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WHAT'S IN A WORD?

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ABSTRACT *Sylvia Ashton-Warner developed an holistic approach to reading in the early years of schooling. Within the general approach was an advocacy for the learning of key vocabulary. Ashton-Warner argued that children were interested in words that related to their own daily lives and they learnt them readily. This paper reports the results of a research project that investigated key vocabulary learning in a sample of five year olds in a New Zealand school. It was found that there were complexities in the teaching of key words which have implications for contemporary teachers, particularly in linking emotional and cognitive aspects of children's lives.*

KEYWORDS

Key vocabulary, early reading, learning vocabulary.

INTRODUCTION

Over a period of eighteen days, seven 5-year-old new entrant students in a New Zealand school were asked each day to select single words they wanted to learn to read. Once selected, the words were written for them on strips of card. On subsequent days, the children's ability to read their self-selected words was tested. The same procedure was repeated with seven 6-year-olds who had been making slow progress in literacy learning in their normal class programme. It was hoped that the words the children asked for would be words of personal import to them, words which Sylvia Ashton-Warner might have proclaimed to be "inside-out" words, words arising from somewhere deep inside the child in, perhaps, a form of free association.

The intent of this research (Barlow, 2007) was to isolate and investigate key vocabulary as a possible alternative approach to early literacy teaching and learning in a modern setting. The justification for isolating key vocabulary from the holistic context in which Sylvia Ashton-Warner developed it, was to make it quite literally a test of her "one-look" criterion: Ashton-Warner claimed that words which were personal, meaningful, and of emotional significance to a child would require but one look to be remembered forever. This is rather a brave claim: important, high frequency words, which are less exciting or meaningful, may require many repetitions before children know them. Ashton-Warner made other claims for the power of words. They could provide an outlet for creative forces in the "undermind" (Ashton-Warner, 1972, p. 14), and help to defuse fear, anger, and aggression. Given these claims, does a key vocabulary approach have relevance for teachers today?

Any method of teaching reading and writing is likely to be considered by teachers in terms of its practicality, ease, and workload issues, as well as by its results. For key vocabulary to be considered for use in modern classrooms, proof of its efficacy is needed. It may be the case that because Ashton-Warner was, according to her biographer, Lynley Hood (1988), an exciting and awe-inspiring teacher, *any* method of teaching that she employed would have resulted in noticeable, reading gains for her students. As Smith and Elley (1997, p. 85) have noted: "The important role of the teacher has often been ignored in theoretical accounts of learning to read". This raises the question of whether the success of Ashton-Warner's method was due to key vocabulary per se or might there be an alternative explanation such as personality factors or her emphasis on writing as contributing to learning to read.

An American advocate of Ashton-Warner, Nancy Thomson, asserted that those who accepted Ashton-Warner's message would know the truth of her claims without the need for experimental design or statistical proof (Thomson, 2000). Although the method has been described and used in other parts of the world, I am unaware of any systematic study of key vocabulary in this country. Hence, this research project aimed to gather exact daily records of words remembered and words forgotten. Such a simple-sounding research project turned out to be more complex than anticipated, and it raised some interesting and sometimes perplexing questions and issues.

THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The central research question was whether key vocabulary worked as a method of learning vocabulary in the manner described by Sylvia Ashton-Warner. Every effort was made to replicate as closely as possible the method described in *Teacher* (1972) and in *"Teacher" in America* (1980). These works, however, are written in non-academic terms, with teaching episodes described selectively. In this investigation, researcher decisions had to be made so that all the children and all the words were treated consistently. Other teachers or researchers might differ slightly in their judgements regarding, for example, precisely what Ashton-Warner meant by the immediate recall of a word. How much time elapsed between first thinking of a word and being asked to recall it?

THE PARAMETERS OF THE STUDY

Sylvia Ashton-Warner linked reading and writing very closely. She said children write what they read, and they read what they write:

> Early in the morning this infant room gets under way on organic writing, and it is this writing that I use in relative proportions as the reading for the day; for the children just off the key vocabulary with their stories of two words up to those who can toss off a page or so. In this way we have a set of graded brand-new stories every morning, each sprung from the circumstances of their own lives and illustrated unmatchably in the mind. (Ashton-Warner, 1980, pp. 59-60)

Sometimes the children in my study wanted a whole sentence written on their cards. It was necessary to point out to them that the card was not big enough: "I can't fit all that on this little card … tell me just a little bit … tell me your best word … tell me your special word …" I was not looking at whether the children could write their words, or whether they could read them in contexts other than on their word cards. My tasks were threefold: to check whether a child knew the previous day's word, to talk to the child and elicit a new word, and to check previously known words. A follow-through to more advanced stages of literacy, and monitoring of longer-term effects, would be essential in a larger-scale investigation of Ashton-Warner's claims for key vocabulary.

