

Experimenting Within an Education Community

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ABSTRACT

Elwyn Richardson's experimental approach to teaching and learning and Oruaiti was officially sanctioned, but the history of education in Aotearoa/New Zealand shows that teachers have been typically conformist. In this article, I suggest that positivist paradigms from the industrial age continue to shape classroom teaching, partly because of norms of individualism, and partly because neoliberal understandings have become central in the functioning of our schools and society. Teaching is an activity that promotes the ethics of a community or society by promulgating some ideas and marginalising others. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, many of our students struggle with the collective orientation of their community traditions and the societal emphasis on individualism. Modernist beliefs in social progress through technology still permeate education policy. Promoting communitarian understandings requires more open-ended approaches to teaching such as Richardson demonstrated. With digital technologies gaining progressively greater influence in schools, the opportunities for social connectedness have been enhanced alongside an increasing emphasis on individual devices. This article briefly explores interconnections between experimentation, context and community.

KEYWORDS

community, context, conformity, experiment, practice, technology

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Introduction

Acknowledging Elwyn Richardson's contributions to shaping a culture of inquiry in education invites us to compare the education culture of his time with our own. Current approaches to inquiry-focused pedagogy (Aitken & Sinnema, 2008; Golding, 2013) endorse using student experience as a starting point for building deeper understandings as well as connecting with the experience of others. In this article, I argue that Richardson's approach to his teaching, as described in his writing and his reflections (MacDonald, 2010; Richardson, 2001, 2012), provides an exemplar of effectively using student experience not only as an entry point to inquiry learning, but also as an appropriate choice of pedagogy. I also posit that his methods of teaching showed that he was comfortable with complexity, resisting pre-judgement while maintaining an open-ended inquiry approach.

I am persuaded that it was his own childhood learning experiences that inspired Richardson to adopt these approaches. Moreover, I suggest that his willingness, indeed his commitment to experimentation, which is what drew him to the sole-charge teaching position, is also what proved the defining factor that won him approval to deviate from the norm of an instructional mode of teaching. As part of the agreement for his school to have experimental status, Richardson agreed to documenting his praxis, and the resulting books later influenced changes in official policy. That is one lesson that can be taken from Richardson's example: teachers who engage with their students

in distinctive ways, rather than conforming to whatever are the practice norms of the time, represent the possibility of emergent practice.

Richardson also demonstrated strong social awareness of the impact of his teaching approaches to his students and their engagement with their learning. I suggest that such approaches represented the foundation of his child-centred pedagogy, and that current concerns with disappointing outcomes for Māori and Pasifika students could be addressed by an equivalent paradigm shift, with the focus shifting to learning through connectedness rather than individuals in isolation.

I also propose the idea that *best practice* represents an over-simplification, connoting simple cause-and-effect discourses which are not well suited to the complexity of teaching in digitally connected environments. Conformity is one of the consequences at the expense of creativity. Richardson's example illustrates the benefits of official support for teacher experimentation and research.

The Influence of Prior Experiences on Ideas and Values in Teaching

Richardson's appointment, early in his teaching career, as a sole-charge teacher at the remote Northland school of Oruaiti gave him the opportunity to put into practice the methods that formed the basis of his own learning in his early years. At Oruaiti, he questioned his own assumptions just as much as he resisted what was normal teaching practice elsewhere.

By the time that pottery had been established I had observed enough of the children's manner of work to know that I could learn much from them and that any preconceived ideas I had of the way in which their expression would develop were likely to lead me astray. (Richardson, 2012, p. 35)

By resisting the notion that as an adult and a teacher he should automatically know what was right for his students, Richardson demonstrated that he was willing to remain open to seeing teaching as a complex activity rather than simply something structured by a curriculum, sequenced and ordered by the teacher's following set guidelines. In resisting such a closed conceptualisation of knowledge and learning, he was able to create the opportunities for his students to develop a curiosity about the natural world, encouraging them to observe patterns and to make connections in thinking about what they noticed. He taught them to experiment, not with fixed procedures or using standardised methods, but by noticing what happened when they used different kinds of clay for their pottery, or different ways to combine words in their written expression. In doing so, Richardson strove to develop their awareness of their thinking as well as of their environment.

