Teacher Study Guide

Teacher by Sylvia Ashton-Warner

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

In "Teacher," Sylvia Ashton-Warner recounts some of her years as a teacher of Maori children in New Zealand. The years of her teaching career that are covered in this autobiographical account take place at Fernhill School in Omahu, New Zealand, where her husband Keith Henderson serves as headmaster at the same time. Through her many years of experience in teaching Maori children, especially The Little Ones,who are the five-year-olds in the classrooms known as the Infant Rooms, Sylvia learns that the children benefit most from a teaching approach she terms as organic teaching.

Sylvia becomes a strong advocate of the organic method of teaching which allows the inner vision of the child to emerge and flourish by basing learning techniques on the child's strengths and on the words and terms which are most familiar to him because they originate from his own culture. Sylvia grows to realize that the most effective way to teach the children to learn to read and write English, a language with which these children are only vaguely familiar, is to allow them to take the lead.

Sylvia basically abandons most preconceived notions about teaching children to read. Daily, the youngsters are allowed to select their own words of the day. There are virtually no restrictions in the daily word a child may select—be it "kill" or "ghost" or "kiss." Sylvia writes the selected word on a cardboard and returns it to the child—thereby underscoring the fact that it is his word, his possession. The selected word is used all day in reading, writing and story telling. The child generally does not forget the word as it has intense and personal meaning to him. The day-long repetition of the child's own word serves to solidify it in the child's mind. If one of these "one-worders" is not recognizable to the child the next day, it is abandoned since it did not serve its purpose. Sylvia's organic method of teaching prove to be successful and her handwritten primers, called Maori Transitional Primers, are adopted by the school to bridge the gap between the Maori culture and the reading of English and American primers required by the New Zealand school system.

Sylvia has more to deal with in her classroom than teaching. There is blatant racism between the white and Maori students. Maoris students are often wrongly accused of stealing from the white children. There are physical fights between the children with young Maori boys often displaying very violent tendencies. Sylvia must deal with criticism from her peers, as well, as her approach is not advocated by other educators who do not agree with her innovative methods.

What comes through most clearly and consistently is Sylvia's dedication and emotional attachment to her Maori students and how she is unwavering in her support of them and of allowing them to be themselves. Sylvia remains adamant that she has discovered the teaching method that is most effective for Maori children.

Creative Teaching, 1

Creative Teaching, 1 Summary and Analysis

Organic Reading is Not New

Sylvia Ashton-Warner is an advocate of organic teaching—that is teaching which is simplistic and whose fundamentals are most recognizable or meaningful to those being taught. This approach provides the basis for an education that will grow and flourish from that familiar beginning. For example, a teacher in a famine area, hoping to connect with his pupils, would not begin with words other than "crop," "soil" or other such relevant term. It is the basic kind of teaching method that is necessary to successfully bring a child from one culture to another. Most importantly, organic teaching is a bridge from the known to the unknown and from the inner man to the outer man. It is a first word—it is reading one's first words.

The significance of first words is not a recently developed concept. Voltaire knew the importance of first words—citing that a nation cannot be formed without them. Many languages are established on a system of monosyllables—for example the Chinese language. The Chaldeans invented a system of symbolic figures as the basis of their language—darts represented war and the eye signified a watchful god.

Tolstoy began a fundamental school that was open to all children, including those of the peasantry who had been excluded from education in the past. Tolstoy was emotionally attached to the school for the three years he devoted to it. He began by discarding any traditional teaching methods already in use and focused on connecting with the mind of the peasant child. Tolstoy's school was structured very liberally, permitting the children to select the subjects they wanted to learn. Tolstoy's approach allowed the teachers to easily recognize the children's strengths and weaknesses and thus be able to identify where their support was most needed. The school was a great success and was loved by the students.

The Key Vocabulary

Sylvia is keenly aware of the importance of beginning the education of Maori children at a very young age. Once these tender years pass, their re-education to another culture is rendered next to impossible. Past failures in the education of Maori children can be, at least in part, attributed to attempting to apply the same standards to them as to English-speaking children who do not have the same cultural barriers to overcome. Sylvia's best source of support and counsel comes from her husband, Keith Henderson, who is Fernhill School's headmaster.

Children, indeed all people, have two visions—the inner and the outer. Of the two, the the inner vision is dominant. In Sylvia's, "infant rooms," created for five-year-old Maori children, she allows the children to select their own words—those coming from that

inner vision—in the initial steps in the process of learning to read. Additionally,she includes pictures of other words in order to enhance the children's introduction to reading. The children are allowed to apply their own captions or words to these pictures which come from their inner vision. First words, such as these, must be meaningful to a child. Attaching their own words and visions to the pictures cannot be more meaningful.

By stirring the child's inner vision and thereby sparking his intense interest, reading becomes an organic response—the child wants to read. Being forced to read American books or read about African children with whom they have no connection is wasting the vitality of a Maori child that inherently exists from his own culture and experiences. By-stepping a natural organic connection to the art of reading, presents an unnecessary challenge to the child. By reading about his own life—the people and cultures he already knows about and is a part of—the words and stories are meaningful. When a child develops the love of organic reading at a very young age, he approaches the prospect of reading books of another culture as a joy rather than a burden.

