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Our Proud Heritage. Making Reading Meaningful: Sylvia Ashton-Warner and the Language Experience Approach

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Language is a foundation for learning and development, including learning to read and write. Educators have long been focused on promoting early literacy skills as well as children's motivation, meaning making, and joy while reading and writing. Influenced by social, political, and historical factors over the decades, educators have thought about and debated how to effectively do so for each and every child.

Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1908–1984) was among the educators who advocated for children, especially those marginalized socially and culturally, to learn to read in meaningful, responsive ways. She wrote and taught about connecting children's voices to their literacy learning. She exemplified using children's key vocabulary, tapping into children's funds of knowledge, linking spoken words to print, and co-constructing text to build a repertoire of words. Her thinking and work went against the educational protocols of her time. Yet her intuition and her positive results with children encouraged her to persevere in developing the Language Experience Approach (LEA), a strategy that continues to be successfully and widely used in literacy education. Ashton-Warner was an unconventional pioneer whose legacy remains relevant and applicable to today's early childhood classrooms.

This column introduces the historical context surrounding Ashton-Warner's life and her teaching in New Zealand. It highlights how she conceived of and implemented the LEA, its evolution and use over time, and the enduring principles that current and future early childhood educators can apply in their own settings.

Sylvia Ashton-Warner: A Rule Breaker and Innovator



Photograph of Sylvia Ashton-Warner, Ref: PAColl-2522-7-01-01, courtesy of the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand

While building meaningful relationships with students in order to teach effectively may not seem radical now, Sylvia Ashton-Warner, who was born near the turn of the twentieth century, was a rule breaker in many ways (Hood 1988; White 2014). She was a gifted artist, pianist, singer, and writer, and she is perhaps best known in the education field for creating the original LEA with the Indigenous people of New Zealand (Ashton-Warner 1963; Hood 1988; White 2014). Although situated in this field's history and coming from a family of educators, Ashton-Warner initially resisted following in her parents' footsteps to become a teacher. Yet she needed a way to support herself and her family, so she eventually took up the call, beginning in a teaching position considered low status in 1938 and continuing to teach until 1955.

Although Ashton-Warner wrote a book titled *Teacher* in 1963, in 1978, she explained in the New Zealand documentary *Three New Zealanders* (Broadcasting Council of New Zealand Television) that she was "not a teacher" and that she would "merely supply the conditions." Ashton-Warner (1963) recognized and wrote about the significance of facilitating learning through student-centered pedagogy and the social nature of learning (interactions with others can prompt new learning and development for individuals). When she began her teaching career, Ashton-Warner took an early childhood position at a state-run school at what was perceived as the lowest level in New Zealand, teaching the youngest Indigenous children, comparable to ages associated with kindergarten and first grade in the US. Much like the inhumane and inequitable treatment experienced by Native Americans in the US, the Indigenous peoples of New Zealand were relegated to segregated state schools with far fewer resources and lower expectations. Historically, teachers in New Zealand who worked with the Māori people were thought of as second-class teachers, whose work led to little academic progress, who deserved lower pay, and who were considered unqualified to work with White children, thought by many at that time to be more capable (Ashton-Warner 1963, 1974).

Teaching Māori Children to Read

Early on, Ashton-Warner knew literacy learning had to be personally meaningful. While teaching Māori schoolchildren, she boldly ignored the government's required reading methods and materials; she did not see the benefits of them for her students. So when her New Zealand superiors insisted that their workbooks were required, she succinctly and simply stated her strong opposition: "I do not believe in them" (Broadcasting Council of New Zealand Television 1978).

Instead, Ashton-Warner observed that her students responded positively to learning to read in English by using their own words, when elicited by her and linked to their lives and experiences. She discovered the power of connecting meaningful words from children's own voices with learning to read and write. Like other thinkers and writers who went against the tide of the times, she also understood the necessity and benefits of living in, experiencing, and serving the communities in which one teaches. In defying the policies and practices of the day and in an attempt to bring literacy equity to Indigenous people denied a high-quality education, Ashton-Warner (1963) realized that her students' inner words were key to unlocking the puzzle of the printed word and to being fully responsive to the literacy needs of her young Māori emerging readers and writers. Thus, her foundational technique of eliciting key vocabulary and the Language Experience Approach (LEA) was born.

Sylvia Ashton-Warner discovered the power of connecting meaningful words from children's own voices with learning to read and write.

Initially, the LEA began with the organic, intentional daily practice of asking each child what word they would like written on a card (Ashton-Warner 1963). Ashton-Warner then developed more specific steps for capturing children's experiences, beginning with their home spoken language and then writing it in English print. (See "What Is the Language Experience Approach?" for more details.) At the heart of this strategy is *key vocabulary*, which are words elicited from the children that are of "intense, personal meaning, instantly recognized, which caption the native imagery and provide a proper foundation for reading" (Ashton-Warner 1963, 33). These words from within hold deep meaning for a young child and can be used to help them learn to read their own words.