Throughout his time at Oruaiti, Richardson made full use of the surrounding environment in his teaching. He frequently took his students outdoors to observe natural features directly so as to both concretise and contextualise their learning. In what he called *rambles* through the countryside, Richardson and his students 'studied things as we came upon them' (Richardson, 2012, p. 165), enjoying an open-ended, unstructured approach to learning. That was one of the things that made his child-centred teaching experiment at Oruaiti notable. His unstructured approach to learning was based on a dynamic understanding of valuing, where the

first recollection I have of the emergence of a sense of values was in the appreciation and then the use of clay itself as a material ... that clay could be *used* to the full value of its plastic and textural quality. (Richardson, 2012, p. 205)

The physicality of the learning context was uncontrived, and judgements were made spontaneously throughout the learning process, rather than being reserved for the assessment of completed outcomes. Informality and curiosity typified Richardson's experiential approach to teaching, and though he was troubled by the effects he noticed from formal approaches to instruction, he was equally unsettled when his alternative approaches did not produce the outcomes he expected.

At the beginning of my attempts to bring out creative thinking I was worried because the work appeared so much poorer than the writings the children had produced when I was using formal methods of teaching. But after only a few weeks I felt sure that the more creative methods produced better work than I could have obtained from a more formal approach. (Richardson, 2012, p. 76)

The conviction that compelled Richardson to continue to develop the experiential basis of his teaching was underpinned by his respect for the students—a clear contrast to his own negative experiences as a boarder at Dilworth school in Auckland that started when he was aged 8 and continued until he was 14. ‘Oruaiti was a gift to me, I always felt that after Dilworth and the atrocious treatment I received’ (MacDonald, 2010, p. 176). The impacts of his own schooling served to motivate him to adopt a more caring and compassionate approach to his Oruaiti students. This was demonstrated right at the beginning of his time at the school, when he made a performance of burning the leather strap with which teachers were expected to discipline the children (MacDonald, 2010).

Richardson readily acknowledged that his early learning experiences, and the views that coalesced as a result, were shaped by his first teacher who appeared in the family context and insularity of his farm upbringing on Waiheke Island. In those early years of his childhood, Waiheke Island was far more isolated from Auckland than it is today. The 50 km by ferry to the city imposed a particular quality of remoteness. The dairy farm that was his home provided a solitary upbringing for him, proving to be a lasting influence on his later life. Richardson’s teaching practice developed from the convictions and assumptions that learning was anchored in personal involvement and activity, aligning with his own experiences. The personal mentor of his early years was Wal, apparently ‘a graduate of Oxford University with a Masters degree in zoology’ (MacDonald, 2010, p. 170), who came to live with the family. Wal’s keen interest in observation hugely influenced Richardson’s later approaches to his teaching. Richardson recalled that ‘[Wal] in his way set up my personal scientific “attitude” and methodology as I applied it to my kids’ (MacDonald, 2010, p. 175). Although Wal’s approach was essentially scientific, it was not abstract, formal or structured, but rather was typified by curiosity and questioning.

After more than 70 years I am not entirely sure how much I learnt from Wal, my first teacher, or what was developed or found out at Oruaiti as I set about teaching children to enjoy, be absorbed and succeed in reading. I feel sure that Wal provided the basis of the approach which I developed at my school. (Richardson, 2001, p. 4)

In essence, Richardson’s teaching was based on what we might now call an inquiry approach, asking questions of his students rather than answering them (MacDonald, 2010). His was the work of what Kincheloe and McLaren (2008) describe as a *bricoleur*, using whatever materials were at hand and acknowledging the children’s perspectives as well as the significance of context in their learning. Yet he did not consider that the ‘discovery approach’ (MacDonald, 2010, p. 36) promulgated in the science syllabus was central to his teaching. Rather, he argued that he ‘set out to construct a humane, caring, mini society’ (MacDonald, 2010, p. 239). In this, perhaps, he represented the essence of the humanist tradition which was included in the school syllabus of 1929, later promulgated for Maōri children in Native schools (Fletcher, 1947). To that extent, his teaching, the approach which was officially sanctioned, aligned with the spirit of the times.