Sylvia writes the words selected by the children on a cardboard. The children select the words without caveat—nothing is taboo. The words can range from "bomb" to "kill" to "kiss" to "house." The word cards become their possessions and they are allowed to take them home. The cards quickly become tattered from the constant handling by the children. Sylvia may introduce her own word—a word like "frightened" after which she asks the class to talk about the word—what they are frightened of, for example. Such discussions leave impressions on the children and the words become part of their lexicons.

The children establish their words—words of comfort for girls like doll and Mummy and those for boys like train and plane. Then there are the fear words that no one other than the children themselves could envision or define. These meaningful, organic words that come from the children are the basis for their eventual love of reading.

Private Key Vocabularies

There are some children who are so emotionally damaged that they cannot envision the inner picture. One child, Rangi, has difficulty with basic words like "come" and "and." Rangi volunteers that he is afraid of the police due to his family's dealing with them. Since intensity is important in learning, once Rangi was given reading cards with "police" and "kill" and "jail" he learned them in minutes. Another child has horrid experiences with domestic abuse in his home. This child responds to reading cards with words such as "fight" and "yell" and "broom." There are both examples of the necessity of establishing private key vocabularies for individual children which unlock the inner vision and launches launch them into reading.

Over an observation period of two years, Sylvia finds that the two most powerful words to emerge from her Maori infant-room vocabulary work are ghost and kiss—the two words are symbolic of the two main instincts of fear and sex. Words that are organic such as these come from the child's inside vision while words from an English primer are inorganic and come from the outer world.

Creative Teaching, 2

Creative Teaching, 2 Summary and Analysis

The Mechanics of Teaching the Key Vocabulary

Sylvia works with the key vocabulary in the morning when creativity is at its highest. Each child is asked to select a new word for the day. Sylvia writes that new word on a piece of cardboard which the child takes back to his mat and re-traces with his finger. The cards are gathered and accumulate in one box. All the cards are spilled out on the mat each day and when the children first come in, they collect all of their own words. They are then partnered with another child and teach each other their words. When a child cannot read one of her own cards, it is destroyed since it has obviously failed as a one-look word for that child. Depending on a child's personal experience, crippling fears may block a child's organic release of a word and may require extra support from the teacher.

In Sylvia's view, the method proves to be the least burdensome on the teacher. It is as though she is not teaching at all—it is being done for her.

Organic Writing

Immediately after key vocabulary work, creative writing is focused upon. The children are asked to write a sentence or a story. Generally, the children do very well, using their skills and words learned from key vocabulary exercises. The children rely on their key vocabularies, self-chosen words and concepts with which they are most familiar. The five-year-olds beginning with just one sentence often increase their writing to half-page stories by the time they are six. Sylvia attributes this development to the children's own creativity. Sylvia is not concerned with the content of their writing. A child might write that he hates school or that his house is going to be burned down that night. What is important is not what the child writes about but that he can express himself freely.

The Mechanics of Teaching Organic Writing

As the children are writing, Sylvia gently nudges them toward correct spelling and grammar—however, the story content is the most important factor and is entirely up to the children. One result of allowing the creative process to flourish, is that the children are quite talkative and the classroom becomes quite noisy. However, in Sylvia's view, this interaction among the students stimulates good writing. Often when a child is stuck on what to write, Sylvia engages him in conversation and he soon begins writing his thoughts down. When a child says he just does not want to write, Sylvia has him write that sentence: "I don't want to write." The creative process then is generally launched and the writing that follows usually reveals some grievance or problem the child is facing.

Content is never forced. It is the teacher's job to extract what is in a child's mind, not dictate what that is. The period that was the least productive in Sylvia's organic classroom experience was when one of her assistants was engaging and talkative. The children often wrote about what the teaching assistant was talking about rather than what was in their own thoughts.

Creative Teaching, 3

Creative Teaching, 3 Summary and Analysis

Organic Reading

"Primer children write their own books," (59). The creative writing that is generated by the children in the morning is used as the reading material for the rest of the day. Use of the children's own writing is successful because the vocabulary and stories are all from their own lives and thus have meaning and are easy to recall. It is in the later sessions, that Sylvia asks children to spell their words out loud. At day's end, however, all the day's words are erased from the board and everyone, children and teacher alike, eagerly look forward to the next day's new words. Often there are connections from one day's words to those of the next day which serves to solidify their meanings.

The afternoon reading consists of each child reading his own story then moving on to tackle the story of another child. Much rich conversation ensues during these periods. The children learn new words from their friends. The natural progression from organic reading is to inorganic reading. Once a child's inner vision is allowed to be expressed, he is primed for movement to standard reading and for the challenges of the unfamiliar.

The Mechanics of Teaching Organic Spelling

After free-play, the children write the new words they requested in the morning on the blackboards. In the liberal setting where there is no pressure to be perfect, being able to spell new words gives the children a feeling of accomplishment.

The Mechanics of Teaching Organic Reading

When confronted with reading books that are in pristine condition, Sylvia knows immediately that the organic reading process has largely been by-passed. Her children's reading books are tattered and worn. They have been read and re-read and used for intense study and instruction. Discussion of reading material is the climax of the organic reading process. The teacher allows the process to flourish on its own by neither praising nor criticizing what is discussed. The teacher is merely an observer and stable presence.

