

# Changes, Chances and Choices

## Conversation with Robin Richardson, 2011

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Robin Richardson has worked as a teacher, researcher, writer, local government adviser and inspector, and consultant. This article is based on an interview conducted with him by Sharon Duncan in 2011, on behalf of the International Association for Intercultural Education (IAIE), published in the IAIE journal the following year.

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**Sharon Duncan:** Before we begin, I would like to thank you on behalf of the IAIE membership for agreeing to do this interview. As someone who continues to have an important influence on radical educators in the UK and further afield, this interview will provide intercultural educators with a privileged opportunity to reflect on issues that are central to our world vision.

I would like to start, however, by asking you about your formative years; where you grew up, your family, your schooling and whether it is possible to identify a key experience or person (a turning point) that might have influenced the educational path for social justice you were to follow later in life.

**Robin Richardson:** I was born in 1936 in Birmingham. My father at that time was a bank clerk, and we lived in the small flat above the branch where he served each day behind the counter. He and my mother lived modestly and frugally, but they certainly weren't poor and they spent money on private education for their three children, of whom I was the eldest, until the age of 11. My father had been a keen sportsman in his youth – rugby, cricket, swimming, boxing, tennis – and throughout my teenage years he was the men's singles champion at a local tennis club. My mother, for her part, was the ladies champion at a church badminton club.

They were prudish in their attitudes to sex and related matters, and socially conservative in most of their opinions, and voted Conservative in all elections. The principal intellectual influence on them was Charles Dickens. My father had a complete set of Dickens's novels and would often take down a volume and read a passage aloud to his children for their entertainment and moral instruction. Alas, the children were not as appreciative as they should have been, and this is one of the regrets I have about my childhood, looking back. Another regret is that I didn't inherit any of my father's sporting prowess.

In the summer of 1953, when I was 16, my parents sent me to Germany for five weeks to live with a family there. I didn't realise at the time how extraordinary this was - the war had only been over for a few years and anti-German feeling in England was still rife. I never got round to asking my parents why they permitted and arranged for their son to go and live with the enemy. But any way, it was a deeply formative experience for me. When I arrived with the family I couldn't even produce

the word 'Ja' – my tongue uttered another foreign word with the same meaning, 'oui', instead. But I survived, thanks to the wonderful hospitality of the family I was staying with, and after five weeks was able to prattle in German reasonably fluently, and knew, deep, deep down, that foreigners are not intrinsically threatening, they're not necessarily the enemy. And I was beginning to love German landscape, music, language and folksongs, and to prefer Goethe to Dickens.

Being able and willing to speak a foreign language (though of course five weeks doesn't make you genuinely fluent) marked me out as different from most of my contemporaries at school. The other thing that made me different from most of them was that I had a girlfriend, Pauline. She was just 16 and I was just 17, and we stayed together as an item throughout the following six years, during which I completed secondary school and spent two years in the army and three years at university, and we got married a few weeks after we both graduated in the summer of 1960. We both became teachers in secondary schools, she of religious studies and I of modern languages.

**Sharon:** You were part of an educational vanguard movement in the 1970s and 1980s in the UK that arguably succeeded in shifting an apolitical child-centered educational approach into a more politicised educational space. Could you tell us a little about your work at that time? How and why you became involved. I know that you were influenced by the work of Paulo Freire. Perhaps you could tell us a little about the impact Freire had on both your personal and professional vision at that time.

**Robin:** The sixties were an exciting time intellectually and professionally, and domestically too with the births and infancy of our three children. The single most formative influence for me professionally, I think, was a course on group dynamics that I attended at a local university. It was highly experiential – the task was to study real-time experience in the group itself, there were no set texts to read. It gave me a sense that school classrooms could be and should be radically different from those in which I had spent my life so far, whether as a student or as a teacher. Concepts of knowledge and learning should be different, relationships should be different, power and authority should be different, the use of time should be different, the very arrangement of the furniture should be different. I began experimenting, sometimes – admittedly - with pretty disastrous results. And I began to realise, though still only dimly, that radical changes in classrooms could only happen successfully if there were radical changes in whole-school organisation, and that radical changes in school organisation needed to be accompanied and supported by radical changes in wider society.

It was in summer 1972 that I saw an advertisement in the Times Educational Supplement for a post entitled Director of the World Studies Project. The task for the person to be appointed was to prepare materials and syllabuses for teaching about current world issues in secondary schools. Seeing the advertisement, I had two immediate feelings. How wonderful that such an important project was being set up. And how lucky the person to be appointed.

I mentioned the advertisement to my research colleague. How wonderful this project is being set up, what a very fortunate person is going to be involved in directing it. My colleague suggested I should apply, and I did, and for reasons I have never adequately understood I had the good fortune to be appointed. By the way, the co-chair of the project steering committee was a young MP who in those days was unknown to the general public. Her name was Shirley Williams.