Equity and Social Justice

Humanist traditions that framed Richardson’s thinking continue to influence current education policy. Given the problems arising from child poverty and social inequalities (OECD, 2011, 2014), today’s ethical challenge for educators might to sustain hope for their students and for each other. It has been argued that ‘practicing reflection is one of our most active means of emerging from the globalization of capital, the alienation of social systems from the environment, and the enframing of technology’ (Devine & Irwin, 2006, pp. 22–23), but reflection alone is not enough. In twenty-first

century schools of Aotearoa/New Zealand, discourses of equity and social justice contend with pressures to foster talent or measure success using standardised assessments, and to determine, for example, who should qualify for access to higher education. Interestingly, Richardson observed that his 'measure of the relative success of each child placed the children of lower intelligence in a position of lower privilege and importance' (Richardson, 2012, p. 206), noticing those ideas of entitlement and deservingness swayed his thinking. While such assumptions retain their sway, ideals of equality of opportunity articulated in Richardson's time (Mason, 1945) remain out of reach.

Renwick (1986) noted that the 'social ideal of desert ... influenced very deeply the expectations that parents, teachers and children have come to have of the education system itself. Schools are required ... to be sorting and selecting agencies' (p. 27). Of course, the processes of differentiation began much earlier with different provisions for schooling Māori and Pākehā when New Zealand was still a Crown Colony. Certainly, Governor Grey's intention to 'civilise the natives' (Cumming & Cumming, 1978, p. 16) was to deliberately and directly reduce the influence of *iwi* (Māori tribal groupings) and *hapu* (Māori clans with a common ancestor). That 'civilising' process saw most of the Crown Colony education ordinances enacted to change Māori and Pasifika practices through the teaching of the English language in particular. It has been argued (Cumming & Cumming, 1978; Renwick, 1986) that ideas of utilitarianism (Bentham, 1838), represented by an acceptance of marginalising minorities, also strongly influenced the nature and style of public education from its inception in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Moreover, the paradigms of rationalism and empiricism found in the fundamental epistemologies of the scientific method, coupled with industrial society as the *de facto* standard for understanding civilisation, meant that alternative approaches such as educating for social diversity were pushed to the margins. Indigenous communitarian perspectives have had to contend with Western ideologies ever since.

Nevertheless, awareness of communitarian perspectives has not been extinguished, as shown in the recent observation by Robinson, Hohepa, and Lloyd (2009) that, for Māori, '[f]or a person to retain a leadership position, *success for the group*, whether *whānau*, *hapū*, or *iwi*,¹ was a requisite' (p. 69, my emphasis). This recognises the importance of collective ways of being for Māori, if not for others, and how individuals are expected to be jointly responsible for the progress of the group. It does not begin to address the influence of the prevailing paradigms of schooling. Nor does it encourage teachers to debate issues of equity and privilege, as Richardson did, as they apply to those for whom individualistic approaches represent a cultural mismatch. For such students, *equality of opportunity*, a goal rated half a century ago as unattainable due to the 'socio-economic conditions' (Currie, 1962, p. 417), remains out of reach. The consequence for teachers is having to choose either to ignore communitarian cultural traditions or to reframe educational success to fit with the individualistic norms of educational discourses.

