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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! 107 In which Pooh looks for a 21st Century Education Part 1**

One day, when Christopher Robin and Winnie-the-Pooh and Piglet were all talking together, Christopher Robin finished the mouthful he was eating and said carelessly: 'I saw a *21st Century Education* to-day, Piglet.'

'What was it doing?' asked Piglet.

'Just lumping along,' said Christopher Robin. 'I don't think it saw me.'

'I saw one once,' said Piglet. 'At least I think I did,' he said. 'Only perhaps it wasn't.'

'So did I,' said Pooh wondering what a *21st Century Education* was like.

'You don't often see them,' said Christopher Robin matter-of-factly.

'Not now,' said Piglet.

'Not at this time of year,' said Pooh.

Just as they came to the Six Pine Trees, Pooh looked around to see that nobody else was listening, and said in a very solemn voice: 'Piglet, I have decided something.'

'What have you decided Pooh?'

'I have decided to catch a *21st Century Education*.'

Piglet asked, 'But what does a *21st Century Education* look like? Then continued thoughtfully: 'Before looking for something, it is wise to ask someone what you are looking for before you begin looking for it.'

**What follows is something I look at as a kind of written doodle thus subject to continual revision (contributed to by what you have to say). In such a matter it is difficult to be comprehensive or fair; if I tried strenuously to be so, I would probably never get going.**

We are, it seems, getting ourselves tied in knots about something called 21st century education – before looking for it, as Piglet suggests, it might be wise to find out what we are looking for.

This could be done in respect to how it might differ from what went before, how it might be the same as what went before, how it might be worse than what went before, who is supposed to benefit from it, who is calling for it, does it exist, should it exist, what are its aims and, being education, how much is career- or self-serving bollocks.

I intend this posting to be a search for something called a 21st century education.

As part of that I declare my prior understandings about the concept – a concept because there has never been any discussion about something called 20th century education, it was never conceptualised in that way, so why for 21st century education? The formation and high usage of the concept label suggests powerful forces at work – forces, I suggest, taking control of the present to control the future. Those active in promoting the concept of 21st century education are mostly from political, technology, and business groupings, also some academics: the immediate future they envisage as an extension and intensification of their perception of society and education as they see it now. And in the immediate future, as well as the longer term one, they see computers at the heart of 21st century education, which is fair enough as long as the role of computers is kept in proportion as befits a tool, a gargantuanly important one, but still a tool.

Neoliberalism is dominant in current economic, political, and education thought so to understand what 21st century advocacy is about, there is a need to recognise the nature of that philosophy. But because it is neoliberalism we are dealing with a complex of abstract and polysyllabic words that need to be uncovered to reveal their true reality, a control, market-oriented, and anti-democratic one. But it is a Russian doll. Those words do more than cover anti-democratic, control ends; they also express a colossal ignorance of our best education understandings about how children learn, which, however, is not irrational, because that ignorance is partly a self-serving slipped-into ignorance. And the reference to our 'best education understandings' is a highly qualified one, because neoliberalism has been hard at work under *Tomorrow's Schools* undermining our best understandings and replacing them with their own, meaning the number of people 'our' refers to is a dwindling one.

Children have no choice as to what century they reside in, 21 carries no more significance to how one should approach the education of children than 20. I believe that people in education, or around education, should stop looking over the top of children to look at those before them: the best way to prepare children for the future, no matter the century, is to meet their needs now. Those needs would be along the lines of empathy [of which reading should be seen as a key contributor], fairness, independence, collaboration, creativity and imagination, problem-solving, commitment to democratic principles, critical thinking, ways of thinking [for instance, for science, arts, drama, history, mathematics], key knowledge [everything in education or life is by definition value-laden but that doesn't mean children should be denied access to culturally important and cohesive knowledge – computer advocates are for skills and spasmodic knowledge based on children's often passing superficial interest which is paraded as some kind of 21st century transcendental insight].

School education is being pressured to inappropriate purposes by groups who claim a hold on the future and from that hold generate techno-panic to gain advantage in the present.

