

Reflections on Elwyn Richardson Commemoration

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ABSTRACT

This article was written as the final presentation to be delivered at our day of reflection on the educational work of Elwyn Richardson. As such, the tone is somewhat different to that which is usual for this journal, but I elect to leave it substantially the same as it was when delivered. I address first the question of what we do when we mourn or remember someone like Elwyn Richardson, who made an important contribution to New Zealand's educational history. Then I turn to a 'whakapapa' or genealogy of progressivist ideas in education in New Zealand, and finally look to where we might take the spirit of these ways of thinking in the future.

KEYWORDS

Elwyn Richardson, Dewey, New Zealand educational history, progressivism

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The Work of Mourning

We have come together to celebrate Elwyn Richardson's life, in one sense, but at the same time we are doing quite different things. We are here in part to pay tribute to a grand educator, and our very judgement that he was a grand educator puts us into a theoretical and political camp and gives the clue to other purposes.

Part of my interest in Elwyn's work is personal; to me he represents a generation of New Zealand schoolteachers imbued, through Beeby, and The Wellington Teachers' College with a particular attitude to education which, for want of a better word we might call 'progressive'. This progressive attitude, and the attitude to knowledge and experience that came with it, owes more to John Dewey than to any other theorist. My father belonged to this generation of teachers: men and women who, while certainly wanting their pupils to be able to take their part in the wider world would have been astonished to hear that their function was to provide added value to human capital in order to enhance the nation's economy. To them, education was above all a public good: something that the country provided to its children because that was the right thing to do and would lead to a better, more humanitarian future. So in this sense, for me, Elwyn Richardson is not so much a person as a sign: a sign of an ethics and a politics of pedagogy which is now almost, but not quite, forgotten. I owe an enormous debt myself to this interest in art and pedagogy. I came to New Zealand as a three-year old. My father had already been here for a year or 18 months, and was a complete stranger. I think he would have remained so except that he—a Liverpool lad who had left school at 14—got the opportunity to enrol in a pressure cooker course at Wellington teachers' College and the world opened up for him. I remember broad- casts of Hiawatha, Shakespearean plays, art exhibitions, music, and most importantly for me, he found a deep interest in pedagogy and the abilities of the child and suddenly I was an object of interest rather than a nuisance in the household.

And we should not forget that Richardson is a sign of a significant number of people who worked in this field of art, imagination and pedagogy, including Jim Allen who has contributed to

this symposium, and others who worked with Richardson and in similar ways. From my own childhood I remember not only my father Jim Devine, but other teachers both in the classroom and out of it, in the Coromandel and Waikato who shared these values—Larry Sibelmann, John and Leslie Shaw, Jim Baxter, Pare Matchitt—people who believed in the educative power of the arts.

The Whakapapa of New Zealand Education

There is another aspect to our purpose—a political aspect: to remind ourselves that education has other functions than the purely economic and instrumental, to remind ourselves of the glorious things we can achieve when teachers use imagination and empathy, when they find the triggers for the child's interest, when they utilise art, and drama, and music not just for their own sake—which is a good purpose in itself—but also as a key to involve the child in other areas of learning, which are perhaps not at first so attractive. For Dewey, the key to learning was not instruction, training in docility, preparation for the factory or developing IT skills—but experience, and finding the richness and educational possibilities in the experiences which capture children's imaginations. This is what Richardson did with art: it is the idea behind the now defunct manual training centres, but also the ideas which earned Sylvia Ashton Warner such credit. Ashton Warner's use of imagery, art, music, story, has much in common with Richardson's practice. Sue Middleton draws attention to the historical context in which Ashton Warner worked: although she liked to think of herself as a lone explorer in the official dark, she was in fact stimulated and encouraged by ideas which came through the Department of Education at the time. Again, Sylvia was a sign, a point of reference, a representation of a wider movement of progressivism. Sue Middleton has written two very good papers, one on the Wellington Teachers' College and one on Ashton Warner's contextual influences (Middleton 1998; Jones and Middleton 2009). I think we run the risk of losing a great deal if we neglect our own educational history: the tendency of university schools of education to neglect the study of educational history means we tend to forget the lives and ideas of these outstanding educators. When this seminar was first suggested we were astounded at how many people did not know of Elwyn Richardson, just as we were encouraged by all those who not only remembered him but knew exactly why he was important and why we should remember him, especially for those marvellously productive years at Oruati. It is not so much that I am worried that without a knowledge of history we are doomed to repeat our past, as that without a knowledge of history we cannot reprise our past in order to influence our future. So unaware of our rich educational history have people become that they think good teachers are born from the egg, and tout the 'authentic teacher', the teacher without historical roots or pedagogic education as a model for policy and teacher education. If we ourselves do not defend the importance of our own educational history it is no wonder our government wants to put untrained teachers into our classrooms.