Of Participation and Collaboration, Individuality and Community

Communitarian understandings remain effectively marginalised in our society where more than 40% of school-aged young people are identified as belonging to non-Western traditions (New Zealand Government, 2014). In Aotearoa/New Zealand, even the *Key Competencies* of our current national curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) are to be understood from an individualistic perspective, apparently unmindful of the 'intellectual histories' (Devine, 2013, p. 60) of community-oriented alternatives. Although cultural diversity and inclusion are listed among the curriculum principles (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 9), the language used implies that these principles are to be understood from the viewpoint of an individual psychology rather than education praxis crafted around collective understandings.

If we accept that it is the discourses of community that shape schools, then it may seem paradoxical that Western societies have so strongly emphasised the place of the individual, especially in the provision of education for social cohesiveness. Discourses of individuality are,

however, central to the organisation and functioning of schools. Wittgenstein (2003) uses the word *gemeinsam* (common) to describe community understandings of individual character traits. Distinguishable and distinctive *categories*, including such obvious aspects as ethnicity, gender and physique, are the frame for the understandings that the common language of education affords, yet they *separate* individuals in the process. What is meant by *community* or *collective* is generally expressed from the perspective of aggregations of individuals, maintaining the centrality of individualistic thinking. So while Richardson (2012) noticed that the students were 'establishing each other's individuality as persons' (p. 18), the focus of his noticings included both the interactions and practices of his classroom community that framed that process, and also the individual attributes that these interactions highlighted.

While a pluralistic understanding of community has parallels in the idea of a body comprising many parts, which we describe using words such as 'eyes', 'ears' and 'fingers', and connect with our understandings of 'seeing', 'hearing' and 'touching', it is also much more. A school community overlaps a community of teachers, a geographical community is constrained in ways that an online community avoids, and the concept of community describes aspects of alignment without demanding homogeneity. Since concepts are fluid, we always depend on context to create meaning from words, so it is important to query our understanding of the term *community*: '[t]he question is: "In what sort of context does it occur?"' (Wittgenstein, 2003, p. 161). Our social institutions, such as schools, shape the meanings of our interactions simply by being contextual elements that develop our understandings. While Peters and Marshall (1996) caution against 'a notion of social self (one anchored in community)' (p. 154) for being 'universalistic' and 'utopian', their concern is with the way neoliberal politics have appropriated the concept and modified it while developing policies that are assimilative. However, conceptions of self can acknowledge connectedness and interdependence at least as much as separateness and distinctiveness. Sidelining communitarian ontologies and epistemologies effectively condemns to the margins those who live by such understandings. In Aotearoa/New Zealand particularly, this represents lost opportunities, not only for Māori or Pasifika, but also for Pākehā, who might otherwise enrich their worldview by accessing alternate perspectives based on connectedness.

I argue that context is also connection oriented. Many of the most important links between ideas and understandings are those carried forward from the past. Richardson (2012) found that in drama lessons his students unknowingly revealed how they were making meaning from home and school experiences, even as he found himself judging 'the relative "shallowness" of the children's grasp of reality in relation to many social experiences' (p. 151). He also described his own learning, making meaning from attending to assumptions he made that did not align with his teaching experiences, writing that '[m]uch of the teaching that I thought assisted expression was not effective because I did not at first know how to discriminate between good and bad work' (Richardson, 2012, p. 206). Teaching is a connection-oriented activity. Teaching judgements are based on prior experiences.

Education Experimentation in Context

The rituals of Richardson's childhood where books and storytelling combined with his free-ranging explorations of the countryside, together with Wal's reflective questioning, developed in him habits of observing and wondering. The teaching approaches he adopted became clearly aligned with 'the scientific method' (Richardson, 2012, p. 168) that was one of the bases for his teaching, congruent with his own experiences of learning as a child. In this, we can see evidence of his locatedness within the scientific traditions of observations, an orientation to discovering 'evidence', categorisation, deductive logic. It is worth noting, however, that '[by] the time Richardson arrived at Oruaiti, *progressive ideals* had long been a part of the official rhetoric of the Department of Education' (Boyask, McPhail, Kaur, & O'Connell, 2008, p. 24, emphasis mine). It is therefore not surprising that

Richardson was given approval for his 'experiment' at Oruaiti—it aligned with the discourses that were central to the education community which represented the context for his approach.