PARTICIPANTS AND SETTING

Three 5-year-olds were chosen by their class teacher to form a pilot study group. Those three, along with seven other 5-year-olds, comprised the entire new entrant class at the decile 2 primary school where the study took place. The pilot study children were present again for the main study, in the sense that they shared their news (morning talks); however, I did not continue to ask for their words because of the pressure of time. I was trying to keep to a half-hour per day, and seven children were enough! Ashton-Warner, allowing somewhat more than a half-hour, said that "twelve is the uttermost limit for one teacher" (Ashton-Warner, 1980, p. 55). She also said that "no time is too long spent talking to a child …" (p. 44).

I worked in the new entrant classroom with the five-year-old group. When I came to working with the six-year-old group, they came to me. We worked in a small withdrawal space, and after a few sessions they came in groups of twos or threes. It was interesting to compare the children's spontaneity in this situation with that of the formal classroom ritual of sitting in a circle and taking strict turns at sharing news: "For New Entrant children, 'conformity' at school can be a kind of ritual; as Schwimmer (1970, p. 73) points out, 'to be part of school culture means to be attached to its ritual, but this in itself is no indication that anything useful is being learnt'" (Barlow, 2007, p. 107). These older children were their teacher's slowest progress reading group. The groups were therefore purposively rather than randomly chosen, to fit class organisation and timetables. Absenteeism and school interruptions affected the quantity of data I was able to collect. Sometimes time ran out, or some other activity was happening in the school that took priority. Sometimes I chose to consolidate words previously asked for rather than try to go for a new word from each child each day. Ashton-Warner said at least "a new word every week, however shy or speechless or dull the newcomer", and she aimed for "a minimum of forty personal words" before children were ready to move on from single word key vocabulary (1980, pp. 50-51).

THE PROCEDURE

It is difficult to assess the extent of the match between what Ashton-Warner wrote and what she did. Sydney Gurewitz Clemens (personal communication, 10.12.2005), talking of Ashton-Warner's American following, claimed "Sylvia was explicit, but not organised, so we've made things more linear". Because the

rationale for key vocabulary relates to words arising from somewhere deep in the child, I hoped that conversations with a child would lead to one word standing out. Clemens says that a teacher should listen out for a word that seems to have a "charge" to it, and that a teacher must take an active part in the selection of the word. Another American teacher, Katie Johnson, whose book *Doing Words* (1997) describes her use of Ashton-Warner's key vocabulary, believes that a child's body language is a guide. However, such directives could mean different things to different teachers, whereas the aim in this study was to minimise subjectivity and rigorously scrutinise key vocabulary in order to test whether the approach has validity.

During the pilot study, prompts were developed for times when a child was stuck and could not think of words. Has anything good happened? Has anything bad happened? Has anything made you happy? Has anything made you sad? What do you like? What do you hate? Who do you like? Who do you hate? What are you scared of?

In practice, by referring back to what the child had talked about for their news, often all that was necessary was: What word shall I write on this card for you today?

The following approach was used with the 5-year-olds. After I had recorded whether or not they knew their previous day's word, and they had shared their news, they returned to their class teacher's programme, and I called them to me, one at a time. I spread out their own words, including the newest word from the previous day, plus some words belonging to other children. I recorded which words they chose and how they read them. The advantage was that the other children were busy. The disadvantage was that, between each child, I had to sort through many cards and spread out a suitable selection for the next child. But by doing it that way, I could ensure that the child's own cards were in the spread, and for those children who were having less success I used fewer cards. Similarly with each small sub-group of 6-year-olds, the cards needed re-sorting.

Although this seems somewhat unwieldy and complicated, I suspect that in a class teaching situation, there would be fewer constraints. While I wanted to allow the children to be themselves and to speak freely, there were also elements of empirical research in this study, less likely in a normal classroom. Ashton-Warner insisted that teaching by this method was easier, because, she said, "it all comes from them and nothing from me" (Sylvia, 1956, p. 54).

