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FINDING DANCE IN SYLVIA'S CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT *Sylvia Ashton-Warner was a teacher who had great enthusiasm for the power of creativity in the young children she taught. This paper draws on the ideas in Sylvia's famous books *Teacher and Spinster* to reappraise the relevance of those ideas for today's teachers. It is argued that there is, indeed, much of relevance. Dance, for example, is a way of allowing children to express their inner selves and bring out their creativity, as are the other arts.*

KEYWORDS

Creativity, dance, early years creativity, arts education.

INTRODUCTION

Whether it was the genius of Schubert speaking over the century through his inspired music, whether it was what I myself felt as I interpreted his music, whether it was the spring in the air after the unprecedentedly cold winter or whether it was ripe to come anyway, it came.

There was a flash of yellow to my right; I looked round. It was Twinnie dancing. I thrilled violently. It was not hula or any native dance. It was fine, exquisite expressive dance, such as is cultivated these days as something new but which belongs to the days before time. It was perfectly in rhythm with the music and followed the feeling of it. Up floated the other Twinnie. They danced to each other, from each other, their arms expressing, their hands and their small bodies. Two small brown spirits with bright yellow jerseys like jonquils. (Ashton-Warner, 1986, pp. 190-191)

These words convey a vivid and endearing picture of a very special moment that occurred when Mrs Henderson (otherwise known as Sylvia Ashton-Warner) was playing the piano in her classroom at a North Island rural Māori school. But what is the significance of this event and why does such a description warrant further attention?

The words are written by Sylvia Ashton-Warner in her ground-breaking book, *Teacher* (1986) (first published in 1963); a book treasured by many both in Aotearoa New Zealand and other parts of the world. The significance, however, in the scenario presented above is that it depicts something not normally associated with the teachings of Sylvia Ashton-Warner. Educationalists know Ashton-Warner as a visionary and revolutionary, who developed extraordinary, even controversial

teaching methods primarily focused on learning to read and write. The scenario appears to have nothing to do with reading or writing because it is about a seemingly very different human activity, namely dance.

However, when we take a more intimate look at the work and life of Sylvia Ashton-Warner there is a depiction of a person who connects to the souls and lives of others in ways that go beyond what is at first apparent. There is also an unconventional side to Sylvia Ashton-Warner, something that might be considered relevant when dabbling into areas deemed outside the traditional curriculum of reading, writing and arithmetic.

Dance in the life of Sylvia Ashton-Warner and her Māori pupils is the focus for this paper. My paper will trace those times and places where dance arose and what those moments meant to both Sylvia Ashton-Warner and the children. Alongside these descriptive events will be an interpretive analysis of why I believe dance was important and central to Ashton-Warner's pedagogical approach and philosophy of teaching, and what her legacy might mean in today's educational climate.

SYLVIA THE TEACHER WITH LINKS TO CREATIVITY

Throughout the book *Teacher* there are multiple references to Ashton-Warner's beliefs about teaching. Some of these pedagogical beliefs are well-known. Others are perhaps a little less recognised or, indeed, seen more as aspirations of the kind of teacher Ashton-Warner would like to have been. It is probably safe to say that noted aspects such as "organic teaching" and "to teach is possible, to teach is a joy" (Ashton-Warner, 1986, p. 7) are well-known catch-phrases, which denote the type of teacher she was, or appeared to be.

I am also well acquainted with Ashton-Warner's focus on 'the vent' and the dichotomous nature of destructiveness and creativeness she potentially saw in children. As she stated, "I see the mind of a five year old as a volcano with two vents; destructiveness and creativeness. And I see that to the extent that we widen the creative channel, we atrophy the destructive one" (1986, p. 33).

Ashton-Warner put forth the idea that a creative child can be a happy and constructive child, thus diminishing the opposite disposition of anger and destructive tendencies. The following passage clearly illustrates Ashton-Warner's belief that these destructive tendencies are more than just figments of the imagination, and creative experiences are the irrevocable solution:

I can't disassociate the activity in an infant room from peace and war. So often I have seen the destructive vent, beneath an onslaught of creativity, dry up under my eyes. Especially with the warlike Māori five-year-olds who pass through my hands in hundreds, arriving with no other thought in their heads other than to take, break, fight and be first. (Ashton-Warner, 1986, p. 93)

Through the conduit of creative expression and engrossed involvement in creating art works, Ashton-Warner saw the potential for the elimination of violence. Within the young child she saw the humble origins of peace, where creativity was viewed as a measure to interrupt the patterns of established behaviours of fighting

and competitiveness. Ashton-Warner's belief was that without the output of creativity the children would resort to their learned destructive tendencies which were, no doubt, often physically manifested.