Creative Teaching, 4

Creative Teaching, 4 Summary and Analysis

Maori Transitional Readers

Sylvia compares her infant reading books to those established by educators. Although her children's infant readers include words and stories that represent sadness and even violence, they successfully form the basis for the children to move onto standard readers. She asks rhetorically if the experts who develop the standard American readers for six-year-old children really think that world peace will result from the depiction of a far-away peaceful society is included in a Maori primer. After a rest period where the children close their eyes for a short period, the children often share their dreams (or thoughts) with Sylvia. She often hears of horrific things going on in their lives, but feels certain that it is better out than in.

The difference of the content in the children's minds and that of the standard reading books to which the children will eventually transition is astonishing. Sylvia muses whether English or American children ever fall down and scrape a knee or if it ever rains in those countries. Is everything perfect there? Sylvia worries that the transitional books fall short in that there is no connection between them and the lives of the Maori children. Thankfully, the Maori transitional readers contain some of the familiar vernacular of the Maori people. For example, there is extensive use of "eh" in Maori conversation. For "are we going to the lake," the Maoris would say "to the lake, eh?" The Maori transitional readers are not meant to by-pass the American readers but are designed to help the children move there.

The American books, purportedly designed to teach English, in reality are looked to to bridge a 2,000 year gap between races. These transitional primers refrain from using common contractions. Instead of "don't" the primer reads "do not" which is not the way most people speak. While Sylvia admires American books for their story length, use of recurring words and sentence length, their content is not suitable for the Maori children. The pristine illustrations in American transitional books fall short creatively from the children's own story illustrations which may contain green-eared people, orange houses and purple trucks. Sylvia finds that it is beneficial to hold the Maori children over, when necessary, in infant room reading so that when they reach the upper grades they are not falling behind and becoming embarrassed and disenchanted with the whole educational process.

The Golden Section

"The Golden Section," refers to ideal proportion and to the intersection of nature (especially plant life) and numbers. Sylvia strongly feels that this concept cannot be adequately explained in the classroom; rather, it can be understood in nature and she often takes the children on nature walks where the children can see the concept first-

hand: for example, the "decreasing size of spans between twigs on a branch as it tapers to its definitive end." On these outings, the children are asked to count trees or the veins on a fern then go to the sand and write their totals there. The children enjoy this connection to nature and become more open to learning basic mathematics. They often enter into intense discussion in the classroom about their outings and experiment with exercises in mathematics. It is more beneficial to see seeds growing in nature than in an unnatural enclosure inside.

Sylvia loosely applies "The Golden Section" concept to her hands-on approach to teaching in general. She is careful to maintain a balance between traditional teaching and that which can be taught organically or through nature study. A child being stung by a wasp spawns many conversations; the children watch the movement of local birds for expressive dance ideas. The children learn from visits by frogs, snails, monkeys and other animals who wander into the classroom.

Tone

There are two categories of order. The first is a conscious effort to achieve respectability. The second type of order is unconscious and can initially appear to be chaotic. Tone in a classroom is determined by three factors: The personality of the teacher; the personality of the children; and, the teaching method used. Some people, and indeed teachers, have the same tone no matter what the circumstances. A teacher's classroom demeanor is guided in large part by ethics and a district's education department's requirements.

Often classroom "tone" is set by the headmaster. In a nearby school, the tone is serene no matter what calamity may be occurring. In the Maori school, however, there is no true leader and the tone of the classroom is left to the teacher's own resources and discretion. Even though Sylvia liberally allows conversation in her classroom and the room becomes very noisy, she asserts that the resulting creativity spawns a mutual respect between student and teacher and that a natural level of order from the subconscious is achieved.

Creative Teaching, 5

Creative Teaching, 5 Summary and Analysis

Workbook

Sylvia is not a proponent of a workbook or lesson plan. She would rather take the risk of drawing a blank than be limited and stifled by what is written on a page. The joy of teaching is bringing a concept unfettered to the children, not robotically checking off points listed in workbook which only serves as an interfering middleman between student and teacher. Adhering to a daily lesson plan is not possible in the organic teaching process.

Dancing

Most of the expressive dance interpretations come from the children. Sylvia's choice of music is classical which the children seem to respond to most enthusiastically.

The Unlived Life

The creative drive in the classroom becomes that of the student and the teacher, almost a by-stander, flows along in that stream instead of against it. Organic teaching helps establish the creative pattern in the mind for a lifetime, even having impact upon profound global matters like war and peace. Sylvia has witnessed in her experiences the pacification of hostile children when creativity is allowed to be unleashed through the organic teaching process. Destructiveness is the result of the curtailment of creativity which precludes the expansion and development of a child's thoughts and life.

The modern child arrives at his first school experience already somewhat stifled by societal conventions placed upon them by pressured parents. Many standards imposed on children by their parents stem from TV and film. These impositions result in one-patterned minds. However, the intervention of an organic education at a young age can reverse the damage from those early years and result in a creative child. In its foundation, organic teaching is a bridge from the inner world to the outer world.

Once the one-patterned mind emerges, creativity is dead. There is no reason to reach inward for creativity and innovation if all thoughts have been preconceived and predetermined by others (parents). Though many teachers and schools have good intentions to nourish creativity in their students, those goals are lost somewhere in between societal pressures and low-grade reading materials. Discussing the issue with a college professor, Sylvia is told that only one in one-thousand students come to the university as creative, free-thinking individuals.