Elwyn Richardson's experimental approach to teaching and learning at Oruaiti was officially sanctioned, but needs to be considered in its context, for as Wittgenstein observed, '... an experiment is a specific action in a particular context' (2003, p. 161). Teachers and schools are shaped by the ideas that are demonstrated in their traditions, as well as by their responses to new influences and pressures making an impact on their communities. It has been noted that the 'history of the New Zealand education system often reveals a spirit of experimentation in which the visions of experimental educators were shaped by the debates and cultural understandings of the times' (Boyask et al., 2008, p. 23). Richardson did not have to contend with the same constraints and demands that are made on teachers and schools today, but he had an equivalent in the form of school inspectors, some of whom did not understand or approve of his departure from normal teaching approaches (MacDonald, 2010). This was recognised by Beeby, who visited Oruaiti and subsequently arranged that inspectors reviewing Richardson's work 'would report directly to Beeby' (MacDonald, 2010, p. 183), enabling him to continue 'to experiment with "permissive education"' (MacDonald, 2010, p. 183).

Expectations, Compliance and Conformity

In contrast to Richardson's situation, teachers in today's schools find themselves much more under the gaze of the wider community, particularly since legislation provided for each school to be self-managing with its Board of Trustees being accountable (*Education Act 1989*, 1989, p. 182 §93). Under this legislation, schools became subject to review by ERO—the Education Review Office (*Education Act 1989* 1989, p. 636 §325), exposing not only teachers but also Boards of Trustees to appraisal and approval or censure. Although the Act was intended to increase local control on schools by their communities, ERO has functioned as a normative force promoting conformity through demands for compliance with National Education Guidelines (NEGs) and National Administration Guidelines (NAGs), even as they 'acknowledge a worrying tendency for schools to become more conservative as a result of consumer pressure' (Vaughan, 2001, p. 98). Accordingly, experimentation in teaching approaches remains at the margins, constrained by the need for approval from the wider community.

Even the physical classroom contexts influence pedagogy. Traditional panoptical classroom seating arrangements expect teachers to assume a role as an all-seeing controller of classroom interactions. Such classroom designs have seen students learn under the 'gaze' of their teachers (Landahl, 2013) for decades. However, in recent years teachers have also been constrained by the demands for ongoing assessments, both in terms of National Standards at primary schools and NCEA requirements at the higher levels of secondary schools. Discourses of individual assessment and appraisal exert pressures on teachers and students alike, promoting compliance to the wider education community. Ideas about leadership and school outcomes have been predicated on a premise of academic attainment where 'serious intellectual activity' (Robinson et al., 2009, p. 73) is strongly connected to discourses of independent individual effort and responsibility, despite an acceptance that 'the students shape the leadership and the leaders shape the students' (p. 73) in jointly constructing a school culture.

The core values and beliefs of the school community necessarily influence teacher positioning and praxis. Many parents, communities and school leaders expect teachers to maintain the traditions of local schooling, unaware of the influence of their tacit assumptions. Teachers may be less challenged to inquire deeply into their own practice if they feel closely aligned with the central discourses of their school and their colleagues. In such contexts, dissonance can prove desirable as a stimulus to questioning and debate, or at least engagement with issues, while harmony provides no such motivation. Dissonance may of course be with the wider education system, as when

Richardson, aware that he too was under the 'gaze' of the education inspectors, acknowledged feeling 'worried' (2012, p. 76), about the quality of results from his attempts to nurture creativity as he judged his efforts in comparison to the normally expected formal approaches toward instruction. The collaborative style of his child-centred classroom arrangements and teaching approaches allowed him to avoid many of the panoptical behavioural norms, but not the subtle influence of comparisons. However, Richardson's willingness to take risks with his child-centred teaching approaches was also empowering for him, for '[a]ny classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process' (Hooks, 1994, p. 21).