I started on 1 January 1973. Several months ensued of reading, listening, conversing and consulting — and, frankly, floundering. In the course of this I came across the writings of Paulo Freire and was extremely excited. The essential message I took from him was that most education, most of the time, is for the purposes of 'domesticating' people. This chimed almost totally with my own experience of education at school and university, and as a young teacher. But education could instead, said Freire, be liberating. This was really exciting, though I could barely see yet what would be involved.

One day a young teacher with whom I was talking reacted to me with great exasperation. 'You want me to teach world studies? Give me one good reason why. At present I teach boring history, boring geography and boring RE, together known as boring humanities. The kids are bored, I'm bored, give me one good reason why I should teach boring world studies instead.' He paused — for breath not for my answer, which was just as well since I didn't have an answer. A glint came into his eyes. 'Tell you what, though,' he said. 'If you can make world studies interesting, I'll teach it.' I didn't say anything out loud. But mentally, I thought you're on.

I spent the 1970s working out — with others, of course — how to make world studies interesting. Our principal publication was *Learning for Change in World Society*, a compendium of games, exercises and activities designed to engage students in schools in exploring political issues and personal, existential issues at the same time.

**Sharon:** Speaking as a teacher who was strongly influenced by the radical education movement in the 1980s, and also as someone who took it very much for granted, it would be interesting to learn about the challenges you faced, as well as the support you received, for your struggle to introduce an issues-based global focus into mainstream curriculum development in the UK.

**Robin:** The World Studies Project was very small — it employed a single individual — so for this reason if for no other I chose to work through informal networks of friends and allies rather than through institutions and structures. For several years we were below the radar, so to speak, of people who might oppose us or try to close us down. But following the publication of *Learning for Change* in 1976 we began to attract attention from the political right, and we were scathingly criticised by various right-wing theorists. At around the same time I moved from world studies to multicultural education, and from the voluntary sector to local government.

I started organising curriculum development and inservice training projects. 'No curriculum development without teacher development,' said a slogan in those days. I was rebuked by members of local communities, however. 'We don't want you to be working on the curriculum,' they said, 'but on producing a policy statement. Get the

local authority to formulate and publish a high-profile statement, and we can then campaign to get them to implement it.' I was extremely dubious about this, but went along with it. Previously, I had never seen much point in creating policy statements and declarations. The first step was to set up what we called the Advisory Committee on Multicultural Education, with substantial community involvement. At the first meeting a young man from an African-Caribbean youth club pounded the table. 'We do not want multicultural education,' he declared. 'We want equality.' It was a turning point in my professional life.

We produced a policy statement on education for racial equality, and incidentally this was reprinted nationally in the Swann Report in 1985. Later that year I moved to be chief inspector in a London borough. There were many colleagues there firmly committed to discourse of equality as distinct from multiculturalism. We produced a document entitled *Equality and Excellence*, and set up a large project called the Development Programme for Race Equality. This was bitterly criticised and attacked by the conservative press and, a little later, by central government. Partly in consequence, the post which I held, that of chief inspector, was deleted. Or to put the point less circumspcctly, I had the honour of being sacked — without, however, being publicly criticised.

**Sharon:** As a young teacher in 1980s London I totally embraced and implemented radical educational approaches and I was fully supported in my endeavours by school management. From the 1990s onwards, however, the prevailing ideology in education has been one of teachers as technicians in a market-led economy. SATs and league tables are used to measure the performance of pupils, teachers and schools. Can you talk to us a little about the challenges that a radical educator might face in a school-culture, where considerations of equality of opportunity, appear to getting lost in the machinery of testing.

**Robin:** I moved at the end of 1990 to the Runnymede Trust. Here, equality was definitely the basic concept and in the field of education we created a handbook for teachers entitled *Equality Assurance in Schools*. It showed how issues of equality were relevant in each and every subject of the national curriculum, and at all ages, and how it was possible for a teacher to maintain their integrity and their job at the same time.

I hugely admire people who hold down a conventional job in education as a teacher or administrator and at the same time keep themselves alert and young and spontaneous day after day for 40 or more years. The strains are particularly great, I guess, when you have to somehow establish a *modus vivendi* with the machinery of testing.

My own career in education has so far lasted just over 50 years. But only 20 of those 50 years have been spent in large institutions – secondary schools in the sixties and local government in the eighties. The rest of the time I have been in very small organisations, or on my own. I do not feel I have the right to tell people how to survive if they have to work, as indeed most people have to, in institutions.

**Sharon:** Can you also reflect a little on the recurrent media attacks on multicultural education in the UK? David Cameron holds multicultural education responsible, for what he refers to as the balkanisation of the UK and has even alluded to it as contributing to the July 2005 London bombings. Could you talk about the implications of these high profile discourses for multi/intercultural educators?