Another prior understanding is that the inappropriate use of computers for learning has contributed to the decline in primary school education (though well behind the contribution of national standards and the terrible education autocracy of the education review office). For all the talk of personalising learning, of building learning around the child, of individualising learning, the mandating question for 21st century education seems to be: how can we build the digital into learning instead of how can we best do the learning? And even further: how can we build schools for digital learning instead of what is best for children's learning environment? Large open spaces are not the best environment for children's learning, meaning that in combination with the heavy use of computers to make large open spaces 'work', a distinct problem is developing. Computers and large open spaces are being promoted by 21st century advocates as the two key ideas to carry us forward to the education for the 21st century.

In respect to computers, learning about them and using them is both necessary and inevitable, how could it be otherwise, but from that necessity and inevitability comes the responsibility to protect schools from their disassociating effects. The neoliberal advocates of a computer-laden future are putting at risk the potential of human thought, behaviour, and imagination. Their judgement, based on what computers can do, remains undisturbed, it seems, by any understanding of what the best of learning can be. Computers are going to be everywhere, beyond the imaginations of most of us; all the more important to appreciate the decisive contribution of learning beyond and apart from the computer and the need to challenge the social control that pervasive computer use brings to bear on school and beyond.

The use of computers should not become *the* defining characteristic of what is called 21st century education but it has, and an education and social tragedy is unfolding. The defining characteristics of 21st century education should be the same as the defining characteristics of 20th century education (expressed above) before the neoliberal philosophy took hold.

In the following paragraphs I will refer to trends deriving from the greatly increased use of computers, also the effects of the neoliberal changes to the education system such as national standards, the narrowing of the curriculum, the fear-laden functioning of the education review office, and the government control of education knowledge.

The particular form of learning most associated with computers is inquiry learning. For all the talk of discovery, creativity, and thinking claimed for that approach precious little seems to be forthcoming. Inquiry learning is the main curriculum practice developed to suit computers and neoliberal education. No matter what a teacher does, if it is called inquiry learning, the teacher is safe; the use of any other name puts the teacher at risk – the system likes conformity, even more obedience, and throughout a teacher's practice and records the authorities are looking for those little signs of deference that communicate the teacher has got in behind.

Despite a lot of cute tricks and manoeuvres, inquiry learning is simply swept up old-style projects using google and computers. It is considerably an empty shell – yes, children are often interested, but what is missing is the development of the vital ways of thinking particular to a curriculum area. An empty learning shell is a prime characteristic of 21st century education.

Another 21st century prime education characteristic is the priority of skills over knowledge – meaning for ends any knowledge will do. As stated above ‘everything in education or life is by definition value-laden but that doesn’t mean children should be denied access to culturally important and cohesive knowledge – computer advocates are for skills and spasmodic knowledge based on children’s often passing superficial interest which is paraded as some kind of 21st century transcendental insight.’

Because the neoliberal education system puts a low value on the arts, drama, and dance there has been a diminution in their quality and quantity, also contributing to that diminution is the cramping effect of national standards which, admittedly, is just another expression of that lack of valuing. In open space schools, which in some respects one would think ideal for the arts, drama, and dance a further diminution derives from the pressure to avoid the noise and activity that typically comes from children’s participation in those activities. The shush factor of the newer open space schools is not as noticeable and inhibiting as in the older ones, but it is still there. And I miss the independent advisers throughout the curriculum but in the arts their absence is particularly painful. It was a team of art advisers dropping in at odd times that was the crucial stimulus to Elwyn Richardson – oh that they could come knocking again.

Open space schools lack the spontaneity available in conventional classrooms, for instance, allowing the varying of the timetable and being able to carry on with a programme, say for most of a day – a cherished part of the primary school tradition.

A heavy use of paper templates is common in schools today, with iPads providing digital ones, and exerting a decidedly deadening effect on learning. Another deadening effect is derived from an idea imported from America for use in open space classrooms in association with computers, but is also being used in some conventional classrooms as well. It is called ‘the wall’. Its purpose is to have children work independently on activities from a range of curriculum areas but especially the basics. Activities are displayed on ‘the wall’ and a place for the children to sign off when completed. In New Zealand, a direct duplication of the practice has largely been avoided but many classrooms especially open space ones, employ something like it. The crucial pedagogical point is that to avoid organisational confusion and a lot of demands on teachers, the activities provided are routine and a little below the level of challenge for children. If the activities are ability grouped, the activities for the top group are closer to being OK than the lower groups. The practice is unstimulating and limiting in all curriculum areas but especially in mathematics.

