

**Sylvia Ashton-Warner in the Secondary School:
A re-assessment of the work of New Zealand's most famous teacher**

Ian Mitchell

Director of Te Kohanga Whanau, and

Curriculum Co-ordinator of Hillary College, Otara

People continue to organise seminars to discuss the 'problems' of Maori education: grave and sincere concern is expressed; pious resolutions are passed future seminars are planned. However, much of this activity is only cosmetic, and the gap between achievement by Maori and non-Maori continues to widen. Nowhere is this gap more obvious than in the secondary school, where, despite the seminars, and the marae based re-training cures, those fifteen-year-old Maori feet move swiftly out of the school gates.

I, too, went to these seminars, voiced the concern, passed the resolutions. Then I found a remarkable book by a remarkable New Zealand teacher, and gradually it became clear to me that, in 1963, when Sylvia Ashton-Warner published *Teacher*, the key to the successful teaching of Maori children became accessible to us all. Only we ignored it. We regarded its author, rather patronisingly, as an off-beat novelist, an eccentric, to be tolerated, but not to be taken seriously.

And yet, the principles and practices she describes with such life and fire in *Teacher* and *Spinster* are the solutions we still search for – writ large, and clear, and compellingly.

I have my suspicions about why her work has been ignored. It's probably something to do with the colonial mentality, the tendency to ignore local genius and acclaim only the overseas expert. And also I suggest it's to do with the chauvinism of a Department of Education which still, in 1980, has no women officers sufficiently senior to figure on the front page of the *Education Gazette*.

Even those few isolated teachers who know of Ashton-Warner's work don't see the total and complete relevance of it at *all* levels of a child's education.

Yet this has been my great discovery: the success with which her theories work in a large, multi-cultural, urban, secondary school – a far cry from her small East Coast Maori primary schools with their bulging infant rooms of nearly twenty-five years ago.

She insisted that the movement in her children's learning was 'from the inside outwards'. This is so obviously similar to the derivation of the word 'education' that it is strange that educators seem so unaware of it. And yet unaware they must be if one looks at most New Zealand secondary schools with their classroom emphasis on content, and the obsessive amount of note-taking which goes on. These rooms resemble the world of Dicken's *Hard Times* where children were regarded as little vessels waiting to be filled up.

Ashton-Warner maintained, rather, that we should 'release the native imagery of our child and use it for teaching material'. Her success in using this approach to teach infant reading is relatively well-known, but the power of this simple principle is largely ignored in secondary schools. Yet the mind of the child can indeed provide the syllabus, at least in forms three and four. All our language – English and Maori – art, music, science and social skills, and many mathematics skills can be learned by using the material which *comes* from the child; by recognising that the child brings with him to school a wide range of rich experiences which cry out to be taken up and turned to account. And so, with one simple, obvious step, we can refute that major criticism of irrelevance which is levelled against the material with which we so often dull our students' minds in secondary school.

Ashton-Warner's second principle was based on the power of creativity. And here again the secondary school has much to learn. We are too passive when we should be active. We stress input, rather than output. There is not enough *doing*. Creativity can be mobilised in every subject of the secondary school curriculum. And by doing so, we teach an extra subject too: peace – a subject critical for our world's survival. Ashton-

Warner observed, and so have I, that there is a direct and exact correlation between a child's capacity to create and his willingness to destroy. The most disturbed and troubled youngsters gain new peace through being left alone to make something. Once they've done this, the cycle of failure is broken, and the cycle of success is begun. The more gifted children get the same satisfaction from having made something and, in addition, their work leads them to new insights into the world of ideas. The responsibility Sylvia Ashton-Warner charges us with is ensuring that, in our classrooms the creative vent of the child's mind is given every encouragement to widen, the destructive vent to shrink and atrophy. She goes on to show that there is not merely missionary zeal behind this insistence on creativity, but an element of selfishness as well.

It's all so merciful on a teacher, this appearance of the subjects ... in the creative vent. For one thing, the drive is no longer the teacher's, but the children's own. And for another, the teacher is at last with the stream, and not against it ... ¹

The hard thing for the secondary school teacher is to rebel against his training and accept that creating things is a valid educational activity. All his training has been directed towards promoting a very narrow range of intellectual skills, so he is very suspicious of anything which seems to be mere enjoyment. He has been taught to denigrate learning activities directed towards social and emotional education. His lessons are dominated by content; he is preoccupied with finishing the syllabus. This is the value of Sylvia Ashton-Warner's work. It shows us that the path which leads to the education of whole persons is most crucial and fundamental direction for our culture to take. Secondary school teachers who have seen the possibilities of this approach all report similar development in their classrooms: a new peace, where the confrontations between teacher and students are dramatically reduced; a clearly observable increase in students' self-esteem; greater co-operation among students; and a more general enthusiasm for learning.

The secondary school is still, sadly, the place where the child's individuality is stifled, just as it was in the late fifties when Sylvia Ashton-Warner reported this conversation.

I said to a friend of mine, a professor, recently,
“What kind of children arrive at the University too you?” He said, “They’re all exactly the same.” “But” I said, “how can it be like that? The whole plan of primary education at least is for diversity.”

“... in the infant room,” I told this professor, “we still have identity. It’s somewhere between my infant room level and your university level that the story breaks.”²

The next lesson, therefore, she has to teach the secondary school is the importance of encouraging the child’s individuality. We should avoid the mass of mindless practices most secondary schools wallow in which result in reducing bright, vigorous, individualistic young people to grey, conforming ciphers. If New Zealand is to develop a vital and colourful culture, the importance of the secondary school’s role must not be under-estimated. If we want to remove political apathy and vacuous materialism, we must teach adolescents to develop their personalities and to express themselves in their own way. We must not merely programme people to pass examinations. Again, moving back to Ashton-Warner, ‘I think that we already have so much pressure towards sameness through radio, film and comics outside that we can’t afford to do a thing inside that is not toward individual development ...’³ Today we should add television to that list. Perhaps the other major principle Sylvia Ashton-Warner used which is under-exploited in the crisis atmosphere of today’s secondary school classrooms is the power of relationship – ‘What an unsung creative medium is relationship.’

Don’t talk!

Sit up and face the front!

Give me that note!

Keep your desks apart!

Go back to your seat!

Don’t copy! That’s cheating!

These prohibitions, common in our classrooms, work actively to repress relationships and co-operative learning. It is astonishing that the tone of our rooms should be as destructive as this in a society which professes to be concerned not only with the rights of the individual, but also with the need for people to provide support for one another. Sylvia Ashton-Warner's great strength lay in her acceptance of the classroom as a microcosm of society.

In her own words, 'I let everything come ... within safety; but *I use it*'.⁴

Those teachers willing to take the point have translated her infant room practice into their secondary school classrooms. They have pushed the symbolically restrictive one-berth desks into big groups, and built tasks which encourage learning skills for groups, as well as for individuals, into their teaching. In this way, they're using what comes; they're with the tide, not against it. They're capitalising on the teenager's characteristic gregariousness, rather than attempting to suppress it. Teenagers enjoy each other's company; it makes professional sense to use this enjoyment in classroom teaching.

Secondary schools are reported to be in crisis, with staff difficult to find and students proving to be increasingly intractable. New Zealand society as a whole is not functioning well. Emigration, drug abuse, alcoholism, marital breakdown, and mental stress all contribute to our alienation, frustration and despair. At the very least, then, it is worth having a long, critical look at the style and tone of our secondary schools with a copy of *Teacher* in our hands.

¹⁻⁴ Ashton-Warner, S., *Teacher*, Secker and Warburg, London, 1963, between pages 92 and 104.