

## The Tyre-Child in the Early World

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### ABSTRACT

This article considers the ‘creative education’ of influential Aotearoa/New Zealand art educator Elwyn Richardson, which is based on what he calls the ‘discovery method’: the ‘concentrated study of material from [students’] own surroundings’. Through a game that his students play with tyres, we explore the role that tools play in Richardson’s classroom and in the imaginary ‘worlding’ of his students’ play. By taking the ‘early world’ of the children’s development to be a product of the tools through which they describe it, we reveal Richardson’s educative process to be essentially technological. His idea of the whole child who emerges through a process of experience and observation—of ‘emotion recollected in tranquillity’, in the well-known phrase of Wordsworth cited by Richardson—conflates the nature of the child and nature of the ‘natural’ world. By this act of ‘natural settlement’ not untypical of settler narratives in Aotearoa/New Zealand, the child’s—and, by implication, other settlers’—relation to the world of nature is naturalized. Instead, we would argue that the child’s relation to nature is altogether unnatural: it is imprinted by the technological means through which she explores the world and makes it her own—and by which she is made over. The ‘tyre-child’ is no child of nature, but a child of technology (as every settler is a technological settler), for whom creative errors—acts of ‘mis-taking’ like the ones Richardson’s children make in playing with tyres—reveal an imaginary capacity at once theoretical and unsettling.

### KEYWORDS

error, play, art education, technocriticism, Elwyn Richardson, New Zealand

### ARTICLE HISTORY

First published in  
*Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 2016, Vol. 48, No. 7,  
674–683

Elwyn Richardson was a remarkable educator. His years at Oruaiti School (1949–1962) in the Far North of Aotearoa/New Zealand suggest an exceptional experiment, enabled by the confluence of an isolated rural school, a relatively amenable educational establishment and the development of ‘progressive’ education. Here we reflect on Richardson’s seminal work *In the Early World* (2012), which was the fruit of his years at Oruaiti, and on MacDonald’s (2010) rich study of the context, practice and legacy of his teaching. Drawing on the technocriticism of Michel Foucault, Michel Serres and Donna Haraway, we aim to rethink the ‘natural world’ of the children’s education at Richardson’s school in terms of the technologies of ‘production’ and ‘signification’ (Foucault, 1988, p. 18),<sup>1</sup> world and themselves, in order to reconstruct the deeper script of his philosophy. This process of rethinking Richardson’s work we take to be less one of critique than of ‘diffraction’ (Haraway, 1997, p. 16), of rereading it through the lens of the technologies he seems not to see.<sup>2</sup>

There is much to admire about Richardson’s philosophy of ‘creative education’ (Richardson, 2012, p. xiii) and the pedagogy it informs, marked by ‘learning from each other [and] learning from experiments’ (Richardson, 2012, p. 16). In particular, we endorse his emphasis on creative practice;

teaching as learning (and vice versa); multimodal learning; collaborative planning and evaluation; a dynamic curriculum; and dynamic, often ipsative assessment and assessment by portfolio. *In the Early World*, which is rich with the exploratory multimedia work of his pupils that documents this pedagogy, is an artwork in itself and expresses the classroom as art room. Nonetheless, we mean to find a way of bridging the isolated rural school that Richardson describes and the inner city urban schools that our own children attend, in an effort to recover the enduring insight of his pedagogy, thereby to construct a different species of 'school without walls'.<sup>3</sup>

To update Richardson's pedagogy will involve a double manoeuvre. First, we need to rethink the 'discovery method' (Richardson, 2012, p. 193) that is central to his vision of creative education, namely the 'concentrated study of material from [the student's] own surroundings' that leads to 'the forging of a close association of the child's thinking with some actual experience or observation' (Richardson, 2012, pp. 92, 49). This process involves '[o]bservation, discussion, experimentation, and expression' (Richardson, 2012, p. 157). Secondly, we need to reconstruct the natural world in which this process took place for his students. Not for nothing was Richardson's preferred description of the discovery method Wordsworth's phrase 'emotion recollected in tranquillity', a line from Wordsworth's preface to his and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* (2013, p. 111, cited by MacDonald, 2010, p. 287). In early Romantic style, it assumes an empirically given world, within which the child's imagination is made manifest, rather than a world that is co-constructed by the tools through which it is investigated. That world, we would argue, is potted, painted, printed and written. And, we will say, taking the children's play with tyres described in chapter 1 of *In the Early World* ('The School') to be an exemplary engagement with found objects, that it is also a 'tyred' world.