In the broader historical context over many years, however, most teachers and schools in Aotearoa/New Zealand have been conformist rather than creative. Moreover, I submit that normative discourses of compliance remain central in both forming and maintaining the professional identities of teachers under a panoptical oversight, despite, or even because of, the diversity apparent in both recent and current alternative schooling projects. On the one hand, such diversity represents a range of creative approaches to the shaping of new pedagogies in changing contexts of schooling. On the other hand, that diversity means that few initiatives gain the momentum or critical mass needed to modify the dominant discourses.

Best Practice and Best Evidence: Influences from the Centre

In our recent past, meta-analyses of available research have been conducted for the Ministry of Education as *Best Evidence Synthesis Iterations* (for example: Alton-Lee, 2003; Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003; Robinson et al., 2009; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007). The intention of such studies is to promulgate principles of *best practice* in schools. There is a danger, however, that such principles may influence schools and teachers to disregard contextual factors in favour of agreed expectations to guide their classroom performances. Busy teachers, unaware of the normative aspects of 'modern technologies of power' (Foucault, 2008, p. 152), may be tempted to adopt rubrics of practice without aligning such rubrics with the contextual elements and interactions within their classrooms. Paying insufficient attention to adapting teaching practice when integrating *best practice* principles may serve to promote second-best praxis instead. Even the terminology used can be problematic. *Best practice* is suitable for scenarios involving predictable cause-and-effect relationships. However, complex situations (Snowden, 2011), where emergent practice such as Richardson's approaches are more suitable, demand a different orientation to learning. Similar arguments apply to the curiosity required to underpin *teaching-as-inquiry*, which expects of teachers that they more closely attend to the language they use in the classroom and focus their students' attention on 'learning goals' rather than 'performance goals' (Aitken & Sinnema, 2008, p. 104). Such attention to language demands alignment between teacher expectations and classroom discourses, because a school emphasis on measurable outcomes such as NCEA credits creates a dissonance with inquiry, and such dissonance then serves to reinforce the notion that learning is subservient to performance. That is not the intention of the inquiry process.

Almost half a century ago, Shallcrass (1967) observed that '[o]ne of the problems about formal education is its conservative nature' (p. 11), for conservatism and creativity do not easily meld. Conservative approaches to school organisation and functioning remain evident even in the causal assumptions that underpin evidence-based practice and research, assumptions based on scientific conventions of cause-and-effect being applied to social settings. Yet teaching does not easily fit with such positivist models, being essentially a 'moral practice' (Biesta, 2007, p. 10) located in a community context of values, beliefs and traditions. Centralising factors tend to position teachers as education technologists supporting school traditions rather than liberal agents attempting to facilitate learning in fluid, complex, connected contexts.

Outliers—Experimental Approaches in Today’s Contexts

Richardson’s approach was part of a dynamic which only partially succeeded in changing the paradigms of education. Our assumptions about schooling, the ways in which we think about education and learning and the values we place on the different disciplines, have all been shaped by an industrial age worldview influenced by scientific paradigms (Robinson, 2001). Teachers and schools must pay attention to the contextual factors implicit in the expectations of the wider community even as they follow *best practice* recommendations (such as Aitken & Sinnema, 2008; Robinson et al., 2009; Timperley et al., 2007). What Tylor (1871) remarked on so long ago as the ‘uniformity which so largely pervades civilization’ (p. 1), continues to be supported by the influence of unchallenged assumptions and traditions, many of which can be traced as far back as the practices and purposes of schooling discussed by Plato and Aristotle (Kandel, 1938). Digital technologies now make possible a much greater variety of ways in which teachers and schools can develop approaches to curriculum and schooling framed by discourses that are more locally appropriate, so there is space to wonder how teaching might be positioned differently in response to the dominance of centralising, normative practices. Cope and Kalantzis (2013) ask: ‘how do we assess learning in the era of collaborative intelligence and social knowledge media?’ (p. 329). If individualising discourses are implicated in increasing not only social inequalities, but also conformity rather than creativity, we might well ask what alternative approaches may make possible.

