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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! 118 The government dismantling of public education: and reflections on resistance Part 1

[Dedicated to Ivan Snook, my mentor, friend, and inspiration.]

This posting explores public education being in serious difficulty – largely because the government is intent on dismantling it. But was where we are inevitable? And a personal philosophy of resistance is referred to.

New Zealand public school education is in decline, in the early throes of a silent calamity: silent because the government, teacher organisations, media, academics, and parents all have reason for keeping it so. The government, because achieving neoliberal ends, not improving education, is its primary motive; teacher organisations, because to admit to a decline would expose schools to blame and criticism, also to make uncomfortable their relationship with the minister; the media, because there is no journalist who has quite got down to really understanding schools (one or two have come close) and there are explicit and implicit editorial restraints (if the decline in public education had occurred under a Labour government, it would be a cauldron); academics, because they would be shushed by their employers for fear of losing contracts; and parents, from befuddlement in response to inflated national standards results and unrelenting propaganda from minister and ministry.

It is not my intention to go into the details of the decline of public school education, I have provided those in a number of postings, but in quick summary, national standards and NCEA results are highly inflated and near worthless as indicators – contributing to this, the failure to get children at primary to think and be imaginative, the formal, uninspiring methods of teaching reading, writing, and mathematics leading to children being ill-fitted to pass authentic NCEA when they reach secondary; and children with the innate potential to exercise choice when they reach secondary, but really having none because of lack of preparedness and being diverted into low hierarchy courses.

In international tests, New Zealand is now at the bottom of the Western world countries when it was at or near the top in reading and writing and got along in mathematics. The National Monitoring Study of Student achievement (Dunedin) has students scoring around 25% below national standards results. But the far greater tragedy is in the arts, they are a desiccated wasteland, and science, mainly just skills: where is the science? and social studies, almost disappeared and when it does show up mainly heartless skills. The greatest and cruellest hoax is the one being perpetrated on Maori and Pasifika children. I am not talking from a distance here, I go into primary school classrooms, the will is there for teachers to do better, but the freedom, encouragement, and means to do so, by design, are in short supply, the government having other priorities.

A distraction by ministers over the *Tomorrow's Schools* years has been what I call the *next big thing*: *Tomorrow's Schools* was the first and biggest *next big thing* (paraded as school freedom), for David Lange to be shaken and bewildered that it brought no curriculum progress; the education review office under the new leadership of Judith Aitken was then promoted as the *next big thing*, to become an education grotesque; then it was national standards; communities of learning; and under the new minister, it will be computers. What an escape the *next big thing* has been for ministers: don't worry about declining results, the *next big thing* will solve all. And please note, all the *past and next big things* are from the neoliberal education toolkit. Sorry we can't provide extra funding for Maori education or special needs, the communities of learning will do the trick there – or computers (especially computers under the new minister).

The main reason public education is in decline is because consecutive National governments have steadily set about dismantling it (it needs to be pointed out that dismantling also occurred under Labour, but more as an inherent structural outcome of *Tomorrow's Schools*). For public education, the inevitable outcome is

a middle-class flight from public school mundanity. In one way or another, the middle-class will find a school system, or found a school system, that meets their values, leaving public schools as working-class ghettos.

The process of dismantling public education is revealed in a range of government behaviours some motivated by ideology, others more by instinct, nearly all in combination, for instance: education being considered a private good and where it might be less so, pushed relentlessly to the right (in other words, insisting education be based on vocational values to the benefit the corporate economy); setting up education to favour the wealthy and powerful in society; controlling education to silence the agitation for increased funding; controlling education to impose a narrow curriculum to inhibit questioning and critical thinking; controlling education to impose a narrow curriculum to inhibit imagination and creativity; controlling education to develop an obedient, accepting society; controlling education by imposing conformity from classroom, to school, to groupings of schools; reducing individuality by larger classes, larger classrooms, and larger schools; controlling education to prepare for continuance of that control in any future social breakdown or dystopia; controlling education for a non-democratic future; controlling education as an exemplar of a non-democratic society; and using fear as an exemplar of the most efficient way to control society (fear reducing the need for a large number of agents of control and, in being incalculable, pushing those subject to it, to extremes of accommodation).

The government is dismantling public education to ideological ends. It is doing this by denigrating teachers, public schools, and teacher organisations; promoting charter schools as a platform for undertaking this; wildly underfunding schools, thus hampering them in compensating for social disadvantage, the ability to help children with special needs, provide specialist teachers, promote the teaching of Maori, and individualise teaching (especially in upper primary classes); undermining the idea of a qualified teacher; re-writing the past to better control the present and the future; taking control of the future (digital to the exclusion of imagination) to take control of the present; imposing the digital as a prime education purpose rather than a subsidiary tool – admittedly a hugely important one (incorrect use of the digital is a significant reason for the decline in learning); asking the wrong question of the digital, instead of asking how the digital can be used in the curriculum, asking how the curriculum can be used in the digital; hampering public school functioning by imposing stifling and belittling hierarchical, bureaucratic controls; adding another layer of bureaucracy as represented by the Education Council; increasing the size of classrooms (very large classrooms are suggested as contributing to learning failure); refusing schools significant architectural choice in any rebuilding; increasing the sizes of schools at the expense of rural and smaller schools (long a source of innovative practice and career development); establishing a narrow, restrictive curriculum at the expense of a holistic one, thus setting classrooms up for failure and even more hierarchical control; fragmenting the curriculum into arrays of narrow objectives accompanied by a heavy regime of classroom and national testing leading to more failure; imposing national standards thereby changing the nature of whatever was intended to be taught by the fact of its measurement; extending the hierarchal and bureaucratic characteristics of the system into the classroom; emphasising a school system based on organisation rather than the curriculum; excluding teacher organisations from genuine involvement in policy initiation and development; reducing teacher control over what they do; valuing conformity over variety; working exclusively from academic and bureaucratic knowledge; and refusing to acknowledge the validity of teacher-produced knowledge.

Continued in Part 2