Such teaching tools and media prescribe the possible forms that the children's world can take, and, at the same time, reveal the technologically mediated nature of child-play. It is this technological framing that enables us to update Richardson's work to fit today's schooling, in which the significant technology of econometrics ('techniques of measure'; see Sturm & Turner, 2011, pp. 9–14), more than any other teaching technology, prescribes the 'world' of children's development through its mechanisms of 'learnification' (Biesta, 2010) and 'constructive alignment' (Biggs, 1996). It may have been easier for Richardson to escape in Oruaiti the strictures of the curriculum and the 'little grey men' who oversaw its implementation (a refrain in his letters to MacDonald, 2010, p. 10), but this cannot forestall attention to the technological apparatus of the classroom. Moreover, Richardson was loath to frame his own educational principles theoretically, scorning 'intellectualization' in creative education (Richardson, 2012, p. 153). According to MacDonald (2010, p. 177), he professed not to have read anything in progressive education except some Dewey, and much preferred not to be associated with the progressive education movement (although he did associate with contemporary artists like E. C. Seelye [Richardson, 2012, pp. 33, 58] and refers to the contemporary novelist D. H. Lawrence in *In the Early World* [Richardson, 2012, pp. 126–127]). Thus, he objected to MacDonald's endeavour to situate his work in twentieth-century 'progressive' or 'new' education movements: he 'firmly held that he was neither a beneficiary of other educationalists' ideas nor a product of any social or historical context' (MacDonald, 2010, p. 254). However, we would argue that to consider the world of the children of Oruaiti, as much as the work of *In the Early World*, to be a product of technology, or technological 'makeover', is to theorize Richardson's philosophy of creative education in a way that does the enduring insight of his experiment no harm. Further, in the context of progressive pedagogy in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Mutch, 2013), it is to place his pioneering pedagogy within the larger 'pedagogical' project of the technological settler 'makeover' that made 'New Zealand' and 'New Zealanders' (see Turner, 2007).

### **A tool in the hand**

Throughout *In the Early World*, Richardson emphasises nurturing the whole child and their personal values (Richardson, 2012, p. 195), rather than simply subjecting the child to formal discipline and evaluation by standards. To this end, he advocates learning through creativity as 'personal

expression', marked by the three I's of 'immediacy', 'intensity' and 'integration' (Richardson, 2012, pp. 133, 100, 138), albeit through 'concentrated study of material from [one's] own surroundings' (Richardson, 2012, p. 92). For him, creativity is 'a gift of seeing directly and a talent for expressing [a] vision with truth and power' (Richardson, 2012, p. 117). Children's artistic expression should display immediacy and intensity akin to a heightened 'stream of consciousness' (Richardson, 2012, p. 101): it should be 'an expression of unashamed awareness, ... its function to promote more intense awareness in children of their own thoughts and feelings about the world about them' (Richardson, 2012, p. 100). For him, such immediacy (literally, 'non-mediation'), such that the tool or medium with which it is expressed disappears, overcomes the split between child and 'nature'. Also, children's expression should display what he calls 'integrated expression' (Richardson, 2012, p. 138), namely 'expressive work in several "subjects"' and thus media (Richardson, 2012, p. 71), such that differences in medium are overcome. Further, its assessment should be integrated, as 'assessment *in wholes*', so that 'the set of expressions ... [can] all be considered *as a whole*' (Richardson, 2012, p. 75; emphases given), such that differences in expression through different media are overcome.

