

## INTRODUCTION

# Revisiting the Early World

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Elwyn Richardson, New Zealand educator of the mid-twentieth century ‘discarded the official syllabus and turned instead to the children’s lives and immediate environment for the basis of his curriculum’ (MacDonald, 2016, p. 2). His is a name that stirs memories of a progressive, creative and optimistic period in New Zealand’s educational history. Yet, as the arts lost influence over education (2016), Richardson would come to feel ‘professionally abandoned, misunderstood and manipulated’ (p. 4) by education authorities. This, despite the success of his book, *In the Early World* (Richardson, 1964).

Public notice of Richardson’s death in December 2012 led to a decision in 2013 that the Auckland University of Technology School of Education would host a one- day symposium in memory of Richardson’s inspirational work. That day, driven largely by Janita Crow, one of the authors featured here, was to give natural rise to this Special Issue. The story of Richardson’s explorations in science, art and education will become apparent in the varied contributions that make up this Special Issue. The contributions uphold strongly the notion of optimistic educational experimentation in what was (and still continues to be) a delightful rural corner of New Zealand’s beautiful Northland. They reflect on Richardson’s ability to integrate, and hold in fine balance, his interests in art, science and palaeontology. Underpinning Richardson’s work was an ethos concerning the nature of human beings, their potential, and the way in which knowledge intersects with the learner’s desire to know, and it is this ethos the contributors have attempted to grasp and convey.

The starting point, it appears, from McDonald’s account, was Richardson’s belief that the basis of good science is observation. While this may seem self-evidently true of science, the reality of school science is to focus on the ‘right’ method or outcome, whereas Richardson sought to link science to life experience and the process and act of wondering. Richardson’s observations of the natural world, of tides, shells, seaweed and driftwood, linked almost seamlessly to art. His approach to art took seriously the perspective and participation of the local community, and hence was born the productive association of Science, Art and the Māori language, which was the brilliant out- come of Richardson’s Oruaiti years from 1949 to 1962.

Part of the richness of this story is the support offered by a wide range of people to Richardson, including local residents and civil servants. The advisors from the Department of Education recognised an opportunity to explore and develop ideas they had already garnered from international literature, particularly from John Dewey. They offered support without the modern strictures applied by arbitrary notions of ‘national standards’. They were in effect setting a much higher standard, in science, art and literacy than could be hoped for on any standardised system. The teacher and the students set their own standards, without reference to the performance of others, but in the light of their own experience, expectations and abilities. Despite Richardson’s later struggles with ‘the little grey men’ (MacDonald, 2016, p. 4) of the Department of Education, he did enjoy some bureaucratic support, and his *In the Early World* (Richardson, 1964) was used as a text for initial teacher education in New Zealand and the United States (MacDonald, 2016) for several years after its publication.

So what does Richardson mean in the twenty-first century? Clearly, the contributors here were looking back to a period of New Zealand’s educational history that offered something which may now be lost. The sun-soaked idyll of a remote country school might be part of this imaginary. The ‘country

service' requirement of the time, which insisted that ambitious young teachers spend two years at least in rural schools, may have contributed to the success of such a school. Certainly, the willingness of the local people to get involved was helpful—but that willingness depended to a large extent on the calibre of the schoolteacher.

What is really attractive, however, is the combination of a young teacher's enthusiasm and licence to experiment, and the mentoring—both challenging and supportive—offered by 'experts', and some officials employed by the Department of Education. These advisors were not, primarily, promulgating the government's views on what form education should take, but working in a paradigm in which it was possible to consider curriculum, learning and pedagogic processes in a holistic and creative way, working with the existing understandings of a young teacher and broadening his horizons, and, at the same time, encouraging an exciting educational experience for his students.

This Special Issue offers several perspectives on Richardson's life and work, and we rather hope readers would read the entire issue. A useful starting point is MacDonald, who provides a sensitive historical overview of Richardson's life and work. She teases out the tension between science and art in his teaching practice, yet environmental science was to inspire Richardson's art work and his literacy work—indeed, providing the inspiration for an integrated curriculum built around his students' life experience as text.

Sturm and Turner 'update' Richardson's pedagogy, in which they find evidence of technology, experimentation, creative practice, collaboration and a progressive approach to assessment, all grounded in the discovery method. In similar vein, Alford's contribution looks to Richardson's use of student enquiry to lead teaching and learning. He critiques the current penchant for 'best practice' and Ministry of Education notions of teacher enquiry as deterministic and superficial, when contrasted with the richness of Richardson's approach. Moreover, Richardson's approach is a corrective to the individualising metaphors and priorities of education in contemporary times.

Heyward and Fitzpatrick, maintaining the spirit of creativity and discovery, seek out the 'ghost' of Richardson in a series of fictional letters they direct to Richardson. Each letter is prompted by the recall of events in an earlier time of initial teacher education, when Richardson's name was, perhaps, more readily invoked than it is now.

Encapsulating the memory of Richardson in the context of a one-day symposium required energy, drive and creative commitment, and this was evident on the day—and delightfully captured by Craw and O'Sullivan, as they demonstrate to their readers 'art-at-work', breathing life and vitality into the act of remembering an educator whose work should not be forgotten.

Devine's reflection, delivered at the end of the one-day symposium sums up very well what Richardson meant to an earlier generation of teachers. Richardson has not lost his relevance, as his memory serves to remind the current generation of educators that they too must resist, in their own way, the inroads of economic determinism. Richardson's memory, and its preservation in this Special Issue, is a pertinent reminder to keep the historical narrative of New Zealand education alive.

## References

- MacDonald, M. (2016). *Elwyn Richardson and the early world of creative education in New Zealand*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
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## ARTICLE HISTORY

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