Life in A Maori School, 1

Life in A Maori School, 1 Summary and Analysis

Much of this section is based on entries from Sylvia's diary and consists of random and somewhat disconnected thoughts and excerpts. A visiting teacher comments on the extraordinary energy the Maori children have and how she has to put her "foot on their necks." Sylvia, understanding the teacher's sentiments, takes a different approach—she lets the energy of the children help to teach them. Standing back and letting the children almost teach themselves, Sylvia concentrates and limits her role to the monitoring of style. Sylvia readily admits that her approach to education is not met with approval by many of her peers and she has been punished with professional isolation. She has even been plagued at times by guilt over her choices.

Traditional teaching identifies two main enemies. One is the children's interest in each other—they want to talk and play with each other, taking valuable time away from learning. Sylvia, of course, channels these relationships into successful teaching tools. Sylvia does achieve the decorum necessary to earn their respect so that when she needs to get information to them that they listen. Oftentimes the energy from these youngsters is intimidating as well as the noise level it elicits and it is tempting to put "the foot on the neck." However, it is more dangerous to stand in the way of this energy than to let it flow. Communication and creativity are better teachers than a foot.

Prejudice against the Maoris is a continuing problem. A middle-class white boy is wrongly accusing a Maori child of stealing something from his desk. It is common for the whites to assume that all the Maoris are thieves. Maori mothers who stop by the class emphasize how important it is for their success and that of their children to have the help and support of the white middle class. They always feel the strong support of the white upper class. Education is the best tool to fight discrimination. More than on any physical or intellectual level, the divide between whites and browns is in their interests, what they have grown accustomed to in their separate cultures. The Maoris love tribal gatherings that focus on food and spiritual matters.

Sylvia maintains only the bare minimum in supplies and resources in her classroom. To learn, the effort and creativity must come from the children with only limited outside help. It is an imposition on a child to give him too many crutches to lean on while he is learning the unknown. Sylvia's official review for her abilities is marked lower than her male counterparts but she is not surprised. Stung by the poor review, Sylvia makes a rash decision to resign after the semester but later, because of her love and dedication to the children, decides to stay.

Sylvia feels sympathy for a 16-year-old Maori girl in the neighborhood whose twin babies both died at birth. Sylvia vows to help the girl but then realizes that the girl is living the only life she knows. Sylvia organizes a basketball team for the girls. She finds it hard to believe the high scores they profess to have made but she would not dream of

monitoring them. Sylvia orders some school uniforms from a local store but when the salesperson realizes it is for Maoris she is reluctant to hold the items since the Maoris are not dependable and often change their minds about purchases. Sylvia plans to visit several injured Maori children in the hospital—serious injuries are common occurrences in the society.

Sylvia is concerned with one Maori couple who has eight children. The family lives in one room and all eight children sleep in the same bed. The children arrive at school dirty and unkempt. The father drinks their money away at the pub on the weekend. When the drunken father returns, violent physical fights often occur between the parents. Sylvia is afraid that someone will wind up murdered. Sylvia is recommending two Maori children for scholarship. They both have brilliant minds and she is very proud of them. However, Sylvia has great concern about what the future can really hold for these bright children.

Sylvia continues her organic approach to teaching. The children virtually teach themselves. Her focus is on the written composition and devotes most of her energies to this area. Many of the children are musical—a pair of seven-year-old twins sing and play the ukulele and are becoming famous in the region.

Life in a Maori School, 2

Life in a Maori School, 2 Summary and Analysis

Post Holiday Notes

On the Friday before holiday break, detectives came to the class to question some of the boys about breaking into the ice-cream shop. The boys are easily led into confessing the deed. Sylvia writes a newsletter each week about activities at the school but is annoyed when she sees that the police department often adds criminal information about the children's relatives to the articles. Sylvia takes great pains in securing uniforms for the boys and girls.

Mr. Tremaine, the Senior Inspector, stops by to give Sylvia the good news that he now has a typewriter in his possession. One of the first projects his office plans to take on is typing Sylvia's handwritten primers. Mr. Tremaine had always felt that her primers represented the much needed bridge between the Maori environment and standard primers. Although Sylvia at first has a hard time letting go of her life's work and is distrustful with them in anyone else's care, she eventually allows Mr. Tremaine to have her works placed in a typewritten version.

Sylvia responds to feedback that one-worders [one-word sentences] were inappropriate by asserting that it is in these one-worders that Maori people often communicate, although their thinking process is much more complex. Therefore, the inclusion of one-worders is conducive to their learning process. One of the students, a little girl named Waiwini, sits by Sylvia's desk for hours sensing that her teacher is in turmoil over the release of her beloved books. Sylvia allows Waiwini to observe as long as she likes—knowing that she is learning more about life watching Sylvia deal with the dilemma than doing her school work.

One of the Maori boys, Matawhero, hits one of the white boys, Gordon. After Matawhero puts on quite a display of disobedience in front of the other children, Sylvia tells Matawhero to go home. The child balks, insisting that he will wait for his sister. Sylvia sends for help from the her husband, the school's headmaster. She is upset with herself for having lost her temper with the boy. Dealing with the Maori girls has its own drawbacks—they cry and sulk over every real or perceived slight. Matawhero returns to school after lying to his grandfather Peter, who is Chairman of the School Committee, that he has been permanently banished from the school. Sylvia concedes that Mark, one of the white boys, would have done better had he begun his reading using white books rather than Maori books.

