

# ATTACK!

104

THROUGH THE HOLISTIC CURRICULUM  
NETWORKONNET for an holistic curriculum and a responsive education system  
Kelvin Smythe Editor: Allan Alach

Welcome to **ATTACK!** a two-page occasional publication. Most of **ATTACK!** will be concerned with the holistic curriculum which, if acted on, is a fundamental way to undermine the present undemocratic education system. Don't be discouraged if opportunities to teach holistically are limited, do your best, be a guardian, and act as a witness to this culturally significant and inspiring way of teaching and learning. **ATTACK!** is a partner to <https://networkonnet.wordpress.com>

## **Attack! 104 In the Early World: Elwyn Richardson**



### **Genius with children: sometimes awkward and ungenerous with the outside world**

#### **Introduction to a series of 11 postings: Written in 2007 as the first postings on networkonnet**

There will be a series of postings on Elwyn Richardson with the purpose of confirming, reacquainting, or introducing, our primary school heritage. Primary school teachers do not share a set of values and associated teaching practices as cohesively as they once did. There are a number of reasons for this including the multiplicity of teacher education institutions; the university control of many of these (and the resulting understandable focus on research-developed knowledge); the considerable diminution in the number of national and regional in-service courses; the movement away from the curriculum by NZEI; ideological rifts such as the place of electronics in pedagogy, or the debate about phonics as against the established eclectic approach; the various lengths of teacher-training courses and styles of taking them (online courses, for instance); the shift in attention, as a result of *Tomorrow's Schools*, away from the curriculum; the considerable growth in management courses; the resort to American education trends (Gardner, Dunn and Dunn) by teachers as a result of alienation from aspects of the education system; and parental control of principal appointments and the populism that occurs as contenders jockey for preferment.

I consider Richardson a genius with children, exquisite in his sensitivity and insights, but sometimes awkward and ungenerous in his dealings with the outside world, though tolerable if in command and unchallenged.

The postings will argue that Richardson is best considered on the basis of his first publication *In the Early World* because his second major publication – *Into the Further World* – is derivative and does not add much, and his other pamphlet-type publications which he clumsily typeset and printed, are repetitive, and lacking in discipline and clarity. He says in his Valedictum in *Into the Further World* that after *In the Early World* he did not think he 'would turn to write again, no matter how pressing I found the need to record at least something of my theory.' That initial impulse was probably correct because his attempts to explain himself in this later publication and education in general, are unconvincing. I recommend that teachers read for themselves *In the Early World*, Richardson's account of what went on over 13 years in the 1950s and '60s in the small country school of Oruaiti by the main road between Kaeo and Mangonui. The book is widely available because it was reprinted in 2001 by the Council for Educational Research (and been reprinted again just recently). Teachers will take many different things from the book according to what

they bring to it, but no teacher who reads it will be unaffected. I will argue that this book, for all the reservations and qualifications that could be made about it, should be central to professional development courses at teachers colleges. The main voice in the postings will be Richardson's as we share in the drama of his classroom epiphanies and surpassing teaching subtleties. Overall, the postings should be seen as more a celebration of who we are as primary teachers, rather than a critique. However, there will be one caution about using Richardson's classroom practice as a model for what teachers will recognise as based on the developmental philosophy. The dominance in his teaching of the relationship between the immediate environment and artistic and written expression, while legitimate and highly attractive, should not define exclusively what developmental is.

Expressing natural life truthfully will inevitably be an important part of all developmental classrooms but the important point to take from the process Richardson describes is not just the emphasis on the natural environment, but the advantage to children's learning, any children's learning, in establishing a foundation of emotional involvement, resulting from intense, rigorous experience. It could, for instance, be mathematics, physical education, or particular strands in science such as chemistry, physics, outer space. I can imagine, for instance, an insightful teacher of mathematics consistently generating classroom excitement by getting children to see mathematics everywhere – in prehistory, history, the present social world, nature, the various parts of science, technology, literature, art, sport, dance, board games – everywhere. Then, devising imaginative ways for children to express what they discover. The scrupulous observation Richardson taught children to direct toward nature could, under the tutelage of an inspired mathematics teacher, be directed toward mathematics – and official curriculum balance, as was the case with Richardson and natural life, take the hindmost.

The series of postings will pay some attention to what I consider weaknesses of Richardson's style of advocacy that occurred as he went about his long and intense campaign to encourage teachers to use children's emotional life as the basis for programmes. The postings will argue that Richardson's quickness to take offence, even pettiness, his sense of being unappreciated, can be excused to some extent as part of the individualism that was important to his education contribution. This kind of attitude, shared by Sylvia Ashton-Warner, seemed to provide a necessary sense of alienation, of being an explorer in education, of going where few had gone before. It will be argued in the postings, however, that Richardson was, in fact, well treated by the education system, which is not too surprising because he was not a 'man alone', no matter how much he wanted to feel he was, but a logical outcome of where the official system was going and what it valued.

The series of posting will look at the teaching ideas and philosophy that can be gained from a consideration of Richardson's publications, in particular, *In the Early World*. This intention may seem somewhat at odds with the declaration in an earlier paragraph, that the teaching implications of what Richardson has to say will be very different for different teachers. I still stand by that, these postings, indeed, have just that purpose, of getting teachers to read *In the Early World* and to take their own meaning from what strikes them. While Richardson has long been an inspiration, I am, for the first time, getting to grips, in detail, with what he means to me – so it is a personal journey which I hope will encourage other people to take theirs. The ideas I will concentrate on are those that arise from the excitement Richardson experiences as he explores and develops his way of teaching; the interaction between art, observation of the local environment, writing, also drama and movement; the development and use of children's emotional responses; the children's use of artistic and written expression to learn 'Who I am'; the teacher sensitivity to what children are doing; the rigorous demand for exactness in observation and reflection, and sincerity and truthfulness in expression; the emphasis on children evaluating their work and the work of others; the democratic nature of much of the programme; the shifting role of the teacher; the expectation that children will experiment, persevere, discover, and refine; and the incidental nature of much of the programme.

Teachers in reading about Richardson will always have a number of questions: What parts of what he says are suitable or practicable for me? How relevant is Richardson to teaching in large schools, and in the prevailing education climate? How sustainable in the long-term is such a programme? I can see strengths in such a programme, but what are the weaknesses? Richardson mainly writes about the inspirational, creative processes, though there are references to more formal practices, what are the nature of these? The main point to keep in mind, however, will be that primary teaching needs to re-establish greater cohesiveness and more confidence in itself, by looking to its traditions, as exemplified by Richardson, to better meet both present and future challenges. The education philosophies and practices of Richardson and Ashton-Warner are timeless and should be in the foundation courses for all those being prepared for primary teaching.

