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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! 115 Some school years in the golden weather

Barbara Whyte, presently a senior lecturer, writes about her s. 3-4 teacher and his life-changing classroom in the 1950s.

This Attack! follows on from Attacks! in the Pooh series (107 112 113 114) which are also about continuities extending from inspiring teaching then to inspiring teaching now. The key being the freedom teachers had to explore and innovate to meet the aims of the curriculum and purposes of the system.

My middle-school years in the 1950s were dominated by the departmental-sponsored playway pilot scheme. I was initiated into this at a primary school I attended in Wellington by a team of inspired prophets (from the Department of Education), and by the visionary leadership of a young disciple (my teacher). When considered against the alternatives predominating at that time, what happened to me has all the feel of an education in the golden weather.

Ask me in hindsight for one word to sum up that experiment, and my response would be – revelation! A revelation for three years what's more – because my teacher was brave enough and committed enough to be our teacher for all that time.

Honestly now, how many of you could describe any of your primary years as that?

Let me paint the scenario:

One of those large classrooms with folding blackboard doors that could divide the space in two if the student numbers warranted an extra class; in a suburban, Wellington primary school; s. 3-4 – about 30 children, from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds.

A young, tall, dark, thin, male teacher part-Italian or -Dalmatian (we never did find out – but we did know his middle name), migrant, whaling-station-in-the-Sounds family. He had a multicultural background and a facility for languages (he had studied French and music, along with all the other 'teacher' subjects), he was very interested in the arts – belonging to the Repertory Society, and with more than a passing interest in theatre and films. (He did, in fact, have a part-time job, as did many teachers in those days when salaries were at more of a subsistence level, as an usher at one of the city movie theatres.)

To our regular, rugby-racing-and-beer Kiwi fathers, he was facetiously referred to as superman; to our mothers- at-home, he was absolutely charming; and to us kids – he was a hero.

The class programme, in being developed over a number of years, helped our teacher gain an exceptional understanding of the participants in the theatre that was our classroom. The programme itself was child-centred – far removed from the formal, teacher-dominated, macho approach used by the other male teacher in the middle part of the school – and it was so creative.

I have a vivid memory of an intermingling of the arts, maths, social studies, science, and language into an enormous, satisfying whole. (It has been interesting for me to read Elwyn Richardson and to note some of the similarities with my teacher. He was teaching us at about the same time as Richardson was teaching at Oruaiti.)

I remember trips requiring extensive child-led preparations. There was pouring over books, maps and pamphlets; writing letters to request information; arranging transport and accommodation; and fund-raising activities such as sausage and sauce lunches, sweets stalls, and Guy Fawkes bonfire evenings (that the whole of Miramar seemed to attend).

What else do I remember? A trip to Christchurch, in particular, comes to mind: preparing lists of what needed to be taken and packing a suitcase (with new things my mother bought out of the housekeeping money); getting to the wharf (some of us had done a study of wharves and transport, so we knew our way around); the embarrassment of kissing our parents goodbye in front of our peers; and the hype and excitement of discovering the world of a ship. The seasickness – acquiring sea-legs (as well as a life-long taste for cabin bread); the overnight ferry finally getting in to Lyttelton; and the neon 'Lane's Emulsion' sign shining in the early-morning light. Staying in a hotel (the Whiteheart) for the first time in my life (this was a period when air travel was very expensive, fantasy stuff – and a day trip over the Rimutakas was considered a major expedition); visits by bus around Christchurch – the cathedral, the Sign of the Takahe in the Canterbury Hills, the Lane, Walker and Rudkin (now CCC) factory. The pranks, singing, camaraderie and laughter. The relief

of arriving home a week later, and our parents and families still being there, doing the usual things, life going on – while our world had what seemed a year's broadening.

Other times, there were more localised visits to places of interest within tram or walking distance – usually with mothers in tow, but totally arranged and orchestrated by us children. How busy we were: exchanges with other schools, debates, sports events, the French language club, the folk-dancing gatherings, tea dances (he taught us to waltz and fox-trot), astronomy evenings, camps, billeting, and pen-pals (some we eventually met). Also, we did mapping and research, organisational plans, maths, problem-solving, and the language functions – all to ensure things went smoothly. It was real and purposeful stuff.