Sylvia runs into problems with some of her senior girls. One girl, Helen, is behaving badly by sulking during a basketball match. Sylvia visits her husband's senior class and complains about the senior girls who have not completed their knitting projects—pullovers for the basketball team. The girls are told that there will be punishment for

them if they do not complete their work by the next week. Sylvia's husband provides much needed support and the senior girls quickly get to work on their knitting projects. Helen, who continues to sulk and stays away from school, is finally lured back by the prospect of playing the center position for an important game coming up. Later, at the competitions the girls' basketball team wins an important competition.

Mr. Tremaine brings Mr. Lopdell, both of the district office, to see Sylvia's newly typed primers. They are impressed with Sylvia's books and promise to bring the Director of Education the next week. Sylvia is somewhat intimidated by the prospect of a visit from the Director but shows enthusiasm when she realizes her negativity is disappointing Tremaine. Sylvia is exhausted by an influx of new Maori boy students who are full of energy and tend toward violence. Sylvia hides an ax when she hears that one of the boys is threatening to chop one of the other boys up. To give herself a break, Sylvia gets one of her senior assistants, Colleen, to take over lessons for a day. Colleen does well with the boys and is able to corral some of their energy—especially a young boy named Seven, who had become a disciplinary problem.

Life in a Maori School, 3

Life in a Maori School, 3 Summary and Analysis

Post Holiday Notes

Sylvia makes some preliminary conclusions about the keys to success in teaching the Maoris to read. These factors include: use of verbs in the past tense; use of words without pictures when possible; avoidance of certain words that have little meaning like "come" and "look;" avoidance of the use of English primers as models; and, productive use of the child's time in the infant-reading room so he does not suffer in later grades.

Sylvia and Colleen, her assistant, face a daily barrage from their students that is, at times, almost overwhelming: [paraphrasing] Seven is cutting me with his knife! Colleen, disarm him; I lost my pencil; Betty's crying; Watch me; Look at my work; You said I could play piano; You said I could paint. The demands from the children are unending. Sylvia concludes that Colleen provides the "common sense" in the classroom while Colleen suggests that Sylvia represents the patience. One spring afternoon, Sylvia begins playing Schubert on the piano and is amazed to see several of the children respond in dance, not in native hula dancing, but rather something more resembling classic dance. This totally organic response thrills Sylvia.

Sylvia gets word that the school will be inspected the next week which means she will be doing a lot of work and organizing. Her methods will be challenged—especially her organic approach to teaching which relies on the strongest impulse of a child—like the strong branch of a plant—to push up from below ahead of weaker passions. The days go by without the arrival of the inspector, only causing Sylvia more angst. Sylvia is worried about the outcome of the inspection. How will they feel if one of her children gets up and dances or Seven looks for his ax? Sylvia does not consider herself a capable teacher or really a teacher at all; rather, she is just a nitwit that found her way into a classroom. Sylvia has a nervous week for nothing—the inspectors never show up.

Life in A Maori School, 4

Life in A Maori School, 4 Summary and Analysis

Holidays

Sylvia makes a Maori belt for her coat which proudly displays unity for the blended cultures. Wearing it around town, Sylvia receives a lot of positive responses, especially from the Maoris. One of the white children, Dennis, is experiencing psychological problems due, at least in part, to the harsh upbringing by his mother. Another white child, June, has been away from the schools also suffering from emotional problems. Sylvia wishes she could work with some of these neurotic white children.

Another professor complains about Sylvia's messy classroom but she takes no offense. To Sylvia, her students with perfect penmanship are the least creative and those with the greatest creativity are failures with pencils. Sylvia is concerned when she sees some of her newer writers composing disjointed stories with no cohesion. During the holidays, a nearby gathering of Maoris leads to three all-nighters with exuberant and drunken Maoris singing over a very loud loud-speaker. However, Sylvia and Keith are patient and see it through without complaint. They understand the social needs that make the Maoris happy.

After the Holidays, Sylvia forms an orchestra which puts on a performance in the auditorium. Although at rehearsal she had taught the children to look forward at the audience, they feel more comfortable in a ring facing each other when the actual performance is given. Each new experience Sylvia has in the school, brings her closer to the children. She feels a mutual bonding between herself and the children. Sylvia understands that this intimate bond must develop for her teaching to be effective.

Mr. Tremaine brings by some important people to see Sylvia's primers. At Mr. Tremaine's request, Sylvia makes a presentation on her books and her Maori Infant Reading Scheme. Sylvia does not identify the visitors in the book since at the time of the book's publication she is looking for a publisher for the reading scheme.

Remembering

Remembering Summary and Analysis

A year later, Mr. Henderson is still headmaster at Fernhill School. Sylvia, however, has retired. A workman comes to Sylvia's residence asking for her husband. The worker wants to report that the floors in the infant rooms are still too wet from newly applied varnish to allow the children in. Sylvia knows this is a problem for the teachers who are busy attempting to get everything organized and ready for the children. The workman points out that it is so humid that it is difficult for anything to dry. Sylvia agrees, adding that her clothes have been hanging on the line for days and are still damp.

Sylvia visits the newly remodeled infant rooms and is thrilled with the bright colors the walls are painted with, no doubt inspired by paintings by the children. The varnished floor is polished to a high sheen and reflects the beautiful colors of the room. Sylvia reminisces about her years with her infant room students. She remembers the rooms in disrepair, the wild animals that would wander in, the noise, the laughter and the tears, but above all each and every child and how they grew and developed.