Consequently, a creative approach to teaching evolved as a methodology to replace less desirable traits with artistic and aesthetic sensibilities where the child's inner world had the opportunity to become evident in the outer world. Creativity and artistic ventures acted as a bridge between the inner and outer worlds of the child because, as Ashton-Warner categorically states, "there is only one answer to destructiveness and that is creativity" (1986, p. 96).

As Ashton-Warner (1986) continues to explain, the destructive spirit is associated with an unlived life and the ills of society can be attributed to the suppression of creativity. This is where I see a strong correlation with other educators and writers who express similar hopes. Greene (1978, 1988) has often claimed that one is never done on this earth because 'wide-awakeness' and consciousness-raising for a vision of the possible are pursuits of a lifetime with no end in sight. She argues that a critical examination of one's own actions and imagination are crucial for the eradication of apathy and oppression. The value of the arts in education goes beyond just the intrinsic aspect. Greene believes that the arts seek to stir an active and conscientious interest in the world to awaken young people from a state of passivity and numbness to a place of being inquisitive creators and performers.

Because the arts in education incorporate critical thinking and creativity (Ministry of Education, 2000), they have the potential to arouse people to that place of 'wide-awakeness'. Being involved in a wide range of perceptive encounters, which incorporate a multitude of senses and full bodily engagement, has the potential to open new ways of seeing and learning. As stated by Greene (1978), "curriculum, to me, ought to be a means of providing opportunities for the seizing of a range of meanings by persons open to the world" (p. 169). Moreover, Greene (1988) declared that "education for freedom must clearly focus on the range of human intelligences, the multiple languages and symbol systems available for ordering experience and making sense of the world" (p. 125). I concur with Greene that through the arts and creativity new ways of looking and doing can be realised using multiple and embodied approaches in education.

Noddings (2006) also suggests that "possibly no goal of education is more important – or more neglected – than self-understanding. Socrates advised us 'Know thyself,' and he claimed that the unexamined life is not worth living" (p. 10). Noddings' thesis about self-understanding and an examination of how external and internal forces affect our lives is not unlike Ashton-Warner's viewpoint that children have both inner and outer visions related to the world in which they live. These visions or forces can either be constructive or destructive, depending on what is seen as possible for the children and for society. When viewing how schools should be conceived Read (1986) also suggests schools consider humanitarian concerns. He does so using Ashton-Warner's own phrase describing schools,

as “a crèche of living where people can still be changed,” and where creative activities are the agents of this change. If we want humanity to have a future – a future of any kind – *this is all that matters*. (p. 13)

From an embodied perspective, author and dance educator Stinson (2005) has repeatedly advocated for learning experiences “that help us live a meaningful human life” (p. 88). She further avows:

If one purpose of school were to help young people discover what they love sufficiently to invest in the hard work of practice as they face challenges and endure the inevitable frustrations and disappointments that come with creating a meaningful life, it would be hard to argue that any of the arts should be excluded. (p. 88)

Hence, Stinson sees dance, together with other areas of learning in the arts as collectively contributing to the purpose of schools and what we desire for our children and lives. Stinson’s definition of dance also connects to both an inner and outer awareness. She believes that dance is paying attention to “what movement and stillness ... feel like on the inside” (2002, p. 158). This kinaesthetic sense becomes transferred to what the body is doing outwardly, which inextricably connects to Ashton-Warner’s belief in children having both inner and outer visions. Given all the aforesaid points of view, I now turn my attention back to the meaning of dance in Sylvia’s classroom.

THE AWAKENINGS OF DANCE IN SYLVIA’S CLASSROOM

As outlined at the start of this paper, the genesis for the emergence of dance in Mrs Henderson’s classroom appears to have been evoked by that special moment at the piano. When Sylvia Ashton-Warner played Schubert she found dance in her classroom that early spring morning. Ashton-Warner’s first reference to dancing in *Teacher* is linked to the significance of playing music in the classroom. When she played the first eight notes of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony she discovered that it was a powerful command mechanism for creating attention, as expressed in the following quote:

... it gave me whole attention. You might argue, “But how could a child at the far end of a room full of movement, talk and dance hear eight soft single notes?” ... The ones near the piano did ... They’d touch the others ... spreading silence itself ... Those silences and those stillnesses. (Ashton-Warner, 1986, p. 17)

There is also a link between the natural language dialogue Ashton-Warner suggests and what I view as the organic language of the body, which also becomes a channel for communicating or telling stories in children’s lives. Ashton-Warner saw this organic body expression, too, when she talks about spontaneous dancing where “there is more music in these children than flesh and blood. This is what I mean by ‘abstract organic pattern of behaviour’ ... when my children broke into dancing the other day” (1986, pp. 196-197).

