

# "In the Early World": A Commentary

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**C**REATIVITY is something we hear so much about, how it is necessary, how we must instill it in our teaching, and how so often at present it is neglected in schooling. As much as the education critics assert the needs of creativity, very few give any concrete examples of what an interested teacher can do.

In a recently issued volume, *In the Early World*, Elwyn S. Richardson performs a very unusual service.<sup>1</sup> He gives some exact, tangible things for teachers and children to do which create creativity, an awareness of their surroundings, and a sincere appreciation for beauty and art.

I found myself struggling through the introduction and the first chapter without understanding what the author was trying to achieve. His writing seemed to present an isolated example without any pertinence to American public education. It was only through a description of children finding their own clay within their vicinity and making pots that I began to see the significance of everything Elwyn Richardson was trying to capture. He attempts to make his point by drawing vivid scenes expressing his contentions. This is fine, but if the reader has no prior knowledge of his aim, it is like being led down blind alleys to find the main street. Once the fog cleared, of course, a beautiful

<sup>1</sup> Elwyn S. Richardson. *In the Early World*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1963.

scene ensued: children really learning, being involved, and enjoying school.

Elwyn Richardson must be an exceptional man to develop and guide such a fascinating program in a public school. Although he mentions that he had little or no foreknowledge of pottery and such, the extent of the activities and the involvements in which he and the children were engaged are amazing. Of course, I believe that, as a good teacher, he is learning and finding the process exciting along with the children.

Some educators have held for years that one learns best by doing. Now I hear the same thing presented as a novel idea. Is it?

Richardson is using that theory as well as pairing it with practical knowledge. In the pottery study, the children found their own clay through the nature study hikes and walks in the vicinity. They tested the various qualities, measured density, viscosity, and so forth. They built a kiln and tried numerous firing and glazing techniques. The children were terribly excited about this, developed a strong sense of creation (not task-fulfilling for the letter A), and were eager and involved with their learning. As the children

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became more proficient, they began to work out a system of values to separate the better pots from the poorer ones.

Not only were these techniques of learning used in pottery and handicrafts, they worked their way into such subjects as math, biology, and social studies. This process usually began with a hike in the surrounding area so that the children could become acquainted with the land and the fauna. (I wonder how many children in the American schools know the plants and birds around them.)

Through their daily hikes, Richardson helped the children develop a sensitive awareness of the shapes, patterns, textures, and sizes in nature. When they returned to the classroom, they expressed in many ways the things they had observed. Some of them expressed their discoveries in linoleum block prints, pottery, writing, or mime. When they became particularly involved with something, as they did with wasps' nest, days or perhaps weeks were devoted to an in-depth study of the subject.

Math and social studies were studied concurrently with other subject matter. During the pottery investigation, problems of the ratio of comparative clay shrinkage were examined and solved. In such a situation the children can see the concepts under a practical light and can witness their usefulness in their own worlds. Mathematical principles were worked into other kinds of subject matters just as easily and interestingly. This follows A. S. Neill's theory that a child learns something when he himself sees a purpose or feels a need.

An interesting learning-teaching situation in history evolved which impressed me very much. The children and their teacher were studying a particular battle in New Zealand's past. An outside speaker from a museum first introduced the event by showing remnants of the battle and by dramatizing the story. The children were impressed and began to examine the event more closely. The final results were a dramatization with dance, mime, and creative sound effects portraying the entire ordeal. This was staged out of doors, and if Richardson's descriptions are

accurate, the effects must have been most moving.

Perhaps the most important key to Richardson's successful program was his flexibility. When he observed a strong interest he encouraged the children to pursue this interest until it was fulfilled, then they would move on to something new. Still another point must be considered here. He obviously was working in an old-fashioned one-room schoolhouse situation with a wide age range among the students, in which the older ones could help the younger ones. Also, he did not seem to have an administration and school board watching him; at least these factors were never mentioned. Some of his practices would be very hard to duplicate in the present-day American schools; we can, however, pursue the same ideas and values.