Twenty-first century education has also become associated with two harmful language practices – in reading, a trend to more phonics and words in isolation – oh champion; and in writing, on the basis, it seems, that primary children should be prepared for university from early juniors, the emphasis in writing has shifted to the expository and argument and away from children writing imaginatively and expressively. This combined with the use of templates and the aSTtle emphasis on using adjectives and adverbs willy-nilly, is resulting in writing in New Zealand schools being smashed.

Another prime characteristic is the way the role of the teacher is defined. The role of the teacher as carried out in the past is first belittled, pouring water into bottles apparently while standing at the front holding forth (which seems quite a trick). And having established that, the 21st century teacher is then defined as being a facilitator (my hunch is that if that facilitator worked out from what to where and how, the facilitator would, in fact, be a teacher).

One of the substantial problems with computer use and learning is the way it encourages or allows teacher to forgo their responsibilities (as I see it) to deepen and extend children’s learning before they go out on their own (so to speak). Learning experiences need an introduction (with all sorts of open questions and activities), gaining of knowledge (interestingly and pertinently), use of that knowledge (with investigation or activities), and a conclusion (presentation and discussion). But the 21st century way is to quickly hand it over to computers and inquiry learning, with the teacher congratulating him or herself on the independence being encouraged.

The reason why the Treaty of Waitangi is hardly touched is because teachers are unwilling or unable to take children into such a topic, to build up the knowledge, to develop a feeling for what happened, and to identify the issues for the children to investigate from there. And a reason why teachers are so fixed on inquiry learning (leaving aside hierarchical insistence) is a lack of knowledge of alternatives. It is important for teachers to know, even if they don’t feel able to change, there are.

**Where is the social studies thinking? that is, the comparative thinking based on the interaction of knowledge with the affective.**

Twenty-first century social studies is children choosing their own topics or being asked to investigate large, abstract impersonal topics like *communication*. There is very rarely a true social studies challenge in a topic like that, or a source of empathetic development.

The social studies thinking will be absent.

**Where is the science thinking? that is, thinking based on science investigation.**

**The question:** The question that guides the investigation.

**What I know now:** The child records all he or she knows about the question. If the child already knows the answer, then there is no point in investigating it further. The teacher can also at this stage make a judgement as to whether it is possible for the child to investigate it in the time available. Many topics like volcanoes and dinosaurs lend themselves to study-skills rather than investigation processes.

**What I did:** This is the vital stage and what differentiates science from point-of-view? It is a step-by-step record of what actually happened; it can be in diary or note-taking form. It records the observing, testing, and trying out of the question. The failures as well as the successes are recorded. Others can read what went on and may suggest ways to revisit the investigation by another route. It may help show others not to go along that path. The child also includes references about those who helped and testing methods used.

And so on.

The science thinking will be revealed.

**Where is the language way of thinking? that is, sincerity expressed in writing.**

Imagine: the discussion, encouraging but not obtrusive to the child's thinking; the child knowing how previous writing had been used and that imagination was valued; the art that had occurred or might follow; the urging to intensive observation and accurate expression that preceded the writing by the nine-year-old girl who decided to view the world through the grass not toward the grass:

*Small balls of rain fall down and spit up in tiny streaks of white.*

*Leaves knotted by strings of weeds.*

*Leaves like cups hold blobs of water.*

*Drops of water trail down leaves and peak at the top.*

*Bird's wings doubles as it flies.*

*Twigs uneven like a fork.*

*The dripping tap splits into tracks.*

'Did you find what you were looking for? asked Piglet.

'Yes,' said Pooh in muffled tones.

'But I have decided something.'

'What have you decided Pooh?'

'This honey pot is a lot more interesting.'

Continued in Part 2

