

ENCOUNTERING THE WORD THROUGH GODLY PLAY – In the Awakenings Curriculum

The heart of Godly play is the telling of a story to children; from memory, using concrete materials.

Godly Play

"Godly play" is a term coined by Jerome Berryman to describe an approach to children's spiritual formation that is based on creating a sacred space in which to present the stories of our faith, wonder about them together, and then allow the children open-ended opportunities, to engage with the story on their own terms.

The stories are told very simply, with simple props, and without interpretation or moral instruction. After a story is presented, the children and the storyteller wonder together about aspects of the story that draw their interest. For instance, with the parable of the Good Shepherd, they might wonder together how the sheep felt as they followed the shepherd, or whether the sheep have names, or how it might feel to be inside the sheepfold.

After a time of exploring the story with wondering, the story is put away, the children choose the art supplies they would like to work with, and they spend some time creating whatever they choose, in response to what they feel is most important in the story, or most interesting.

This is play. It is Godly. It is meeting God along with children, rather than teaching them what we think they ought to know. Our faith stories are very powerful and offer plenty to think about. Godly play is often deeply satisfying for the adults who engage the stories along with the children. *(Barbara Laufersweiler)*

Story

Story is a key part of our faith tradition. The activity of God in the lives of people and in all creation, as recorded in the Scriptures, has been handed on to us, firstly through the oral tradition and then in the written Word. In every age people have engaged with these stories and sought to relate their own story to the larger story of faith. In this way people are helped to know God in their lives.

Stories help children, as well as adults to explore key issues around the meaning and purpose of life and death.

Teachers assist young children to learn about the faith by helping them to engage with Scripture, liturgy and Christian life and service.

The style of opening up biblical stories through Godly Play, is particularly suited to children because it uses only actions and descriptions essential to the story. This engages the imagination and provides opportunity to experience the wonder, mystery and power of these stories.

Silence is an essential part of the 'language' of religion. Stillness and silence foster reflection and the capacity to listen to God. "Be still and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10). Teachers aim to help children value silence as a means of listening and responding to God.

KEY ELEMENTS OF STORYTELLING IN GODLY PLAY

1. Telling the Story

2. Wondering

3. Exploring

These key elements assist students to engage with the story and with each other. In using the stories of Scripture and the Tradition, including the symbols and rituals of liturgy, teachers help children bring together faith and life experience. They also teach the importance of faith, which the Church seeks to hand on.

1. TELLING THE STORY

There are many ways and styles of telling stories. In this curriculum the main style utilised for initially telling the story is a reflective one using concrete or visual material. This style addresses the learning needs of young children and is suited to biblical stories, which tell only essential actions and descriptions. It draws on the work of Jerome Berryman¹ in 'Godly Play' and the work of Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi in 'The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd'². In the Awakenings Curriculum Godly Play is placed in the 'Encountering the Word' section of Margaret Carswell's Composite Approach to teaching the Scriptures.

The ideal seating arrangement is a semi-circle with children on the same level as the storyteller. A circle encourages interaction and signifies the equality of each person. The floor is suggested but if this is not possible, teachers arrange the seating such that storyteller and children are on the same level. The teacher suggests a comfortable posture for children.

- ◆ The story is best communicated by *telling* rather than reading.
- ◆ It should be told, not necessarily 'by heart' but 'from the heart'.
- ◆ It is accompanied by the use of visual and/or concrete materials.
- ◆ At the initial telling, children engage by watching and listening. After the story, children are given time to use the materials.
- ◆ The story is told staying close to the biblical words and without embellishment.
- ◆ Unfamiliar terms, places. Names etc should be discussed prior to the telling of the story in 'Prepare to Hear the Word'
- ◆ A routine for preparing children for the story needs to be set in place. Routine helps children to move into a different 'space' and settle.

¹ Berryman J, (2003), *The Complete Guide to Godly Play Vol 1-5, Living the Good News*, Denver, Colorado

² Cavalletti, S, Coulter P, Gobbi G, and Montanaro S Q, (1996), *The Good Shepherd and the Child: A Joyful Journey*, Liturgy Training Publications, Chicago

Facilitating 'Telling the Story'

The teacher:

- needs to become familiar with the story before telling it.
- should read the Scripture passage and the Scripture: Background Information.
- practises telling the story using the concrete materials before presenting it to the children.