While we appreciate Richardson's emphasis on nurturing the whole child, we would argue that the child is 'split' by the tool in her hand, in and through which the world appears to her in the form that it does, such that she appears to the teacher as a distinct and uniquely developing individual. We cannot ignore the fact that 'the child' is also a mediated function of teaching tools (and media), a 'tool-child'. The tool or the medium, in this regard, serves as what Serres (1982b, p. 67) refers to as the interloper or 'parasite' (the 'third man') in a dialogue who is necessary to, but occluded by, the act of communication. For him, it is the noise that we shut out as we grasp meaning, ignoring non-orthographical elements like glitches, grunts, accents and so on. Though noise is something Richardson himself valued in the classroom (see Richardson, 2012, p. 18 on noise and creative work), the song of the natural world in New Zealand—the school without walls—might equally, or at the same time, be that of a chainsaw as that of a tui ... and a chainsaw demands no less attention to its existence and role in the landscape as any 'natural' creature. We associate this cacophony with the noise of a productive classroom. The teaching tool or medium is thus a 'parasite', an interloper—or overlooked intermediary—in the dialogue between child and 'nature'.

Richardson's work with his children illustrates very well the role of technology in play, but his apparently artless method suggests that the child's making involved no received or transmitted discipline, much less the technological tools of a craft. (Richardson affirmed the remark of an Oglala Sioux Indian chief, John Kills-in-Water, with whom he worked on a reservation in South Dakota: 'we have no art. We do everything as well as we can' [MacDonald, 2010, p. 286].) But the discipline of craft is everywhere evident in the children's work, in the repeated forms of sculpted heads, linocuts, prints and poems. The children rather obviously have an idea of what a work in each medium should look like and on this basis evaluate each other's work. Furthermore, they produce strikingly well-crafted art: their poetry, for instance, appears both conventional and correct. That the idea of their work is not an adult's is undoubtedly important, but that the result could not be the product of media-specific discipline is wilfully naïve. Craftwork, we would point out, is utterly dependent on technology (*tekhné*, interestingly, is Greek for art *and* craft). Pottery, painting, printmaking and poetry are somewhat misleading in this regard, as the human hand seems so strongly implicated in their production. The tamariki whose finger traces the lines of a pot or painting is herself being imprinted by clay and paint in the same way that a coin emerges through the paper being rubbed with a pencil. The 'finger said it', says Richardson (cited by MacDonald, 2010, p. 288), but, we would say, with what? Pottery, in particular, is so closely associated with the earth as to make not only its products but also its makers autochthonous. Technology today may seem less hands-on—and more intrusive—yet is no more 'technology' than the implements with which Richardson's tamariki made pots, painted pictures, created prints and wrote poems.

It is possible to think of a computer as 'technology' and a pen as the work of the hand. In this way, Richardson's pedagogy can be cast in the nostalgic glow of a holistic education, in which the nature of the child and the 'natural' world converge. Unsettling it might be, but we would argue that

it is better to think that pottery made the human being, just as the chainsaw (following from the saw) made, or made over, the settlement of Oruaiti. The world of *In the Early World* has already been 'worlded', as Richardson's students learn through their investigation of Oruaiti's 'development ... during the hundred years' settlement by the white man' (Richardson, 2012, p. 155); it has been strongly made over by processes of settlement whose script is a naïve New World narrative of nature, progress and freedom, ignoring the invasive nature of settlement. This narrative elides the 'hard facts' (Fisher, 1985) that the 'freedom' that accompanies 'progress' is hard-won at the expense of nature (as it was) and that the 'nature' that results shapes settlers as much as they have shaped it. By this act of 'natural settlement' not untypical of New Zealand settler narratives (see Hardy, 1995), the child's—and, by implication, other settlers'—relation to the world of nature is naturalized.<sup>4</sup>