Ashton-Warner (1974) further elaborated on the importance of the inside-out nature of key vocabulary, echoing connections between the children's lives and their motivation to read and write:

> As the pattern of any physical movement is from the body outward, so is the flow of the [key vocabulary] from the mind outward, from the inside out. The words start often with our child's own name, but not necessarily, or Mommy or Daddy, then his brothers and sisters . . . [then moving] . . . to people outside the family, things outside, animals, pets, his bike. . . . [Each child] is unique and variable; besides, big emotional explosions can take place in the course of it, but it's a natural guideline (33).

In these ways, children's own words offer a link from oral to written language.

What Is the Language Experience Approach?

Sylvia Ashton-Warner explained that the intent of the Language Experience Approach (LEA) was to "release the native imagery of our child and use it for working material" (1974, 17); in other words, to replace the reading material of the state workbooks. When Ashton-Warner (1974) shared her definition of the LEA with teachers in the US, she emphasized that a child's spoken word reflects their inner eye (1963). She viewed these words and phrases as "the captions of the mind pictures that have the power and the light" (14) and as "sentence length and story length of the captions within" (30). Ashton-Warner illustrated the importance of these first words

for understanding the reading process by comparing them to the complexity of Egyptian hieroglyphics and the power of Helen Keller's recognition of her first word, *water*; these first written words hold worlds of meaning from within. Ashton-Warner stated, "I reach a hand into the mind of a child, bring out a handful of the stuff I find there, and use that as our first working material" (1963, 15).

What began as a simple daily practice turned into the following specific steps that Ashton-Warner implemented and later taught other educators to implement.

Step 1: Provide a memorable, shared experience for children.

Step 2: Ask children to describe their experience, and transcribe children's exact words, including key vocabulary. This vocabulary is often focused on their senses (what they saw, heard, smelled, tasted, and/or touched) and what they want to remember about the experience. Words are transcribed on chart paper, a whiteboard, or other paper or electronic display. According to Ashton-Warner (1963, 1974), Stauffer (1970), and Van Allen and Halvorsen (1961), teachers should spell correctly as the children's words are transcribed exactly, which may mean spelling a child's idiomorphic word (like "blerg") or transcribing incorrect grammar (like "We goed to the farm") to show that what we say can be written and then read.

Step 3: Read and reread the transcription. Children see and hear their own words in print. This third step may include revising words for meaning. Subsequently, students and teachers read and reread their creation, even on subsequent days. It is helpful to keep all electronic or physical charts for revisiting children's archive of experience, to provide continued practice in reading more words, thereby adding to the children's repertoire of words.

The Evolution and Legacy of Ashton-Warner's Approach

Word spread about Ashton-Warner's beliefs and practices, including the LEA. Educators from around the world wanted to know more. For a while after leaving the classroom, Ashton-Warner provided for her family by working with universities, giving workshops, writing books, and even traveling to the US to teach educators there about the LEA. After teaching for several decades, with always shifting life priorities and interests, she found more and more delight in artistic, creative endeavors in music, painting, and writing

novels for adults. She published five award-winning novels, many translated into multiple languages and some, like *Spinster,* made into quite popular movies. Although Ashton-Warner's focus and passions shifted, the LEA persisted in educational circles. To this day, this strategy remains popular for use with emerging readers and writers.

Many have built upon and from Ashton-Warner's concepts and implementation of the LEA, maintaining the focus on creating texts that are based on children's own experiences, that are transcriptions of children's spoken words, and that are used for literacy instruction. Other literacy approaches and philosophies were coming into prominence, some of which aligned well with the LEA. From more holistic approaches to more skills-based ones, some of these approaches or philosophies were complementary to the LEA, and some were contradictory. With these ebbs and flows, the LEA has remained a feasible strategy for supporting literacy learning, perhaps because it can be implemented with limited resources and across varying social and cultural contexts.

Related to the evolution of the LEA in the 1960s and 1970s, Stauffer (1970) and Van Allen and Halvorsen (1961), who learned from Ashton-Warner directly, wrote about her seminal work and expanded on the LEA to make it applicable to US contexts. They underscored the connections between spoken words and written language, especially for emerging readers. Van Allen's thinking was translated by many classroom teachers into the following oft-chanted mantra: "What I can think about, I can talk about. What I say, I can write. What I can write, I can read" (Spache & Spache 1973, 243).

Alongside its growing use in the US by early childhood practitioners, literacy researchers have studied and written more about the LEA as a literacy strategy. For example, Cloer, Aldridge, and Dean (1981) wrote about the ways that it impacts the levels of print awareness to ignite children's literacy motivation and skills. Dorr reminded reading educators in 2006 that "what was old is new again" and provided a sample modified LEA lesson plan showing how to use key vocabulary with early elementary students composing sentences to demonstrate learning during a field trip. Others, like Cliett (2014), have focused more specifically on key vocabulary and how current and future teachers can use it as authentic material to build and extend young readers' repertoire of words.