The term 'progressive' has some unfortunate connotations nowadays. The progressive movement was the educational arm of 'pragmatism' and meant to signal a connection between practice and theory, lived experience and thinking and so on. But 'progressivism' incidentally signals the triumphal belief in progress which has justified the unbridled exploitation of the natural world and may yet lead, in the form of unrestrained capitalism, to the destruction of the environment and ecology on which we depend. We might prefer nowadays an educational ethos which fits more comfortably with a notion of 'steady state' economics and the conservation of the natural world. This might mean, for starters, less focus 'on 'productive'' that is on economically rewarded work and more focus on artistic, personally and socially rewarding work. In such a vision of the future clearly Elwyn Richardson would have an honoured place.

Deleuze and Guattari as Sign of Other Ways of Thinking into the Future

Each generation has to find its own form of resistance. As my father's friend Larry Sibelmann took his students at Whenuakite school to the river to swim when the inspector called, now we must find

other ways of showing that there are imperatives beyond the national standards. Nowadays, if one wishes to resist the narrowness of neoliberalism and human capital theory it is more likely that we would turn to Deleuze and Guattari (e.g. Deleuze and Guattari, 1972, 1980), rather than to Dewey, such is the power of the 'date of publication' in the minds of academics and examiners. There are of course a range of potential choices: any source of ideas that help us to escape the confines of our Cartesian history can be usefully employed. Deleuze and Guattari fulfil some of my current requirements, but they are not the only possibilities.

They reject the isolated, debodied figure of the autonomous chooser who is the hero of neoliberalism, and replace it with a series of images and metaphors which cause us to think afresh about our relationships with one another, with the material world, with art, with history and with our futures. They regard themselves as empirical philosophers because they are interested only in the actual, experienced world, not in any notions of transcendental, including any transcendental notion of knowledge. In their depiction of the relations of people with people, things, animals, they draw on the idea of 'affect': the emotional experience that comes from proximity to the other, whether positive or negative.

There is no possibility here of hiding away in the silo of moneymaking isolation: even the bank account has 'affect'. In destabilising the notion of the individual to that of a nomadic form of being that may take on many forms in a lifetime, in their view of knowledge as rhizomatic rather than as taking the form of truth or the tree of knowledge, and in seeing the process of meaning making as collaborative, a process of territorialising, deterritorialising and reterritorialising¹ as concepts and structures shift, they challenge many of the concepts that educators and the education-related sciences have taken for granted—the nature of the human being, the nature of knowledge, the pre-eminent importance of the human in the world, the significance of the material, above all creating a vision of the world which encourages the development of new and diverse forms of knowledge arising from forces and intensities that may form assemblages without indulging in any of the binaries of mind/body, theory/ practice; material/non-material, human/non-human; that characterise our everyday assumptions.

What interests me about Deleuze and Guattari, in part is that not only are they forms of resistance to neoliberalism, but Deleuze, like Dewey, studied the works of an eighteenth-century philosopher called Spinoza, who himself wrote in reaction to the cold rationality of Immanuel Kant and to Descartes' peculiar decapitation of the human body. So this struggle of respect for relationships, for warmth, for emotion, for the importance of the physical and the arts, as against a reductive form of rationality, self-interest, economics, has been going on for a long time. Unfortunately, con- temporary governments are almost always in favour of the narrow and immediately profitable. By celebrating the life of one of our most notable educators, whose work drew on the worlds of art and music rather than on the worlds of the banks, finance companies and corporations, we engage in revitalising a form of resistance, as each generation must do for itself.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Note

1. Helen May at this conference gave a wonderful example of deterritorialising and reterritorialising knowledge in the child composing music using the letter names of notes on a xylophone—Music? Literacy? Coding?

Notes on contributor

Nesta Devine's family emigrated to New Zealand when she was very young, so she was able to take advantage of the free, universal, and relatively egalitarian education system of New Zealand as she grew up. She has a BA from Otago University, an MA and PhD from Auckland University and a Teaching Diploma from Epsom Secondary Teachers' College. She taught high school students in History, and English for many years, and had something of an obsession with Pacific world views and the welfare of Pacific students. She later studied again at the University of Auckland with Jim Marshall and Michael Peters. Her PhD was a study of Public Choice Theory, an imperialist, proselytising form of economics. Currently she is a professor at Auckland University of Technology, where her main teaching responsibilities are in philosophy of education, the Doctor of Education course and the supervision of PhD students. Email: nesta.devine@aut.ac.nz

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