An organic approach to teaching in Ashton-Warner’s pedagogy connects to nature, which links to form, shape and beauty. Dance reappears when walking to

converse with nature to draw and count numbers among the flax and fern. This is where “some of the girls dance the ‘Babes in the Wood’ ballet and cover two children with leaves” (Ashton-Warner, 1986, p. 77). The sensory nature of learning is encouraged with hands-on encounters with multiple textures, and physicality is invited into the learning experiences wherever possible. The children revel in games and physical movement activities, often dancing amid the trees or sliding down the grassy banks.

The references to dance emerge frequently in the segment described as “The Golden Section” (Ashton-Warner, 1986, p. 75), when appreciable stimuli offered by nature provide multiple possibilities for dance as evident in the following passages. “The birds have supplied us with movements for expressive dancing. There’s a magpie dance and a lark dance, although we have seen no larks ...” (p. 80) and “The falling leaves supply us with endless dance designs, both formal and informal. Also the fin movement of fish. And frogs” (p. 81).

THE EMERGING SIGNIFICANCE OF DANCE FOR SYLVIA

A section dedicated specifically to dance occurs part way into the book *Teacher* and is accompanied by some captivating pictures of both boys and girls engaged in dance. Their faces show sheer delight and the bodies are full to the brim with vigour; not a casual or lack-lustre exploration of dance this, but an all-embracing, rigorous and yet graceful rendition. Definitively headed Dancing, the paragraph commences as follows:

Dancing I place in the morning output time, considering it as good a medium as any other, since Plato said it was the one complete expression involving the faculties on all levels, spiritual, intellectual and physical. That’s what I think too. Not that I deliberately teach it for that reason. It just happened one bright spring morning when I was playing some Schubert to please no one but myself that a child stood up from his work and began composing a dance, then another, then another, and there it all was. And here it all still is. (Ashton-Warner, 1986, p. 90)

As a result of this discovery, dance became established as a regular occurrence in the daily programme of the school. Dance was placed alongside creative writing, key vocabulary and organic vocabulary, together with other artistic ventures such as singing, painting, clay, sand and water, and last but not least, two very special possibilities, day-dreaming and loving. I surmise that a programme which reflects such diverse and enriching fodder must be beneficial for the participants. Even the language used to describe the daily programme utilises the terminology of dance with the titles “Daily Rhythm” and “Breathe Out” and “Breathe In” (Ashton-Warner, 1986, p. 101).

As evident in Ashton-Warner’s own words, the importance of dance as an ally of organic writing is expressed accordingly:

Since writing of this kind is the most exhaustive of all the mediums used in the output period, I time it early in the morning. Often we

break the writing time with expressive dancing since dance is body talk anyway. I know for sure that some welcome it, and it may help composition, but I don't know. (1986, p. 55)

What I see here is Ashton-Warner's belief that whether or not dance enabled children to improve their writing, it was just as important to nurture the expressive soul. Like Ashton-Warner, I believe that ensuring the children's real lives are ever present and not keeping them protected from emotions create children who have passion for their work. Using their experiences and being able to tell their stories in their own words or body language is a powerful agent for children in contrast to books with words that do not mean anything to young readers.