Sylvia watches the new five-year-olds walk in with their new teacher nervously welcoming them. The teacher asks them to take their shoes off and to be careful with the newly varnished floors. Most of the youngsters are white with perfect hair and tidy clothes. Sylvia moves to the next room with older children—the six-year-olds from last year that she taught. The children say good morning to her but they seem different, subdued. Sylvia is disturbed to see that the neat charts that the teacher is displaying have no Maori words. She is also bothered that the very clear printing on the charts is replacing the children's own rickety handwriting. The printing is much better than the children could do before but sadly they will feel very little connection to the austere words. Sylvia leaves the silent, shining room and returns home. The tears that sprinkle down her face do not remove the sadness and loss she feels.

Characters

Sylvia Ashton-Warner

Sylvia Ashton-Warner is the teacher of five-year-old Maori children who are students at Fernhill School in Omahu, New Zealand. The children are placed in Infant Reading Rooms where Sylvia determines that the traditional approach to learning to read English will not work with these children. Instead, Sylvia adopts an innovative teaching approach, termed organic teaching, which is based on the child's inner vision, which develops from his own experience and culture. Throughout this account, Sylvia remains a strong advocate of the children and this method of teaching them. She has an emotional attachment to the children and expresses great concern for their potential in the future.

Sylvia goes to great lengths to accommodate the needs of the child. She abandons traditional methods and reading primers that she deems not appropriate nor effective in teaching the Maori children who are only superficially familiar with proper English. In applying her organic teaching approach, Sylvia allows the children to "teach themselves." She extracts words and terms from the children's inner vision to teach them first words. Rather than episodes from American or English primers, Sylvia allows the children to learn to read words that have intense meanings for them and that stem from their own experiences and culture. There are very few restrictions—children can select any word from "kill" and "ghost" to "kiss" and "love." The children easily recognize these words because they are their own and have meaning to them. Sylvia is successful in her new method, as witnessed by the school's adoption of her primers, known as Maori Transitional Primers.

Sylvia must deal with isolation and criticism from her contemporaries who do not agree with her innovative teaching methods. Teaching is not her only challenge in the classroom as Sylvia is also consistently confronted with racism between the Maori and the white students and must deal with Maori boys, many of whom are violent.

The Maori People

The Maori people that Sylvia Ashton-Warner encounters during her tenure as a teacher at the Fernhill School in Omahu, New Zealand, are portrayed as genial, enthusiastic people who have been held back by poverty and racism. Sylvia sees the inner vision of the Maori children and is convinced of their abilities and intelligence. Many of these children face adverse and even life-threatening circumstances in their homes. Some of the students come to class dirty and rumpled and obviously ill-prepared for the day.

Sylvia learns from other educators and her direct interactions with her students that many of the children live in cramped quarters and worse, in abusive domestic living conditions. One Maori couple lives in a one-room house. They have eight children who

all sleep in the same bed. The father of these children squanders most of his pay at a saloon each weekend. When the man returns home, he and his wife get into violent arguments that lead to loud arguments and physical abuse. Sylvia fears that someone will be murdered in that family.

Sylvia can readily see the difference between the young boys and girls in her class. The girls are typically gentle, quiet and shy. The fragile nature of the girls is obvious as they tend to cry and sulk at even the slightest real or perceived slight. On the other hand, many of the Maori boys show violent tendencies and often are responsible for physical attacks on other children.

Keith Henderson

Keith Henderson is Sylvia Ashton-Warner's husband. During her tenure at the Fernhill School in Omahu, New Zealand, Henderson serves as the school's headmaster. Keith is Sylvia's best sounding board for her challenges in teaching the Maori children.

Colleen

Colleen is a senior student at the Fernhill School and is assigned as Sylvia's teaching assistant. Colleen is good with the Maori children and Sylvia credits her with bringing "common sense" into the classroom.

Mr. Tremaine

Mr. Tremaine is an official from the New Zealand School District. He is an advocate of Sylvia's teaching methods and supports the use of her Maori Transitional Primers.

Peter

Mr. Tremaine is an official from the New Zealand School District. He is an advocate of Sylvia's teaching methods and supports the use of her Maori Transitional Primers.

Helen

Helen is a senior girl on the school's basketball team. When she is admonished by Sylvia, she sulks, thinking that she has been booted off the team. However, Sylvia graciously welcomes her back on the team.

New Zealand Wildlife

Sylvia uses wild animals that wander in the classroom such as Sammy Snail, Ginger Rooster, Pussy, Mangu's dog, a fantail and a monkey as learning opportunities for the students.

Seven

Seven is a Maori boy who becomes a disciplinary problem. He threatens to chop another student up, causing Sylvia to hide an ax she has in the classroom.

Matawhero

Matawhero is a Maori boy who physically attacks one of the white boys. As punishment, Sylvia sends him home, which the boy misunderstands. He thinks he is permanently banned from the school.

Waiwini

Waiwini is a Maori girl who displays the typical female traits of shyness and sensitivity. As a learning opportunity, Sylvia allows Waiwini to sit by her desk all day when Sylvia is obviously going through a personal dilemma.

Objects/Places

Infant Rooms

Five-year-old students are placed in Infant Reading Rooms at the Fernhill School in New Zealand. It is in these rooms that Sylvia begins the challenging job of teaching Maori children to read and write English.

Maori Transitional Primers

Sylvia develops Maori Transitional Primers which bridge the gap that exists for Maori children in the adjustment from the comfort of their culture to the challenge of learning to read and write English.