Modernity placed individual rationality at the centre with a hope of scientific progress and emancipation (Kvale, 1992), and this positioning continues into our digital world, albeit with different views of social connectedness. Schooling as a community practice brings for teachers new challenges to pedagogical thinking. Integrating twenty-first century digital technologies and connecting with social media may appear to combine a community orientation with a child-centred curriculum, but changing from an experiential frame of reference to virtual online scenarios requires that teachers adapt their perspectives. Unfortunately, ‘teachers are not necessarily equipped to develop information literate students who are lifelong learners’ (Probert, 2011, p. 155), and teachers need access to those who do have such understandings. The alternative is to experiment, as Richardson did. The problem with experimentation is that ideas of *best practice* rather than *emergent practice* remain positioned at the centre, and teachers need a supportive community in which to grow their own contextual approaches to teaching and learning. Neoliberal ideologies have, meanwhile, also influenced the nature of how education is provided, arguably to the detriment of a strong sense of community (Peters & Marshall, 1996). Teachers wanting to experiment need approval and support, seldom available in the context of school hierarchies. In my view, this is because school leaders, being central in the functioning of their institutions, are often poorly positioned to support pedagogies at the margins. The initial isolation as a sole-charge teacher, and later official experimental status with high-level support, enabled Richardson to work in the relative absence of such pressures.

Implications

Richardson’s work with the students in his care serves as an example of what is possible with a good relationship between teachers and their students, as identified in many research studies (e.g. Bishop, Ladwig, & Berryman, 2014; Cooper, Allen, & Bettez, 2009; Golding, 2013; Hattie, 2014). Richardson’s teaching illustrated the importance of context, for by the time Beeby gave approval for the Oruaiti experiment, many of the more progressive ideas promoted at the 1937 NEF (*New Education Fellowship*) Conference had become an accepted part of what Fraser (1938) referred to as an ‘educational renaissance’ (p. ix). Indeed, Beeby’s decision as Director of Education to grant Oruaiti School experimental status was because Richardson’s work outside the formal syllabus aligned with Beeby’s own views of the need for teachers to break out of the ‘bounds of the set curriculum’ (MacDonald, 2010, p. 183).

If further creative approaches to schooling in Aotearoa/New Zealand are to escape the current constraints of conformist discourses and education traditions, then similar opportunities to experiment must be supported. Richardson's efforts could not have continued without official sanction, as some inspectors clearly disapproved of his deviations from the set syllabus (MacDonald, 2010). However, over time, and following the publication of his books, the benefits of such approval became visible. For creative teaching approaches to flourish in the future, there needs to be sufficient endorsement for such experimental endeavours, similar to the endorsement Richardson received from Beeby. With such support new and, hopefully, effective approaches to pedagogy in complex spaces can be found. Without it, creative teaching may remain at the margins.

Conclusion

A strong sense of participation, of community, and of collaboration is not only desirable, but essential to do justice to New Zealand's multicultural education context. These aspects are found more towards the margins than a neoliberal centre, more in community than isolation, more in experimentation than tradition. To deliver such divergent modes of teaching and learning, policy-makers need to engage more with teachers at the margins and explore the edges of such teachers' understandings and praxis. That is what Beeby achieved by approving Richardson's experiment—the documentation of an alternative. The lesson offered by Elwyn Richardson's example is that teachers themselves can provide the research evidence needed by policy-makers—a possible template for future developments.

Notes on contributor

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Note

1. In Māori, *whānau* refers to an extended family group, *hapū* to a larger kinship grouping, and *iwi* to a tribal community (Moorfield, 2011).

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