**Robin:** When I listen to a politician, I do not know whether he or she really means what they say or whether they are simply trying to gain or maintain electoral support, or (the same thing) trying to score points against political opponents. I suspect politicians themselves often don't know, and have indeed stopped caring, whether their views are genuinely thoughtful and principled, or articulated simply out of political expediency. I suspect Cameron is too intelligent to believe all the silly things he says about multicultural education. He is a shrewd political animal, however, and knows what to say to get and keep large numbers of supporters. And the fact is, large numbers of people nowadays are genuinely baffled and disoriented by the pace of social change and by the erosion of traditional notions of national identity, and they are relieved and pleased when a political leader tells them their worries are caused by, for example, multicultural education in schools.

I am for my own part very glad that it's increasingly difficult, in every country in the world, to be both intelligent and uncritically patriotic. But at the same time I am sympathetic towards people who find uncertainty worrying rather than exciting. I am saddened by politicians who pander to uncertainty, as distinct from helping people to live with it.

**Sharon:** I would also like to ask about your work on Islamophobia or anti-Muslim racism (I am aware that you do not use these labels lightly). Perhaps you could talk a little about the challenges involved in addressing Islamophobia in relation to multicultural education. Could you also comment on the new OSCE guidelines for teachers relating to 'Intolerance against Muslims'? Are they helpful?

**Robin:** Hostility towards Islam and Muslims has its roots not only in ignorance, misinformation, media distortions and political scaremongering about Islam but also in misunderstandings about one's own cultural and national identity and history, exacerbated by globalisation. Challenging such hostility in schools is in consequence extremely sensitive, complex and difficult, and teachers need and welcome guidance. I was involved in the production of the OSCE guidance, and so must declare an interest. There are things in it which I think are useful, and I think the document is much better than it might have been, given that three enormous international organisations had to cooperate to produce it, and there had to be formal consultations with the representatives of many national governments. I hope OSCE will create a budget to publicise the document properly, and to support training events about it. The fact that the guidance reflects good practice in a wide range of countries gives it substantial authority, I hope and believe, such that teachers can readily use it with professional confidence.

**Sharon:** On a less controversial level, as a primary school teacher in London one of my most treasured teaching resources was a book that you published with Angela Wood called "Inside Stories: wisdom and hope for changing worlds". Could you tell us

a little about how and why this book evolved and how your relationship with stories might have evolved with it?

**Robin:** Angela was and is a very close friend and most of what I know about stories I learnt from her. Looking back, I realise the first storyteller in my life was my father. It was not only the novels of Dickens that he continually drew to the attention of his children but also Aesop's fables – he instructed us through stories, and through proverbs and proverbial references drawn from stories, not through precepts alone. When I became a teacher I often had to speak to an audience whose members ranged considerably in age and knowledge, and in consequence I would often try to encode ideas into stories and extended metaphors.

When I worked for the World Studies project in the 1970s I found inspiration to use stories in the works of Paulo Freire. A major task for an educator, he said, is to 'encode' (his word) complex ideas within simple yet mysterious stories, and to help learners to decode the stories, thus seeing the messages and ideas for themselves. Helping people to decode stories was for Freire the essence of what he called the pedagogy of the oppressed. It can be equally central in the pedagogy of the oppressor – if, that is, the goal is liberation as distinct from domestication.

**Sharon:** Finally Robin I would like to finish this interview by asking you to reflect on how you see the future role of intercultural education in our increasingly globalised planet. Global interconnectedness seems to suggest increased intercultural communicative competence. Globalisation, however, also seems to structure a culture of anxiety and insecurity that presents significant problems for intercultural communication. I know you have written about this in relation to islamophobia. Given this anomaly how would you describe the challenges for future intercultural educators and do you have thoughts on how these challenges might be addressed in the educational context.

**Robin:** You put the question extremely well! Stating questions well is an essential first step in the search for answers. Just at the moment one main thing I'd like to emphasise, or re-emphasise, is creativity in the full range of the arts, 'popular' as well as 'classical', performing very definitely as well as artistic and literary, and new and modern and mixed-media as well as traditional. Second, and equally importantly, I think it's increasingly clear we have to integrate multicultural and intercultural education with certain other fields and issues – particularly gender equality, socio-economic equality, equality for disabled people, and equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people. People involved in the various campaigns need to know each other, and support each other, and learn from each other.

**Sharon:** Robin it really has been a tremendous privilege to talk to someone with lifelong experience in this complex, challenging and politically volatile but profoundly humanistic field of education. Once again on behalf of the IAIE membership, I would like to extend sincere gratitude for taking the time to share your thoughts and feelings on a subject that is important to all of us who are committed educators in an increasingly intercultural world.

Thank you.

**Robin:** Thank you, Sharon, thank *you*.

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**Postscript**

You may in addition be interested to look at other papers about Robin Richardson in this archival scrapbook. They include [a list of publications](#) in which he has been involved and a talk in 2011 about global and antiracist oerspectives in education entitled [Journeys Through Four Decades](#).