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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! 119 The government dismantling of public education: and reflections on resistance Part 2**

But the main instrument governments have used to dismantle public education is the education review office; it is the organisational apotheosis of the coercive neoliberal education ends. If public education is to be freed, given renewed health to pursue democratic and holistic ends – more than anything else, more than the removal of national standards, more than increased funding, the supervisory function of schools must be radically restructured.

The review office is pure dread: the relationship of school to review office is one of unpredictability and lack of accountability leading to an overall relationship based on fear that is often sublimated by schools furiously conforming to, even going beyond, review office expectations. But in the complex, value-laden environment of education, there is always more a school can do, so there is always pervasive that the dread of being guilty of grievous error, of something else that needs to be done, of who knows what? Unpredictability of review office behaviour can derive from the personality or mood of the review officer, a principal being prominent in the newspaper, a principal being associated with a different philosophy of education, or even just showing hints of it, a letter about the school residing in the review office's secret file – there are multitudinous ways for the review office to put a school on the rack – and there is no accountability. But the most dangerous part of the review office's way of functioning is its anti-democratic way of deciding, without consultation with parents, teachers, or any representative consultation group, what curriculum areas should be emphasised, how teaching should be organised to minute detail, and how schools should be administered. The official curriculum in New Zealand primary education is now a document interpreted for meaning by an unaccountable centralised grouping (review office, ministry, and Treasury) with the latest word often being spread through review office school visits. This centralised group invariably taking out of the official curriculum those parts making the curriculum easier to measure as a means of extending bureaucratic control.

Through the time of *Tomorrow's Schools* from 1990 to today, I have resisted the philosophy of *Tomorrow's Schools*, leaving my position as a senior inspector of schools to expose the deceptiveness of the way that philosophy was introduced and the consummate idiocy of it being a Labour government doing the introducing. My main instrument of resistance then, as now, was the advocacy of the holistic as against the neoliberal fragmented control curriculum.

An education system should be built from the curriculum up, not the system down – meaning, in the present situation, the holistic is a weapon.

In 2010, I spoke to the South Island Intermediate and Middle Schools Annual Principals Conference ('How corrupted is our education system?')

And what I said in conclusion to that address is a summation of my philosophy of what characterises resistance in a democracy – no matter how hard the going, the prerogative of that democratic context was understood by me, and always appreciated. Perhaps, though, resistance requires some madness, I could often feel it rising but I subverted, and to some extent controlled it, into my writing.

I said, 'There won't be decisive change for the better until, sometime in the future, New Zealand faces a crisis, probably a combination of the economic, social, and moral. In that circumstance, we should be ready with some ideas, carefully considered ideas, for a better way of going about things. In the meantime, especially in education, power structures being the way they are, we must expect that education will be increasingly unsatisfying for children and disappointing for society (both economically and spiritually). This will be especially so in New Zealand which doesn't receive the lavish funding, say, UK, Australian, or American schools have received; and poverty increases with its flow-on education effects. All we can do, I

believe, is slow down the decline by opposing the characteristics of scientific management, by exposing the myth of the academic expert, proposing alternative ways, and campaigning for a fairer society.'

I can remember sitting at my computer in the course of writing that paragraph and contemplating the question: How is all this going to end? I turned off the computer and pondered the question for some days, and my answer was: Not rationally, only when New Zealand 'faces a crisis, probably a combination of economic, social, and moral.' But, and this is a crucial point for a philosophy of resistance, that ending was not inevitable.

History is not a story of what was inevitable; it is a story of what didn't have to be. David Lange didn't have to impose an education system to go with the economic system his minister of finance had imposed (and Labour doing this removed the natural opposition to it when National would have introduced it anyway); the members of the caucus might have had the courage and insight to oppose it; the teacher organisations could have opposed it and while they might have failed at first, that could have set things up to succeed in the long run; a strong leader could have headed one of the teacher organisations; we could have had one example of the media who listened (RNZ thinks it is listening but it hasn't listened and doesn't listen, and no newspaper listened – really listened); Labour eventually might have recognised the grievous error of its education ways and undertaken a thoroughgoing democratic restructuring; and what if Brian Donnelly had held his nerve against Labour and National and appointed a different group of people to sit in committee on the future of the review office?