Eliciting a new word

A daily recording sheet for each child was developed as a result of the pilot study, for it became clear that the pressure of time would be more of an issue with more children and more word cards. It was not possible to write a lot on the recording sheets and at the same time be a good listener and respond to the children. What really mattered was that I showed a genuine interest in what each child had to say, that I asked questions, and that I maintained a friendly, non-judgemental stance, so that the children felt that what they had to say was valued and understood. At the same time, I wanted to capture as much rich, descriptive data as possible, for

example, qualitative factors such the child's speed, understanding of the task, dreaminess, enthusiasm, tiredness or boredom, certainty or uncertainty, mood, and tendency to copy the words of others. Videotaping or audiotaping might have proved useful, although the children would have required time to become accustomed to this.

Decisions had to be made about what is, and what is not, a key word; indeed whether there is any such thing. A danger of participant observation is that it can generate unreliable data (Denscombe, 1998). Is one word really any better than another? How many key words – or potential key words – may a child be harbouring at any one time? Would another teacher or researcher, working with those same children, on those same days, have ended up with different sets of words? Did personal factors, then, affect what I noticed and recorded?

The shift from freely sharing news, as morning talks, to choosing one special word to be *the* word for the day, to be written on a card, was a matter for careful timing. If the right moment, and the right word, slipped past, it was not always possible to retrieve it. When does one interrupt a child and ask for a word? If I repeated a word, or showed special interest in a word, the child might decide that that was the word they should choose. I had to be careful not to force a word, and to ensure that it was the child who finally chose the word.

Sometimes children asked for words that bore no connection to what they had just talked about, like when Jack told us how he had got the better of his mother in a pretend sword fight ("it was 'cos of my fancy footwork"), then asked for the word 'watch'. In most cases though, there was a clear link from at least some part of the child's news to the word chosen, even when the news ranged over unrelated topics:

> *Sally:* Last night I was the only one who ate my tea up and I got a lolly and I got to stay up late. And I believe in Jesus.

> *Katie:* When we went to church my mum said I could wear my new clothes and I got happy. And Aunty Dianne's cat ran away and we're going to get a dog.

To single out one word from the stream of talk might seem arbitrary. And can one say categorically that a word is a *key* word because it is remembered (when you do not know until the next day), and *not* a key word because it is forgotten? The following stories, although told with conviction, did not lead to remembered words:

> *Anna:* I swimmed in the deep part and mum didn't hold me and I fell down and I was like a star and mum was far away.

> *Researcher:* So, shall we say 'swimmed' or 'swam'?

> *Anna:* 'Star'. I want 'star'.

> *Vai:* There were twelve ghosts in my room. Norma told me how to make them go away. If you're scared they'll scare you for real.

Ashton-Warner, too, admitted to doubts on occasion in the choice of words. She wrote of barriers such as the child's mood, one child copying the word of

another, repressions, and "crippling fears which block the organic expulsion of a word" (1980, p. 49).

Recall of previously learned words

Ashton-Warner insisted that the learning of words of the key vocabulary would be fast, easy and permanent. She proudly describes the wonderful togetherness of her pupils: the noise, movement, quarrelling, smiling, goading, as they practised their words with partners. Reading and learning could not be cut off from relationship and communication. In order to ensure that the children were reading and writing only "words that carry with them an inner picture" (1980, p. 50), she checked straight after morning tea time which new words were known and which to remove. Her pupils had rather more experience with their words and learning them than was possible within my research. This is important when we look at the results.

The children in my study were told that the word cards belonged to them and they could keep them at school or take them home. They could share them with friends, family and teacher as they pleased. They were encouraged to treasure their cards, but after the half-hour session, how much attention they paid their cards, what they did with them, or how much help they received, was not monitored or recorded. One child told me her grandmother kept all her cards carefully together in a folder at home. Ashton-Warner does not say anything about lost cards. I made duplicates of every card. If a child arrived without a card, I showed an exact copy and said: "What does this say?"

For the first few sessions with the 5-year-olds, I tipped all the previously learned words on the floor, as Ashton-Warner said she did. This was a bit muddly, especially as more and more word cards were added. Issues arose, such as what to do when a child grabbed a word belonging to another child, without the owner noticing, thereby depriving the rightful owner of any chance of recognising his or her own word. Katie Johnson (1997) had her students keep their own words in separate envelopes. Some teachers, and sometimes Ashton-Warner, have kept words on curtain rings. They wrote the child's name in small letters in one corner of the card. I did not do this, in case it might have been a giveaway.

There were other uncertainties about the research techniques which made it difficult to compare my results with Ashton-Warner's. For example, how much certainty about word recognition should be demanded? How much time should be allowed to identify a word? Are certain prompts permissible to jog a child's memory? Sometimes, for instance, the 5-year-olds changed their minds several times about a word. They may have eventually got it right, but may have sounded very unsure. For the purposes of this study, however, if the child eventually got the word right, it was recorded that way. Should the child be looking at the word on the card when he or she identifies it? Is looking up at the ceiling acceptable? I had children run up to me as soon as they arrived at school, shouting out their word gleefully, with no card in sight. Or they may have waved the card around in the air as they said the word.

