

Book Review

## **Elwyn Richardson and the early world of creative education in New Zealand**

### **by Margaret MacDonald**

**Fiona Woodgate** | *New Zealand Tertiary College*

---

Elwyn Richardson (1925-2012) is recognised within educational circles as a visionary educator who made a significant contribution to education in New Zealand. Richardson's book published in 1964 'In the Early World' detailing his time working with the children and families of Oruaiti School in the far North of New Zealand received national and international acclaim.

Through his experiences and experimentation from 1949 – 1962 in the small rural school in the far North, Richardson developed a philosophy and pedagogy of teaching that has influenced and fascinated the education sector for decades. In this account of Richardson's life and work, MacDonald sensitively articulates the story of how Richardson developed his philosophy of teaching and the social and political context of the time. MacDonald's telling of this story is informed by both her extensive communication with Richardson and research into the historical context of education in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

In this biographical narrative, MacDonald has two main focuses – the educational context of the time and the popular pedagogical theories, and Richardson's development of his own theory of integration which became the underpinning principle of his teaching practice and experimentation with the children, families and community at Oruaiti School.

In this book MacDonald provides an insight into Richardson's early life and childhood and the experiences that influenced his teaching practices and philosophy. MacDonald's sensitive retelling of Richardson's early years growing up as the second son of farmers on an isolated Waiheke Island quickly paints a picture of how Richardson's early learning and explorations of his home developed an interest and passion for the world around him. As a reader with an early childhood education background I could immediately make correlations between the experiences that MacDonald detailed and an approach to learning that connects closely to an early childhood curriculum where children have opportunities to explore and develop their own working theories.

Although this book is predominately about Richardson and his work at Oruaiti, a documentation of the history of educational reform in New Zealand from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century and the philosophies that underpinned the changes is also detailed, providing context to the times within which Richardson's exploration into teaching and learning took place. This account of the push for reform and change led by progressive educationalists including Clarence Beeby, the Director of Education from 1940, the cyclical nature of education reform in this country and education's susceptibility to fads is fascinating reading.

Through MacDonald's retelling of Richardson's investigation into learning at Oruaiti School a clear picture of the importance that Richardson placed upon ensuring that learning was relevant to children, child-centred and purposeful leaves the reader with encouragement and inspiration for the possibilities of creating unique curricula based upon the socio-cultural context of children, their prior knowledge, families and environment. Richardson's pedagogical theory of integration, which is explained within the book sits well within a modern socio-cultural curriculum and assessment philosophy. Strong correlations between Richardson's ideas and the ideal implementation of Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017), curriculum that is purposeful, holistic and moulded to fit the needs and interests of the child can be

## Book Review

made for early childhood teachers and for teachers within the greater education context. Within a context of push down education and national standards the stories told within this book provide the reader with enthusiasm to implement curriculum that feeds children's natural curiosity and desire to learn and would be a valuable resource for all teachers.

## Reference

MacDonald, M. (2016). *Elwyn Richardson and the early world of creative education in New Zealand*. Wellington: New Zealand: NZCER Press