I remember, as well, the creative activities. There were poems, stories, whole books we wrote and 'published' – and the regular sharing of these with our families during many social evenings at school. We were authors!

Then there was the art and craft: experimenting with a wide range of media; the double classroom space and the corridors being taken over by materials and absorbed children; whole days given to making art works; the visual displays of the final products; sessions led by the art adviser; visits to the city art gallery to observe other people's work; analysing the black and white woodblock prints in the school journals – and doing some. We were artists!

But most vividly, I remember the drama.

Drama was an integral part of the classroom, probably because of the teacher's interests, but also because we kids enjoyed it, and regularly built it into the programme that we co-operatively planned. There were informal drama activities scattered throughout the school day in which we developed our language skills. They were often impromptu and, in retrospect, confidence building. Like Sylvia Ashton-Warner, the teacher used the piano as a communication tool, so music and drama became strongly linked in our mind-sets. Props, masks, backdrops and costumes were part of the everyday classroom environment – and unplanned, voluntary presentations or group activities were the norm. The sharing of written work often became an occasion for role-playing – not necessarily involving the whole class, sometimes just a group in a corner slipping into a spontaneous mini-production.



There were some very articulate children amongst our number, and they provided demonstrations that rubbed off on us less gifted ones. Dorothy Heathcote's role-playing, problem-solving drama approach was, now I realise, being used ahead of its time across the curriculum. Because of the supportive atmosphere cultivated by all, the more timid eventually came to try most things. Some of the class members had more need of props, or extensions such as puppets, to give them the confidence to express their ideas. Others, at the beginning, could only express themselves orally in the context of the role, but by the end of three years, in such an environment, were confident enough to debate, sing solos, act out parts, and perform in public.

Often during the year there would be a major drama production to be played to an audience. Ideas for this came from a variety of sources, but one of our regular 'fund-raisers' turned out to be a popular area to draw from. The teacher had his ushering contacts in the film world and was able to hire old movies cheaply. We would set up Rooms 3 and 4 like a movie theatre; make programmes and half-time refreshments to sell; and charge an entrance fee. It became, in pre-television days, a very social occasion for us and our

families. Much debate went into selecting the year's movies, with a considerable promoting of old favourites such as Shirley Temple or Charlie Chaplin for parents. Sometimes we fell in love with a film that had a real story, such as 'The Wizard of Oz' or 'Toad of Toad Hall'. Favourites like these then became the basis for our major drama production.

We became involved in planning, writing scripts (lyrics, if a musical), composing or poaching music to suit, auditioning for parts (whole class consensus was needed for this allocation of parts), practising, making costumes, painting props and scenery, more practising – and finally presenting the show. In a way, presenting the show became something of an anti-climax after all the preparation.

It was, as I considered then, my misfortune to be first, a 'ballet dancer' and second, a good reader. There was a history of ballet dancers on my English father's side of the family which his mother insisted on fostering in me despite my obvious Samoan-on-my-mother's-side build. As a result of all this, it was considered fairer by the class that since I regularly had moments of 'fame' with my ballet activities, I didn't really need to be given a performing role. Reluctantly I accepted the argument. After all, how could I say, well, I didn't have that much fame.

As a good reader (a skill that usually put me in an advantageous position in the classroom), I was always relegated to the position of reader. So, while everyone else (inevitably the script would be extended so that everyone in the class participated) got dressed in their costumes, make-up, and looked exotic; all I could do was appear in my best prim Sunday School dress (with perhaps a touch of lipstick), trying to convince myself that every play needed a good reader.

By now you will be getting a picture of the playway approach as brought to life by a visionary (to us kids, almost messianic) teacher. With substantial control handed over to us, we planned and participated in a dynamic, interactive programme that met our needs emotionally, intellectually, aesthetically, and socially – we just loved school and learning.