Although dance evolved creatively from the children in a similar way as organic writing, Ashton-Warner ventured to offer some augmentation. She states:

Although most of the interpretations come from them, I indulge myself by providing them with a further selection of movements to use as they choose, to supplement their own movements. But I haven't noticed much of it being used voluntarily in their interpretation of new music. The old story of imposition again. (Ashton-Warner, 1986, pp. 90-91)

Ashton-Warner never used other than classical music "because it was a classic that brought them to their feet in the first place" (Ashton-Warner, 1986, p. 92). Whilst Ashton-Warner's manifestation of dance in the classroom is applauded, it was also curious she did not appear to foster Māori dance to the same degree. She chose to use only classical music composed by the European masters, which is contrary to the more progressive approach taken with key vocabulary. There tended to be a view of native dance or hula as less refined than the dance evoked by Schubert or Chopin. Was this a sign of the times or the possibility that Ashton-Warner recognised a way for young rural Māori children to gain access to the cultural capital of the dominant Westernised canon through employing something which had a seemingly natural connection to the children's lives? Although hints throughout *Teacher* and also in *Spinster* indicate the children did perform the haka where they "might get up and dance in the middle of their sums ... or lead a haka" (Ashton-Warner, 1986, p. 198) or where "Matawhero stood up and led a haka last week to blow off steam" (1980, p. 228), the haka was kept for special occasions because, as Ashton-Warner remarked, "it rouses them" (1986, p. 193). Composers such as Schubert, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Chopin, Brahms, and Grieg were some of the most commonly used. Ashton-Warner admitted she was not conversant with dance as a subject. Nevertheless, she pursued the newly found endeavour through a sensing of what was happening, drawing from her source of dancing knowledge which resided in her imagination. I believe the combination of the astute recognition of the children's desire to dance and Ashton-Warner's professed heartfelt aspirations for the children ensured the dancing spirit remained alive.

Ashton-Warner posits, "My aim is that a child may be able to create dancing as freely as he dreams or writes autobiography or plays. But I haven't got there yet" (1986, p. 92), although by the time Ashton-Warner wrote *Spinster* (1958) she admitted that she had got there, as encapsulated in the following passage:

This morning I try out an idea from Peer Gynt from “The Hall of the Mountain King”; I like the eeriness of the bass quavers. A sudden silence falls on the room and, turning, I see that Mohi, my fair-haired Māori ... has risen from his dreaming on the mat. He pulls his jersey half over his head, leaving his eyes alone looking out from the neck hole, his head hooded, his elbows withdrawn so that the ends of his sleeves flap emptily, and he is dancing out these eight quavers to the bar, these eerie bass quavers

As the passion of the rising music takes him up ... he follows fastidiously with hastening feet each split beat until at length, when the Grieg falls in pitch and slows down to the last chords, Mohi also falls in pitch and slows down to his own last steps (Ashton-Warner, 1980, p. 102)

Following this account in *Spinster*, Ashton-Warner wonders how dancing of this nature arose but began to realise there was something special in the creation of such dance. As she stated: “It brings that *key* nearer. I’m absolutely certain there is a key now” (Ashton-Warner, 1980, p. 103). Thus dance not only became an important component of the output period during the morning’s work, dance was also seen as a possible way to assist with writing as well as being used to alleviate the stress of school work during any time of the day. Additionally, the possibility was envisaged that dance could become another avenue of expression and form of communication about life.

Here, dance is thought of as something that could be as central for the children as the process of creating their own stories and plays. I would hazard a guess that dance for these children was probably as important and, in various ways, even more important for some children as an outlet of expression, particularly if this was their regular or most common *modus operandi*. When used this way dance becomes a holistic process integrating the mind and the body where, as Ashton-Warner (1980, p. 60) postulates, “body-talk” can be perceived as “the true voice of feeling”.

THE LEGACY OF SYLVIA ASHTON-WARNER

The very fact dance was entertained as a crucial component of the children’s lives indicated that Ashton-Warner had a breadth of humanity and insightfulness, which saw beyond the taken-for-granted or the regulated school curricula fare. There was recognition of the inner drive or intrinsic way of knowing that Ashton-Warner honoured in her teaching where she fostered children’s “inner visions” (Ashton-Warner, 1986, p. 32) or organic ways of seeing and imagining. Children’s imaginations and the passionate engagement they have for the world in which they live were the cornerstones for her teaching. To overlook the children’s own lived experiences and the feelings imbued in such experiences, was, as Ashton-Warner states “an offence against art” (p. 33).