2. WONDERING

- ◆ The 'I wonder' statements engage children with the story, invite reflection and elicit the children's ideas and thoughts.
- ◆ Wondering together teaches the art of dialogue, of listening to others, accepting and learning from others' ideas and contributions. It lays the foundation for relating to others in community.
- ◆ Wondering together allows for learning that comes from within each person. It is important to trust the presence of the Holy Spirit in this process.
- ◆ Suggested 'wondering' statements are provided with most scripts. Teachers select from these and adapt where necessary to suit the needs of the children. Teachers may create their own or follow the children's ideas. Children also may initiate wondering.
- ◆ There are no 'right' answers to wondering statements. They are not comprehension questions.
- ◆ Wondering statements are not suited to factual information, eg "I wonder how many apostles there were" or key belief statements, eg "I wonder if Jesus really rose from the dead."
- ◆ Each person's response is influenced by their particular life experiences.
- ◆ Wondering statements are only the beginning of 'wondering'. This is continued as children expand their wondering in the exploring activities.
- ◆ Open wondering statements signal to the children the on-going and life-long process of engaging with the mystery of God.

Facilitating 'Wondering'

The teacher:

- Following the 'telling' of the story allow a short period of silence then introduce the wonder questions by modelling a few then invite children to wonder with their own questions
- receives and accepts each response.
- listens to understand each child's ideas.
- reflects back what is said without additional comment.
- questions only to understand not to 'correct' a child's response or steer them in a different direction.
- trusts the silence. *Children often wonder or reflect silently. It is not necessary to force responses.*
- does not provide answers but encourages the child to develop and articulate ideas.
- reminds the child who wishes to talk about unrelated topics, that there will be another time for this.

3. EXPLORING

This element provides the opportunity for individual/small group exploration of the story. It gives the child the time to focus on and explore aspects which have significance for them.

- ◆ The child should choose the story or part of the story on which to focus.
- ◆ Young children often find it easier to explore and express their feelings and ideas through art and drama.
- ◆ The Creative Arts provide 'tools' through which the child can explore, imagine and express ideas.
- ◆ The concrete materials for the story should be available for children to use later. Working with the story is a means of entering it more deeply.
- ◆ The child will incorporate their own experience and imagination while engaging with the story. The child's re-telling of a story will reflect their experience and understanding.
- ◆ The story can be re-told in different ways.
- ◆ For some children, writing is a powerful means of responding to and exploring the story. Opportunities to integrate Writing should be provided.

Facilitating 'Exploring'

The teacher:

- demonstrates the use of visual arts materials and techniques, through which the children explore and express their ideas.
- allows an element of choice and openness in what the children do: *these are not 'craft activities' with a set finished product.*
- ensures children have sufficient time for their work. *By arranging for storage of incomplete work children can continue in the next session if they wish. Often much is invested in the child's work and it needs to be treated with respect.*
- responds by engaging in dialogue with the child, asking open questions, describing what they see and not interpreting it.
- provides for children to share their 'work' only if they wish. *The 'work' itself is often an expression of the child's experience or feelings.*



Using Concrete Materials

- ◆ The concrete materials should be simple and sturdy. Only key figures and objects need to be represented in the story. Materials that are too detailed and elaborate distract from the story and may not engage the imagination.
- ◆ The movement of figures should be simple and include only those essential to the story.
- ◆ The teacher focuses the children on the story by looking at the materials as the story unfolds. The teacher does not engage with the children during the presentation of the story.
- ◆ During the story, movement of materials is done at a slow and reflective pace. The movement of materials is often done after the words are spoken and silences have been created. These silences assist the imagination as the children observe what is happening. It allows time for 'feeling' the story. While children have a real capacity to enjoy silence, they may need to get used to it in the school context.
- ◆ The materials used for the story need to be accessible to the children for their use after the story.
- ◆ The teacher, by collecting the materials, telling the story with them and packing them away demonstrates reverence for the materials as one would demonstrate reverence for the Bible. During the story, figures and objects should be handled carefully to model respect for both the people and mysteries they represent.
- ◆ Symbols used in liturgy, eg water, bread, oil, Bible, candle, cup should be used where possible in stories about liturgy. Pictures can be used to support the use of objects but should not replace them.

PLAY

- ◆ Play is a natural way children explore their world and experiences.
- ◆ Through play and fantasy children investigate, create, role play, critique and construct meaning.
- ◆ Play supports the development of creativity, language, social skills and problem solving. In imaginative play children are able to step out of the limits of their real situation to explore other worlds and experiences.
- ◆ Children are introduced to the Catholic faith through story, symbol and action. They are invited to play through engagement with the story, symbols and actions, through wondering and exploring.
- ◆ A secure, safe and organised environment is necessary to support and encourage real engagement, exploration and creativity.

Adapted by Noreen McLeish, with permission, from the CEO Sydney RE Curriculum 2006.