We would prefer to write about Richardson in a way that prevents his work from being yoked to this naïve settler narrative. Indeed, he refused to see himself as the 'product of some "cultural need" or an expression of "God's Own Country"' (cited by MacDonald, 2010, p. 256). But the empirically given world of his students' experience and observation, and the use of tools through which he imagined that they simply represented it, made this difficult. No doubt, the very idea of the natural world as a school without walls must have helped to make Richardson the poster boy of the liberal educational establishment. An urban school setting, in which we would advocate the same exploration of the built world, makes the Romantic sentiment of the educative 'excursion' (Wordsworth, 2007), in and through which the individual character is formed, harder (but not impossible, we would agree) to maintain. What we will call the 'tyre-child', a species of 'techno-child', is our effort to learn from Richardson's experimentalism and at the same time to free ourselves and his legacy of a naturalized and child-centred 'nature', and the supposed freedom that it engenders for adults in New Zealand, projected onto children as the inhabitants of a state of nature.

## The tyre-child

In order to get at another 'nature', which is a technological or techno-nature, rather than a found or given 'natural' world of nature—either nature 'itself' or the very nature of children—we focus on the 'tyre-child' that Richardson describes in *In the Early World*. This compound term refers to a game played by the children with tyres, presumably objects that they found in or around the school. The game involved rolling the tyres using sticks, with a child running alongside the tyre on either side, doing rounds of the school yard and pretending to be driving tractors, thus recreating the 'natural' world outside the school (Richardson, 2012, p. 3). The 'tyre-child' has three elements of note:

1. the objects that make up the game and are not pre-manufactured toys but objects found and turned into toys;
2. the tractor tyres that act as 'pivots', in Vygotsky's (1967, p. 12) sense of the word, for the children's imagination; and
3. the child, or children, and tyre, which can be considered as one, no longer a child *and* a tyre, but a tyre-child, a hybrid entity that is at once natural and unnatural, and of a piece for the duration of the game.

The tyre of found nature, drawn upon as a pivot, is reconstructed as a tyre-child, a new object and hybrid entity with a new nature and purpose created through play. The possible world of the child's imagining involves putting an object to another use, that is repurposing, or 'mis-taking', it (Dewey, 1958, p. 287). We would add that there is no limit to the objects that a child might use as a pivot and thereby mis-take in this way. As Vygotsky (1967, p. 12) remarks, that the stick more conventionally deployed as a horse in childplay is not itself a horse, nor is the horse a stick. The game reveals, in the process of objects being mis-taken, that the place itself is both hybrid and rule-bound in nature. The tyre-child might lead us to ask after the role of tractors in making the place 'what it is'. The operative rules of the place, including local farming practices, are thereby exposed by making use in other ways of objects found there. It is made up of all sorts of objects generated by its own

makeover. It is a credit to Richardson that he engaged his pupils in projects that explored the history of the valley as well as its geology, but his discovery method in effect confuses its nature with their nurture.

The children's constitutive mis-taking reveals the place to be a fabricated one: here the technologized or made-over nature of the area of Oruaiti. In Richardson's book, and in his work as a teacher, this might have prompted reflection upon the existence of unnatural as well as natural objects and the hybrid place that they together constitute: how objects such as tyres got to be there, what their purpose or function is, and how their use establishes social practices (of farming, dwelling, communing) and pre-supposes the built world of the valley. For us, the children's play reveals Richardson's method of exploring the place to be a *technological* education. The natural place of the *In the Early World* is a techno-nature, or built world, of which the children are intuitively aware. A teacher might make the point plainly by asking the child what she could do with a small axe, rather than a paintbrush. A kiln, paintbrush and pen are all tools that make a world in which the children live one possible world among others. Through their play, the children are exploring a world of technological predetermination. Mis-taking a tyre by putting it to another use in a game reveals the constitutive role of creative 'error' in the world-making imagination of children—taking a toy as a given does not—and reveals, too, the unreflexive role of error in Richardson's discovery method. Discovery is only possible if a tool—kiln, paintbrush, pen—is not itself taken to be a part of the natural world in which it operates.