I identify that as a person and educator Ashton-Warner was a visionary; a person who saw very clearly the effects of a stifling and homogeneous curriculum predicated on Eurocentric-westernised ways of knowing and being. During the time when Ashton-Warner was teaching much was attributed to Dewey (Simon &

Tuhiwai Smith, 2001) and the progressive movement, where teachers were encouraged to try new pedagogies and new configurations. In their book *A Civilising Mission?* Simon and Tuhiwai Smith (2001) talk about “making use of the children’s own language” (p. 108) where Sylvia Henderson (aka Sylvia Ashton-Warner) was seen as “the best known exponent of this approach” (p. 108). There is mention, however, that other teachers who taught in Māori schools during Ashton-Warner’s time also adopted similar methods for teaching English reading by writing their own stories. As one teacher in a Native School stated: “First of all there were Sylvia’s books and they were full of murderous things ... Another girl, hers were ... good stories ... Mine were somewhere in between. I think mine were the best” (p. 109). I do not know if a comparable approach applied to dance. The curriculum content Ashton-Warner was expected to impart was content that had little relationship to the learners in a rural Māori school, hence the reason she adapted her teaching methods and subject matter. An interconnected and interrelated pedagogical approach that incorporated the aesthetic and cultural dimensions of the human community she faced each day opened up new horizons for her teaching and curriculum. I would go so far as to say that Ashton-Warner was, to some degree, postmodern in her approach to teaching because she embodied difference, compassion, and aesthetics, within an ecological and liberating framework situated in a localised context (Slattery, 2006).

The children in Ashton-Warner’s classroom were able to embody the richness of their environment through aesthetic and sensory engagement with learning opportunities, thereby storing an abundant tapestry of lived experience and knowledge in their bodies and autobiographical memories (Krasny, 2004, in Slattery, 2006). Finding dance in Sylvia’s classroom is the epitome of such learning, as illuminated by Ashton-Warner herself on that wonderful day of discovery, which she refers to as perhaps her highest peak of achievement in her teaching:

There was the loveliest sight I have seen. Swaying, dipping, whirling to the spring music of Schubert. They had never heard this music before. They had never danced in that wonderful way. It was purely spontaneous. Purely *organic!* (1986, p. 191)

Ashton-Warner displayed a foresight that was rarely seen in educational circles during her time of teaching. She was seriously concerned about the atrophy of creativity and thus the apathy of a nation who had a penchant for instant gratification via consumerist goods, even as far back as the 1930s. Ashton-Warner valued diversity and yet found herself perplexed by the sameness of students produced through standardised educational content. Where was originality? Where was the creative spirit? Ashton-Warner exclaims:

I like unpredictability and variation; I like drama and I like gaiety; I like peace in the world and I like interesting people, and all this means that I like life in its organic shape and that’s just what you get in an infant room where the creative vent widens. For this is where style is born in both writing and art, for art is the way you do a thing and an education based on art at once flashes out style. (1986, p. 99)

Although Ashton-Warner claimed that she was in august company when equating what she believed in with Beethoven and Tchaikovsky, it was her sheer determination that enabled the emergence and survival of the arts, such as dance, in her classroom. Because of the dichotomous nature of creation and destruction, Ashton-Warner was forever mindful that “every happening in the infant room is either creative or destructive; every drawing, every shaping, every sentence and every dance goes one way or the other” (Ashton-Warner, 1986, p. 100). For this reason a fire burned relentlessly in Sylvia’s soul to ensure that the arts “crashed through” (Ashton-Warner, 1986, p. 23) rather than facing the fate of perishing.

Ashton-Warner’s teachings had an underlying principle of peace, or, at least, release from destructive tendencies and the devastation of war, which, in my mind, links to compassion, equity and justice. Creativity was the ‘vent’ and dance, accompanied by companionable aesthetic disciplines such as music, literature, drama, poetry and art provided that release or a ‘wide-awakeness’ (Greene, 1978, 1988) of the aesthetic vision.

CONCLUSION

I was heartened and moved by Ashton-Warner’s passion for what she did as a teacher. But I was enthralled by her radical spirit and courageousness to enter worlds unknown; to push the boundaries in order to find those liminal spaces so dance and other outliers in the educational world could find a place in her classroom and children’s lives. Without these personal traits, dance may have never appeared or have been found in Sylvia’s classroom, and when dance was found, it may never have been held onto.

Whilst one could suspect the redemptive nature of a white teacher educating Māori children, given the context of the time when Ashton-Warner taught, or view Ashton-Warner as an eccentric, it would be short-sighted to negate her belief that channelling the creative spirit could act as a means to counter destructiveness and to imagine possibilities. Perhaps if we all found dance in our classrooms or educational spaces there would be the possibility that, at least for some, dance could be a path for peace and happiness for the sake of humanity. As alluded to before, creativity and imagination are agents of change if we want humanity to have a future that matters, and dance is one of those places where creativity resides and the imagination can soar.

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