RESULTS

Ashton-Warner said, "You can't read children by statistics". "Not that I count or enumerate the words … just get the feeling (Ashton-Warner, 1972, p. 111). Only on the first day of the pilot study did I get words that perhaps children might think a teacher would want, for example, her, go, look, and dad. I did have to emphasise for the first day or two, "your own word", " a word you love", "a word you hate". Sometimes two-word phrases were accepted; there were more instances of this with the 5-year-olds than with the 6-year-olds. The latter group, although they were struggling to learn to read and write, generally had a clearer concept of what a *word* is than the younger children.

I credited a child with knowing a word if he or she read it from a single card, or from a selection of cards spread out on the floor (even if the child was looking out the window as it was said!). I differentiated between words that were known on the day after they had been chosen by a child, and words that were not known the day after. Sometimes a child would not know a word at first, but remember it later in the interaction.

Thus, one child (Vai) had forgotten the word 'rat' when I showed her that one card, but remembered it a little later when a lot of cards were spread out in front of her:

> *Vai:*   Yesterday I found a dead rat and I went to scare my little
> brother and he was crying and I put it on his head.

A third chance worked only with one child (also Vai) in the pilot study regarding the word 'notebook'. On this occasion, I dealt out cards in front of Vai, one at a time, saying each time, "Is this notebook?" Although I tried this on other occasions, it always failed if the first two attempts had failed.

As long as a word was read correctly in one of these three ways, it was counted as known and retained for the next day. Three chances may seem rather a lot, in view of the fact that Ashton-Warner said that any word of the key vocabulary should be recognised instantly. I was making some allowance for the fact that we had no additional activities with the words from one day to the next, as Ashton-Warner's pupils did. The children in this study, after they had given me their new word for the day, traced over the letters on their word card, once, or occasionally twice, while they were still standing beside me, but beyond that, no other practice or reinforcement or repetition was possible. Some might think that, in these circumstances, the fact that the children remembered as many words as they did, represents something of an achievement, especially for those 6-year-olds who had been struggling in their normal class reading programme and making very slow progress.

Sometimes a word was not known, but a few days later, the child started asking for it. Sally, for example, was unable to read 'lolly' on Day 3 but suddenly wanted it again on Day 6. Of course it had been removed because it had not been known earlier. I decided to re-introduce this card, because she was obviously puzzled at not finding it there. Although it could not be included in the count of remembered words, a classroom teacher would no doubt welcome such cleverness and use it.

The word recognition for 6-year-olds was more straight forward. These children either knew a word or did not. The 5-year-olds were often less sure. There were times when a child said a word aloud, over and over, knowing it had to be there somewhere, staring at it but unable to recognise it. Then there were times, for example, when Sally picked up a card ('sundae') and said, "I don't know what it says, but I know it's mine." In summary, half of the 5-year-olds remembered half or more of their words the next day – three between 70 percent and 90 percent. One remembered only 1 in 12 words. All 6-year-olds remembered between 73 percent and 100 percent.

DISCUSSION

Ashton-Warner's explanation for the success of her method rested on a claim of a subconscious origin of children's words. I did not attempt to connect the words the children chose to the subconscious mind. I did not categorise the words as arising from fear or sex drives. It is unlikely that teachers today would accept a Freudian interpretation of words children ask to learn. Rather, I looked at the words from the perspective of their meaning, their structure, and the visual aspects of the words. I looked at themes, and found words that referred to family, friends, pets, toys and games; words associated with television and movies; outdoor games; shops, clothes and food. I identified words as nouns, proper nouns, and other parts of speech. I checked how many words were selected by Ashton-Warner's students. I looked at words asked for by boys or by girls, and long words and short words. Whatever way one looks at the words these children selected, it is difficult to discern a pattern; words were remembered and forgotten in all categories.

If I asked the children *how* they remembered a word, they never repeated the story from the day before which had given rise to the word. They invariably mentioned something like the first letter of the word. One child was not able to remember either of her words 'butterfly' or 'kitten', but one day she pointed to 'butterfly' and said "kitten's got two t's like that".