English Primers

All children in New Zealand schools are required to read primers developed by English and American educators.

New Zealand

Sylvia Ashton-Warner teaches reading and writing to five-year-old Maori children at the Fernhill School in Omahu, New Zealand.

Omahu

Omahu is the inland New Zealand city where Fernhill School is located.

Fernhill School

Fernhill School is the New Zealand school where Sylvia Ashton-Warner teaches Maori children to read and write English.

The Golden Section

"The Golden Section" refers to ideal proportion and to the intersection of nature (especially plant life) and numbers. Sylvia takes her class on nature outings so they can observe this concept in person.

Maori Belt

Sylvia makes a Maori belt for her coat which displays the colors of the blended races. She has many positive reactions to her belt, especially from Maori people.

Girl's Basketball Team

Sylvia organizes a senior girls' basketball team at her school, which ultimately wins many competitions.

Mr. Tremaine's Typewriter

Mr. Tremaine is a New Zealand school official who obtains a typewriter so that Sylvia's Maori Transitional Primers can be transferred from her hand-written versions to more legible, typewritten ones.

Themes

Organic Teaching

The strongest theme that emerges from "Teacher" is the importance of using an organic approach to teaching in meeting the needs of children who are expected to adapt to the language and customs of a new culture. Sylvia Ashton-Warner utilizes an organic teaching method in teaching the reading and writing of English to Maori children. Organic teaching is based on tapping a child's own inner vision for the initial words which serve as the basic building blocks of learning. As part of this process, the children select their own first words which stem from their own experiences and culture and therefore are most meaningful to the children. This approach provides the basis for an education that will grow and flourish from that familiar beginning.

Sylvia does not invent the organic approach to teaching but rather adapted it for her use in teaching her Maori students. The importance of using relevant first words is clear when considering that a teacher in an area stricken with famine will connect with her students by using words that have preeminence in their current lives, for example, "crop," "soil," "food" or other such meaningful terms. The organic method of teaching is essential to successfully bring a child from one culture to another. Moreover, organic teaching bridges the gap from the known to the unknown and it extracts meaningful educational devices from the inner vision of a child.

Racism

Another strong and consistent theme in the non-fiction account, "Teacher," is that of the destructive nature of the racism that exists in New Zealand at the time of the book's publication. Evidence of racism is observed by Sylvia Ashton-Warner on an almost daily basis in her classroom during her tenure as a teacher. There are often scuffles between the white boys and the Maori boys. The Maori boys by nature are instinctively distrustful and violent. Some of the Maori boys can be set off with the slightest hint of real or perceived bias.

One of the five-year-old Maori boys named Seven seems obsessed with knives and cutting. When Seven threatens to chop up a fellow student, Sylvia makes sure to hide an ax that is located nearby. Another violent little Maori boy viciously attacks a white boy and is sent home for punishment. This Maori child is himself traumatized by the incident, wrongly thinking he has been banned from school permanently. Several white boys accuse the Maoris of stealing things from their desks. Generally, whites think all Maoris are thieves.

The Maori students were multi-generational victims of racism. The overall sense from "Teacher" is that poverty, brought on at least in part by racism, is keeping the Maori

people as a whole in a futile situation and that the future for the Maori children, many of whom are bright and capable, does not hold much hope for success.

Courage

Sylvia Ashton-Warner displays a good deal of courage in her work in teaching young Maori children to read and write English. Sylvia is quick to learn that traditional teaching methods are not going to be effective in teaching five-year-old Maori children to read and write English—a language that is only superficially known to them.

Rather than taking the easy way out and just going through the motions of teaching the children, Sylvia places her focus on the children's needs and takes her vow to teach them to heart. Independent of any guidance from a superior, Sylvia takes it upon herself to develop a teaching method that will facilitate the unique learning challenge facing the Maori children. Sylvia adapts an organic teaching method that will suit the requirements of New Zealand education yet still meet the needs of her young students.

The majority of Sylvia's contemporaries view her methods with disdain and she feels the sting of their isolation. Due to her abandonment of standard reading material, Sylvia's yearly reviews by the school district are often rated below par. Nonetheless, Sylvia is adamant as to how the children need to be taught and stands strong against outside criticism. In the end, her courage pays off in the way she hoped. Sylvia develops what will later be called Maori Transitional Readers. These primers successfully deal with the learning curve that the Maori children encounter. Her program is so successful that the school district adapt her primers for general use.

Style

Perspective

Sylvia Ashton-Warner writes her autobiographical account of her tenure as a teacher at a New Zealand school in the first person narrative. The first portion of the book focuses upon the organic teaching methods that Sylvia employs to meet the challenge of teaching the Maori children to read and write in English, a language with which they have little familiarity. After thoroughly describing the teaching process, the latter half of the book consists of direct excerpts from a diary kept by Sylvia during her teaching experience. These diary entries provide insight into Sylvia's personal struggles and feelings that are not contained in the first, rather technical, portion of the book.

As an accredited teacher describing her own experiences, there could be no better source to write the book, "Teacher" than Ashton-Warner herself. It is only through her own words that the reader is able to grasp the depth of the challenge and obstacles she faced and by the spirit expressed in the book that undoubtedly got her through the tough times. Sylvia Ashton-Warner has professional writing credentials as well and is a successful writer of fiction. She penned a fictional account of her teaching experiences with the Maori children in the book, "Spinster," which was subsequently made into a motion picture.