Someone in an official position or a teacher organisation could have come through and played the long game, which is the key to the philosophy of resistance, but none did, any resistance was issue-based (usually raised by the government) keeping the organisations distracted, busy and feeling useful. In effect, the organisations became reliant on pleading with the government and being habitually acquiescent in the hope of the government occasionally dispensing a favour, while all the time it was steadily dismantling public education.

Any of these would have changed history. I obstructed, ridiculed, and proselytised, waiting for a change to history; that was my game, one I never thought I would win, but one for my own reasons, I felt impelled to engage in. (In respect to the reference to Brian Donnelly, I agitated for that through the magazine, a protest on the steps of parliament, addressing meetings, printing bumper stickers, running a petition, but Brian Donnelly capitulated and guess who was on the committee? Hekia Parata's sister and Margaret Austin for Labour, amongst other neoliberal education devotees.) My resistance was not because I thought I would win, but because what I was resisting was wrong. And, at the risk of self-indulgence, there is that universal yearning for your life to mean something, I always proceeded in the belief that in fight for right we are not alone, we are with all those people in the past who have fought for right, in particular the multitudes of lesser people, lesser people like me, whose example we don't know, long forgotten if ever remembered, but who endure as a general cultural memory.

The foundation for my resistance was curriculum knowledge (largely gained by observing and listening to you) informed by a willingness to imagine. It has been both an elevating experience and disturbing. To know what is going to happen and not being able to decisively change events is sometimes knowledge you would rather not know.

In 1999, I spoke to a group of principals. My main message was that given the morally and ethically complex times ahead, principals, in doing what they had to do, needed to do that, but on the understanding that they retained, as part of their thinking, the idea that much of what they had to do was not in the best interests of children. They needed to make that distinction for their own integrity, and to be able to challenge that which was not in the best interests of children when opportunities arose.

That was the message of resistance I delivered to principals but increasingly their eyes showed incomprehension or resistance (more the former); reactions seeming to be in pace with principals moving from the holistic curriculum to the national standards one. I could gauge the movement away from the holistic from the decline in interest in my courses on setting up holistic classrooms. One of the intriguing characteristics about schools is that amongst the much revered school values, *independence* is often omitted, and *courage* nearly always. Many principals know what they are doing is not in the best interests of the children but from my observation become determinedly non-imagining, allowing themselves to operate at the practical level and in the short term. The pressure from the education review office and the ministry based on fear is intense, and like all autocratic organisations sought more than conformity and loyalty, they sought love – and in all kinds of subtle ways principals found ways to communicate that.

Education in a democracy should serve democracy but, at the moment, it doesn't, it serves, through neoliberalism, the corporate culture. Education should serve the values of democracy, the developing of the holistic talents of the individual, and employment prospects in an authentic and integrated way, but it doesn't. These three aims are not by nature exclusive of each other but they are increasingly made to be. The New Zealand school education system is a microcosm of the developing corporate state: the use of the big lie, propaganda, false statistics, and the most efficient and effective means of control – fear. The effect in schools is narrowing the curriculum, divesting the arts and critical thinking, and creating citizens unable to think their way out of a paper bag, conformist, fearful, and with a belief that following commands from

the top is the only way. Another effect is to undermine public education both because it is public and because of its potential as a source of competing ideas and values. The corporate powers that be, and governmental systems expressing those, use their control of the present to use predictions of the future to bolster their control of the present. Those in control emphasise a digital, corporate dominated future with an intolerant refusal to accept any other. They do not contemplate other futures, for instance, a breakdown in civilisation from climate change, a breakdown that could well strike in the lifetimes of school children today. Public education, on the other hand, should be about values, democratic values to prepare children for any number of futures, including one in which economic development is subordinate to environmental and humanistic imperatives and the attention is to a fairer sharing of less.