It became apparent that if I had a child standing beside me, and I had that child's undivided attention, there were literacy opportunities that seemed to link to theoretical frameworks. One was that key vocabulary may be harnessed in the service of either a top-down or a bottom-up approach to literacy teaching and learning. There were opportunities for children to learn about phonics, spelling, letter formation, left-to-right directionality and sound-to-letter and letter-to-sound relationships. If applied in a classroom, other discrete, bottom-up skills of handwriting, grammar, and style could be included, as these arise in the natural context of the children's writing. The method can also be seen to fit within a language experience approach in that children write what they read, and read what they write. In a method based heavily on children's own stories and ideas, a focus on the meaning and function of language is important. There were interactive features in the method, in that the children brought their own feelings, interests, concerns, and memories to the written word. It also used a look-and-say approach, in that this was precisely what I wanted the children to do, and to this end, I strove to elicit words that were intensely meaningful to them.

The method aligns with socio-cultural perspectives in that children are seen as "participating in constructing and determining their own lives … the lives of those around them and the societies in which they live, and contributing to learning as agents building on experiential knowledge" (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999, p. 49). Ashton-Warner developed a method for teaching emergent literacy which, while incomplete as a sociocultural model, shared some of the characteristics of such a framework. Her attempts to improve literacy success rates were based upon a recognition that children are active learners (Ministry of Education, 1999), bringing prior and out-of-school experience to school-based learning. The teachers I worked with commented that the one-to-one conversation with each child each day was one of the best features of the method, whether words were retained or not.

There are implications for teaching like this. A classroom teacher, being with the children for most of a school day, may be in a more favourable position than a researcher to notice and record what is of importance to a child. Key vocabulary may not emerge just because it is morning talk time. In fact, in the current study, one child – Rosie – who had had little success during the data-gathering phase of the research, continued to demand that I write words on cards long after the official data-gathering was over. It was as though she had suddenly caught on to a game, and though they are not recorded in the official data, she confidently remembered and read those later words. Veatch (1983) has insisted that key vocabulary as a method requires a clear structure, rigour in the acquisition of skills, and imparting of knowledge. Key vocabulary, she says, is not simply a matter of "no discipline, no systematic organisation, no planning" (p. 3). However, Rosie's spontaneity and urgency may suggest key vocabulary is a valid and powerful application. Teachers are not, of course, always able to take immediate advantage of such teachable moments, but they may be able to take note of what the child says for later use.

A classroom teacher might balk at the idea of making, by hand, sets of reading books, given that schools already invest heavily in commercial reading resources. It is usual for junior school teachers in New Zealand to use, from the outset of formal reading instruction, mass-produced material. In other words, children are *given* material to read, and reading and writing are generally taught separately. However, teachers regularly help new entrant children write their own stories, as dictated text. Such authentic material could become the child's reading for the day, without necessarily needing to be works of art (as were Ashton-Warner's hundreds of graded Māori transitional readers). Teachers could make children's booklets as simple or as sophisticated as they wanted. Children's self-chosen vocabulary, as a prime resource for beginning reading, fits a "personalised learning" model, considered important these days (Ministry of Education, 2007). Thus, using a key vocabulary approach is a *different* way of working rather than *more* work.

Little books chosen by teachers and adults may be colourful, attractive, carefully-graded, and chosen with children's interests and background experience in mind. Ashton-Warner maintained, however, that commercial curriculum-based material could never have "the power and the light" (Sylvia, 1955, p. 392) of texts which emerge organically from words the children themselves elect to learn, because those words caption an inner vision.

Ashton-Warner said that *all* young learners need time to exercise their "native imagery" (1972, p. 121), and Katie Johnson (1997) said key vocabulary is important for all children – for all people – at the accession of literacy. Key vocabulary, then, may be unnecessary for five-year-olds who have had much pre-school literacy experience, and may be appropriate for older students who have had little such experience. Theresa, who was six-and-a-half, and had received individual Reading Recovery lessons for 20 weeks with little success, remembered eight out of eleven of her self-selected words, a result that suggested using a key vocabulary approach for a little longer might have continued her momentum. Ashton-Warner said: "Backward readers have a private key vocabulary which, once found, launches them into reading" (1980, p. 42).

Teachers are bombarded with achievement objectives, targets, technology, assessment instruments, and an overcrowded curriculum. Today's literacy concerns focus on helping children become meta-cognitively aware of themselves as problem-solvers as they read, and this is important. Teachers may feel they do not have time for such esoteric and hard-to-measure concerns as children's inner lives, their uniqueness, their true personalities. Less tangible considerations, such as the emotional function of the reading process, which is what Ashton-Warner prioritised, may be overlooked. Ashton-Warner's principle of key vocabulary reminds and encourages us to balance the emotional and the cognitive in literacy teaching and learning.

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