### Testing the Ideas

I have tried some of Richardson's techniques with my second grade pupils, seeking to increase my own and their awareness and creativity. I received some interesting results. First I had the children write anything they wanted on how they felt—good, bad, ill, happy, if they wanted to be somewhere else, what they were thinking. Here are some samples of what I received:

"I'm going on the muscleman for recess. I wonder what I have for lunch. I know what sandwich I have, a bologna sandwich. I wonder why boys play ball all the time, well, I guess they think girls shouldn't play dolls. I wonder what I'm thinking about."

"My hand is asleep. I want to play with Dan after school. I'm going to play Little League Baseball tonight. I am happy. Doug sits behind me. He is very silly. He talks about bullfrogs."

"I want to be a baseball player or a football player or a store keeper or a referee in a football game or a game with Steve or when I grow up I want to be just a plain living man."

"I like John. I feel good. I don't like spelling words. I like Michigan Week. I don't like work. John is writing. I am writing. My mom likes me and I like my mom. I like candy. My mom doesn't like candy. I like my mom and dad. I wonder what time it is. I hate chocolate cake."

Of course these are mostly aimless rambling thoughts (which I more or less requested). Yet much of this material is delicate poetry, so honest and sincere. I was very happy that the pupils were so candid with me and that this gave me a chance to know them a little better.

Next I wanted the children to concentrate their attention on a single thing, yet something common to them all. In order to help them discover their observation of their external world and their descriptive abilities, I asked them to write about the floor.

"The floor is hard. It is tile. I walk on the floor. The floor is dirty and dusty. Our desks are always on the floor. The floor has squares. Things fall on the floor. The floor holds up, almost everything in the room. Sometimes the floor is very clean."

"The Floor"

"The floor is like marble.

It is hard.

It is flat.

Then it looks something like a rat.

The floor is long."

"See it, walk on it, dusty, sometimes shiny.

Sit on it, work on it, put things on it.

Sometimes colored.

You can write on it.

My floor is white."

". . . The floor has white with black. It has cracks on it. It has heel marks on it. It has pencil on it and tape. The floor does not even know one plus one and that it equals two."

"The floor is red and black and white. The floor is on top of the earth. I like floors."

At this point I might add that this is the children's own style. I told them to write however they chose. I only corrected their spelling in this paper.

For another writing session, the children

wrote about sounds they could hear at that time.

"I hear talking.

I hear coughing.

I hear a pencil drop.

I hear Mike talking.

I hear me clean out my ears."

"I hear kids.

I hear someone talking.

I hear someone sneezing.

I hear David's talking.

I hear Mike talk.

I hear myself thinking."

Recently I asked the children to write about the color blue.

"Blue is the window when you see through.

Blue is the sky when it's down.

Blue is the sea with a fish.

Blue is my dress and my hat.

Blue is the wall.

Blue is a house and a door.

Blue is a flower.

"Blue makes me think of the ocean or even a blue-jay in a pine tree.

Blue makes me think of raindrops or even a boat.

Blue is like a shirt of blue,

or even the sky,

or even a thunderstorm."

Elwyn S. Richardson has led me to an exciting and fruitful experience through observing how fresh thoughts form and take shape in beauty, originality, and poetry. For the children, too, this was an enjoyable time. As I asked them to write what they thought of this idea, I received these comments:

"I like printing. It is fun. I want more. This is fun. Printing is fun. Fun is printing. That is fun. Please give us more about everything."

"I think it is fun thinking of things." □

## Future ASCD Annual Conferences

1971	March 6-10	St. Louis	Kiel Auditorium
1972	March 4-8	Philadelphia	Philadelphia Civic Center
1973	March 17-21	Minneapolis	Minneapolis Auditorium
1974	March 9-13	Anaheim	Anaheim Convention Center
1975	March 15-19	New Orleans	Rivergate

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