The idea of error in, or as, childplay is not something we are adding to Richardson's method. In a notable project, described, curiously, in a chapter on 'Nature Study' (chapter 11), Richardson engages his students in an ethnographic study of errors in letters written by the community (Richardson, 2012, p. 179 ff.). The project brings together our concern with error, writing and technology. In our view, rules are no less 'empirical' than the habits or appearance of birds. They are exposed as such when they appear out of order. In such instances, a larger social 'orthography' (literally, a system of 'right' [ortho-] 'writing' [-graphy], or communication) is manifest (Serres, 1995, p. 19), which may then become an object of study. Richardson identified error in the addressing of letters and tried to work out what kinds of people made the errors and why. Business letters, for instance, had fewer mistakes, which suggested that their writers were better educated. Richardson, typically learning from his children and the project in which he had engaged them, took the opportunity to remark on the errors he habitually made. Over and above what it tells us about his inductive method, this activity offers a lesson in literality (see Sturm & Turner, 2014, p. 2), which is to say, the 'empiricism of the letter'. The technology of writing letters reveals the operative rules of a whole system of communication, just as the tyre-child reveals the operative rules of farming practice, and something about the conditions of the formation of the local landscape. In each case, the 'error' exposes the rules, or 'norms', of the social practice in question, and enables questions to be raised about the assumed social consensus that underlies it (see Virno, 2011, pp. 103–104).

Quite apart from the grammar lesson that this project provided for the children, we consider this reconstruction of a social world to be most valuable. The way of 'error' enables us to ask in what possible world it is possible that the error can have been made. Further, we can ask about the possible world that the children's mistaking proposes. That world is one in view of which this world might yet be profoundly altered. Childplay, then, is a matter of formulating propositions, as if the world we take as given is not 'what it is': to follow the error is to avoid strict subscription to social consensus, couched, today, in the encoded adult values of national standards. While for Richardson, as MacDonald remarks, 'a theoretical route was not the doorway through which he entered the classroom' (MacDonald, 2010, p. 259), our literal method is theoretical. For us, the capacity for children to address the world in the form of pivot-propositions is not pre-intellectual or pre-theoretical: it is intrinsic framework. The view of the intelligence of children as 'naive', 'natural' or 'empirical', which is prior to the theoretical capacities of the higher or more developed mind, misconceives the embodied intelligence of childplay, the function of play-as-proposition, and the transformative power of the parasitical imagination.<sup>5</sup>

## The techno-child

To turn to the techno-child today, in an effort to update the art and craft of learning and teaching, we find three aspects of Richardson's disposition and pedagogy especially appealing:

1. Through the emphasis on nurturing the whole child, Richardson undertook to grow the student as a distinct and uniquely developing person. We see ourselves as playing a similarly educative role, identifying the idea that a student has of what she can do, and be, and finding ways of bridging a pathway through which a student might become that idea of their own imagining.
2. Richardson's discovery method, as we have reconstructed it, brings together art and science, in a way that is essentially technological, such that the very means for a student's self-imagining will be technological in nature. Accordingly, we strive to enact a reflexive awareness of the technological means in and through which the self today is made manifest: through a range of tools, devices, applications, platforms and programmes, including the classroom or course—and not excluding a range of what Foucault (1988, p. 18) calls 'technologies of the self', by which individuals transform themselves. Through this process, the child does not become a whole self, but rather a 'para-self' (Rotman, 2008, p. 5), an entity that, due to the mediation of technology, appears 'beside' itself. A child with a pen, a computer, a tyre, is a hybrid, parasitical entity.
3. Richardson's disdain for technocratic education—in the guise of the inspectorate and prescribed curricula—is refreshing, despite the evident official support that his 'experimental' school garnered at the time. Today's educational technocracy takes the form of national standards and a concern for 'basics'—reading, writing and arithmetic—monitored by an enhanced system of performance measures (often driven by parents' desire to assure that their children are 'achieving'). In such an outcome-oriented system of education, the child can potentially become a de-individualized econometric unit.