Tone

The tone of the first section of "The Teacher" is that of a professional teacher describing her unique approach to the challenge of teaching Maori children to read and write English. Sylvia Ashton-Warner goes to great lengths in describing the daily routine that she developed for her young students. The author, Ashton-Warner, seems to have a reverence for classical references and is generous in her use of quotations supporting her ideology. For example, she speaks of the music of Schubert "sent from a century ago" which compels her Maori students to dance, not the hula, but a more classical rendition. In support of her unique approach to teaching, she employs the wise words of Tolstoy who had a similar, avante-garde approach to teaching the peasant children of his country. She evokes the wisdom of Voltaire when speaking of the importance of one's "first words."

The second portion of the book consists largely of excerpts from a diary kept by Ashton-Warner. In these personal utterances, the reader is able to understand and appreciate the dedication and emotional attachment this teacher had to her children. Ashton-Warner displays her sense of humor as well in her diary excerpts. In one episode when she fears that an impending classroom inspection will expose her unapproved teaching methods and the rather fractious behavior allowed in her classroom, Sylvia confides to her diary that she never thought of herself as a teacher; in fact, she is not a teacher—but some nitwit that was allowed in the school.

The overarching tone of the book is without question the strong advocacy and love she feels for her Maori students. Her unwavering support of them and her adamant assertion that her method of teaching the Maoris is the most effective is consistent throughout.

Structure

The book, "Teacher," by Sylvia Ashton-Warner is divided up into two main sections. The first section is entitled, "Creative Teaching." This first section deals with Ashton-Warner's innovative approach in teaching English reading and writing to Maori children and their daily schedule. In sub-sections, she explains organic reading; key word vocabulary; organic writing and reading; Maori transitional readers; the Golden Section; Tone; the "Unlived Life"; and daily rhythm.

In the second portion of the account, Ashton-Warner shares her personal diary entries made during her teaching experience in the New Zealand school. Included in this section are Sylvia's reactions to her personal struggles and challenges encountered during her teaching tenure. Her sense of humor and fun is apparent especially in this section, which she obviously included to reveal her more human side.

A brief concluding chapter entitled, "Remembering" begins with the information that Sylvia had been retired from her job at the school for a year. She visits the school which has been renovated and readied for the new flock of youngsters. Sylvia is disappointed to see that signs point to the abandonment of her innovative teaching methods and a return to more traditional approaches. The book ends on a rather sad note. Sylvia senses that the new children coming in will suffer from the reinstatement of the old ways.

Quotes

"Before a nation can be formed, it is necessary that some language should be established." (Creative Teaching, p. 28)

"For it's here, right in the first word, that the love of reading is born, and the longer his reading is organic the stronger it becomes, until by the time he arrives at the books of the new culture, he receives them as another joy rather than as a labour." (Creative Teaching, p. 34)

"It is always not what is said but the freedom to say." (Creative Teaching, p. 54)

"Do the word experts who assemble these books assume that by putting peaceful books into the hands of children they will be an influence for peaceful living?" (Creative Teaching, p. 68)

"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." (Creative Teaching, p. 90)

"As Dr. Jung says, psychic life is a world power that exceeds by many times all the powers of the earth; as Dr. Burrow says, the secret of our collective ills is to be traced to the suppression of creative ability; and as Erich Fromm says, destructiveness is the outcome of the unlived life." (Creative Teaching, p. 93)

"And the design of my work is that creativity in this time of life when character can be influenced forever is the solution to the problem of war. To me it has the validity of a law of physics and all the unstable, irrepressible emotion of beauty." (Creative Teaching, p. 100)

"Whether it was the genius of Schubert speaking over the century through his inspired music, whether it was the spring in the air after the unprecedentedly cold winter or whether it was ripe to come any way, it came. . . .They danced to each other, from each other, their arms expressing, their hands and their small bodies." (Life in a Maori School, p. 191)

"A Tamati [Maori family name] can obey neither God nor man. Let alone teacher." (Life in A Maori School, p. 192)

"If only I had the confidence of being a good teacher. But I'm not even an appalling teacher—I don't even claim to be a teacher at all. I'm just a nitwit somehow let loose among children." (Life in A Maori School, p. 198)

"As I grow older the moments do not lessen so much as change character. As one matures, the fusion with other souls graduates into fusions with life." (Life in A Maori School, p. 198)

"Ah, the simple rapture of fulfillment at my work being understood that cold morning. What unutterable reward for my labour." (Life in A Maori School, p. 215)

Topics for Discussion

What is organic teaching? What does Sylvia Ashton-Warner mean by the inner voice and the outer voice of a child?

How is Ashton-Warner's approach to teaching the Maori children different from standard teaching? Why are her methods more successful in teaching Maori children than traditional techniques?

What does the young Maori boy, Seven, threaten to do? How does Sylvia react to Seven's threat?

What are typical characteristics of Maori boys and what are typical characteristics of Maori girls? How do these traits manifest themselves in the classroom?

What is the "Golden Section?" How does Sylvia try to illustrate the Golden Section to her students and how does she loosely apply this concept to her approach to teaching?

Why is it important to the Maori children to select their own daily words? Why are the Maori children more apt to remember words they select themselves? In what ways are the children's daily words re-emphasized to them?

What effect does racism have in Sylvia's classroom? How has racism, in general, affected the lives of the Maori people?