These shared experiences and the co-construction of texts about them remain essential to LEA proponents. The shared experience is considered the yeast that invigorates children to have something meaningful to say. Almost anything can serve as the catalyst experience: experimenting with ice, mixing colors while finger painting, or peeling a fresh orange, to name just a few. Teachers elicit and transcribe children's responses to these firsthand experiences.

Though Ashton-Warner's body of pedagogical work is relatively small in comparison to her other endeavors throughout her life, her literacy strategy has made its mark and is recognized in literacy education (Tierney, Readence & Dishner 1995; Vacca et al 2003; McGee & Richgels 2012; Tompkins 2013). Additionally, the LEA has been used by educators serving English learners from birth to adulthood (Mohr 1999; Nelson & Linek 1999; Dorr 2006; Nessel & Dixon 2008) and those working with students with disabilities (Gomwalk 2018; Jozwik & Mustian 2020; Polloway, Patton, & Serna 2001) to foster literacy development.

Supporting Today's Diverse Classrooms and English Learners

Mohr (1999) captured the positive possibilities of applying the LEA through a case study of a Latina first grader learning English. Mohr contrasted using a typical word list provided to English learners (with words like *peach, nail,* and *ladder*) to the LEA method of using words, and then contextualized sentences, after a read aloud of a highly predictable picture book. In this instance, the LEA led to an increase in the child's reading scores.

In 2002, the work of Labbo, Eakle, and Montero showed how the LEA evolved in modern times, updating the old LEA approach of using chart paper to a new approach using digital photography with kindergartners. Likewise, Pappamihiel and Knight (2016) provide a case study of how a second-grade teacher helped dual language learners and refugees from Burma engage in a museum field trip with a digital LEA and follow-up literacy activities. In small heterogeneous groups, the teacher encouraged the use of children's own images and words to document the field trip in their digital LEA portfolios. The digital images, cooperatively labeled and captioned by the groups, led to an increased repertoire of English words, more conversation and words spoken in English, and strengthened organizational skills.

Supporting the Literacy Development of Children with Disabilities

Educators and researchers have also effectively used the LEA with students with disabilities. Special education professionals Polloway, Patton, and Serna (2001) first outlined the use of the LEA as an alternative to basal readers (leveled reading textbooks). They proposed the LEA as a means to capitalize on students' verbalization and as a key component to boost literacy in terms of word recognition, comprehension, and spelling

for students with disabilities. Gomwalk (2018) studied 20 Primary One nonreaders with intellectual disabilities (IQ scores ranging between 10 and 70) in Nigeria. He used pretests and posttests to compare two randomly assigned groups, one with "business as usual" and one using the LEA. The results indicated that using the LEA led to a statistically significant difference, with students in the LEA group showing improvements in sight word vocabulary and literal reading comprehension according to informal reading inventory scores.

Echoing Labbo and colleagues' digital twist to the LEA (2002), another recent study added a modern literacy layer by using technological tools to support English learners who also had special needs in terms of delayed language development. Jozwik and Mustian (2020) studied learner-dictated passages using voice to text, word prediction, and screen reading tools with English learners with disabilities. Their data showed that the addition of the LEA was linked to increases in the number of words read correctly and decreases in the number of miscues during oral reading for this group of learners.

Implications for Today's Classrooms

Similar to the times which led Sylvia Ashton-Warner to create the LEA and advocate for children's voices, social, political, and historical factors influence current literacy practices. Decades of research and theory have added to the conversation about how to use children's interests, experiences, and language to ignite children's literacy skills. Among the ideas and practices advocated, Ashton-Warner's work in developing the LEA reminds today's educators of these guiding principles for practice:

- **Embrace high expectations of all children,** including those with disabilities and those whose home language is not English. With appropriate supports and personal contexts, all children can become readers and writers.
- **Encourage and support children's oral language development,** asking and listening for words and phrases that connect to children's real lives.
- **Document children's words and phrases in print,** and use these co-constructed texts for effective instruction and future planning.

- **Build upon children's funds of knowledge,** including their home languages, connecting their life experiences to new ideas, school experiences, and important literacy skills.
- **Offer ongoing, authentic language and literacy experiences,** including lots of opportunities to speak, listen, read, write, and think about their own and others' words.

At a time when the boundaries, autonomies, and reach of teachers' instructional decisions may seem tied to required curriculum and standards, the LEA lives on. Reflecting on Ashton-Warner's literacy strategy and its legacy, then and now, early childhood educators can leverage the power of children's own words to honor children's home languages and experiences and to use these meaningful words in literacy lessons to grow readers.

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