With regard to the third aspect, the new systems of measure to which education is increasingly subject suggest to us a new norm of 'nature', whose basis is mathematical,<sup>6</sup> which, for us, ought to be the object of both reflection and repurposing, not of a new essentialism. One way we teachers can think about this problem is to consider learning as parasitical in the more technological sense that we have described. A child in this sense hollows out the present in the act of building a future place in which she will flourish differently—even if we are horrified by the technologically rich world they imagine (online gaming and social media spring to mind). The purpose of nurturing the child cannot simply be to produce a person in our own (adult) image. The child's experiments on the world, mistaking what it has provided in the act of play, both reveals the limits of that world and makes other worlds possible. The error of childplay is thus a productive noise, a 'cacography' (Serres, 1982b, p. 66; 'bad' [caco-] 'writing' [-graphy]) to the orthography of the world as they find it. This way of thinking may be entirely elusive to parents or community, likewise to government bodies or policy units, but it enables us to grasp the function of a technological field in which learning very obviously takes place and to develop a creative capacity in children—to mis-take the world and thereby recreate it—which updates the artistic creativity in media like pottery, painting, print-making and poetry of Richardson's classroom.

Updating Richardson without falling into hagiography suggests the strong need for theory in educational policy, if policy is not simply to be informed by what parents want or what incoming governments, as a result, think is good for children. Because what is popular is not necessarily good, there must a space for theory, and a separation of theory and policy and of educational good from the tools of its measure. Otherwise, the history of educational theory is indeed unnecessary for progressive education, as Richardson evidently thought. His strongly a- or anti-theoretical methodology—his unwillingness to frame his ideas in principles—has the unwelcome effect of

permitting policy to override experiment, which effect he objected to and from which he suffered. And it plays into the anti-intellectualism of a making/doing (and making-do) settler culture and the prevalent idea that New Zealand is a natural playground for children, on which idea the made-over world of adult New Zealanders is predicated. Without theory, his work is all too easily captured by a naïve New World narrative of nature, progress and freedom that we should by now be well wary of embracing in ‘new’ countries like ours. Don’t we know that ‘nature’ is historically constructed—circumscribed, sign-posted, re-created in the form of recreational areas—and that it is confused with our ‘nature’ in the act of producing ‘Kiwis’? The hybrid tyre-child, as much stoat as kiwi, tells us something about this mis-taking of country, recalling the conditions of its Māori mis-giving, and tells us, too, that settlement is a pedagogical exercise: education properly nurtures citizens, but it does us all a disservice if it doesn’t enable us to think about who we are, where we are, and what has made us, or better, of what we are made.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### Notes

1. For Foucault (1988, p. 18), there are four such technologies: of production, signification, domination (power) and the subjectification (self). Technologies of production allow us ‘to produce, transform, or manipulate things’, while technologies of signification allow us ‘to use signs, meanings [or] symbols’ (the former are native to science; the latter, to linguistics).
2. For a nuanced account of Haraway’s diffractive method, see Barad, 2007, pp. 71–94 (chapter 2). Barad (2007, p. 71) defines diffraction as ‘the methodological approach ... of reading insights through one another [here: ours and Richardson’s] in attending to and responding to the details and specificities of relations of difference and how they matter’, on the model of the patterns of interference that occur when a wave encounters an obstacle. For diffraction as method of educational inquiry, see Gough, 1994.
3. For the Parkway urban educational experiment of this name in Philadelphia in the late 1960s, see Greenberg & Roush, 1970.
4. Hardy’s actual phrase is ‘natural occupancy’, by which she means the way settlers distance themselves from their role as invasive colonists to become ‘natural settlers’ by ‘going native’—or, in Richardson’s case, allowing nature to transform or ‘naturalise’, them.
5. For the parasite as the ‘differential operator of change’ that ‘excites the state of the system: its state of equilibrium (homeostasis [equilibrium]), the present state of its exchanges and circulations, the equilibrium of its evolution (homeorrhesis [steady flow]), its thermal state, and its informational state’, see Serres, 1982a, p. 196.
6. For the role of *mathesis* in modernity, a deference to that which is calculable in advance, or ‘always-already-known’ (*ta mathémata*), see Heidegger, 2002, pp. 56–61.

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