of children’s learning is measured in a national high stakes environment, what children learn is not learning occurring, then being measured, it is learning being changed for the measurement and by the measurement – and always for the worse.**

Second, there is a lack of intellectual challenge and flexible thinking occurring in contexts combining the affective interacting with the cognitive. This kind of intellectual challenge should occur from children’s first year at primary school, and not, as is widely held, to be delayed until children get to a certain level of functioning in the 3Rs, which often becomes some time never.

Third, the degree of high stakes assessment in primary and secondary schools (of the sort pertaining) means insufficiently clear signals are being communicated as to what is working and what is not. On the surface, except for the occasional cold-water dousing of PISA results, and *Listener* articles detailing eye-watering NCEA Level 2 irregularities, all the curriculum and system changes made by the government and privatised services have been fabulous successes. But below the surface, that ‘success’, as this posting argues, has come from the setting up of high stakes situations (of the sort pertaining) and resulting highly inflated results. This process is now at the heart of the government’s education policies.

But there are signs that the government’s fiercely devised wall to keep the truth about official testing away from prying eyes is about to be breached. A *Herald* editorial, for instance, suggests readers interpret the results of such testing with a grain of salt.

There may be those who question why I should be raising such an uncomfortable subject. My answer is that without confronting high stakes assessment (of the sort pertaining) nothing will change in New Zealand school education: teachers and principals will continue to be impeded, and children, especially from lower socio-economic families, will continue to be short-changed. The children from better-off families usually have enough social capital to recover as they go through the education system; children from poorer families often don’t. However, all children would benefit from smaller classes, more teacher support staff, more teachers available as tutors in the early secondary years, an education system that encourages imagination and flexibility of thinking, and releases teachers sufficiently from centralised control to allow variety of approach. There is, however, no strong impetus for change because the results from high stakes assessment are masking an education system in decline and wrong directions being taken. What has been described is a system out of kilter. How to correct that is set out in the *networkonnet* education manifesto, all that needs to be done now is for you to point your leaders in the right direction and put a rocket in their pocket.

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