



Kairaranga Book Review

ELWYN RICHARDSON AND THE EARLY WORLD OF CREATIVE EDUCATION IN NEW ZEALAND

MARGARET MACDONALD

Reviewed by: Jayne Jackson

Elwyn Richardson (1925-2012) was an important figure in New Zealand education. His visionary creative classroom practices, developed between the late 1940's and early 60's in a small rural primary school in Northland, received national and international acclaim after the publication of his book 'In the Early World' in 1964. This book has left an enduring legacy amongst teachers having been reprinted and updated several times, most recently in 2012. Richardson's pedagogies have echoes in contemporary models of best practice that is child-centred, focused on personal inquiry, integration, and creativity, relational and relevant to the learner.

This book is firstly a sensitive biography which explores Richardson's educational influences. MacDonald appears to have a fondness for Richardson as a person and admiration for his educational stance but this is tempered by her skill as a writer as she adopts a more neutral perspective, letting the facts speak for themselves rather than attempting to persuade the reader to hold Richardson in high esteem. Richardson's own publications reveal details of the learning and the artistic, literary and scientific products of his students whereas this book enquires deeper into Richardson's thinking and the development of his personal pedagogies. MacDonald documents his recollections of being an experimental learner and teacher from his early years on Waiheke Island, through a painful time at boarding school, to the evolution of his practice at Oruaiti School and beyond. In crafting this biography, the author drew on existing publications, personal correspondence with Richardson, interviews with Richardson's past pupils, and discussions and observations during what was to be Richardson's last visit to Oruaiti. Despite Richardson's initial reluctance to be interviewed, MacDonald engaged him in extensive correspondence (in excess of 300 letters over a 5 year

period). This primary source will be of interest to educators and historians for years to come.

The second theme of this book is the historical backdrop to Richardson's teaching and writing. MacDonald weaves a narrative that reveals the contemporary landscape of New Zealand educational policy, practice and players. This is further augmented by her discussion of theory from leading international educationalists of that time such as John Dewey. This is a useful inclusion to the book as it helps the reader develop a broader understanding of the context from which Richardson's pedagogies emerged. Richardson himself eschewed the world of theory in favour of contextual reflective practice and actively rejected the labels that others tried to give him. It is somewhat ironic that in this book he is now positioned as a theorist and model educator.

MacDonald draws attention to the centre of Richardson's philosophy which she sees as a deep commitment to respect the learner and build a relationship between teacher and student such that both can benefit through the creation, examination and re-examination of the products of learning. Given that relationships inside the classroom were pivotal to his teaching approach, it seems anomalous that this biography does not include material regarding the relationships Richardson had with his own family and friends. At the end of this book, I was left wondering about Richardson's personal life and how this may have influenced him as an educator. I wanted a glimpse of Richardson as an ordinary person, not only as an educational hero.

Despite Richardson's teaching being more than 60 years old and set in a classroom without modern technology, many resources, and fast access to information via the internet, this book is a reminder that some classroom dilemmas have been unresolved for a long time. For example, MacDonald shares that Richardson saw integration as not just a way of dealing with the demands of a full curriculum but as an essential tool for learning as each discipline offers its own unique perspective on a subject. In turn, these varied viewpoints provide access to rich and varied

learning opportunities. Richardson also grappled with other topics of current relevance including parent engagement, child-centred learning and peer assessment.

This book provides a refreshing contrast to our current educational climate of neoliberalism. It stands as a reminder that education can be and is about so much more than commodification, a means to an end and test results. I highly recommend MacDonald's book for classroom teachers who are looking for inspiration and to think critically about their own practice. This book is an opportunity to refocus teacher priorities on the joys of teaching and learning. As a profession, we should acknowledge the gift that education can be to both student and teacher.

REVIEWER PROFILE

Dr Jayne Jackson is a lecturer at Massey University, she currently co-ordinates the Graduate Diploma of Teaching (Primary) at the Albany campus. Jayne's background is in primary teaching. Her research interests are in situated literacy and the roles families play in supporting the development of learning in literacy.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL DATA

Title: Elwyn Richardson and the early world of creative education in New Zealand

Author: Margaret MacDonald

Publication Date: 2016

Price: \$60.00 approx.

Publisher: NZCER Press

ISBN: 978-1-927231-56-2