

Learning Through Play and Story

The Montessori Way

The preparation of the child for full participation in the life of the Church is a much wider thing than the learning by heart of certain intellectual truths. It is a life in itself.

Maria Montessori (from *The Child in the Church*, 1965, edited by E.M. Standing, p. 33)



Despite changes in the nature and availability of written curriculum materials for Christian Education with children, there is a lingering question about what is suitable and appropriate - especially for young children. How does one begin to learn and teach the faith? How does a congregation best introduce its children to the stories, traditions and worship so fundamental to its life? Is it possible to learn and teach in a way that opens up avenues of interpretation and understanding for the future, rather than closing them off with rigid doctrines or boring activities? How are children to come to feel and believe they have a real place in congregational life?

Approaches to learning and worship that take such questions seriously have been gradually emerging over the last several decades. The approaches to which I refer in this paper have their origins in Montessori learning methods. It is time for some of us in the Uniting Church to take a closer look at these approaches. In this article I seek only to offer a brief description in order to generate curiosity and discussion. The description here is based upon experience through learning with colleagues from different churches; through giving many workshops and seminars on the approach in Australia and New Zealand; and by working with a Uniting

Church team in an Australian church congregation.

Playing with Bible Stories?

Should one advocate playing with Bible stories? Yes, and no. The notion of play in Montessori tradition is qualified by the kind of materials and the environment provided. The method has developed over many years in the hands of Maria Montessori, Sofia Cavalletti (with Gianna Gobbi), and Jerome Berryman (with Sonja Stewart). In Italy, the USA and many other countries, this Montessori style of Christian Education has been called "The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd". As adapted by Jerome Berryman, in the USA, it has come to be known as "Godly Play". The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd and the Godly Play methodologies both encourage children to handle specially prepared materials and to use their own imaginations. The environment, within which the materials are used, helps to create an atmosphere of profound respect and care for both the materials and the story in view. Materials have been developed, over several decades, in response to observation and trials which seek to evaluate the choices children make. The following points outline the kind of procedure involved:



Materials are made, usually, from cloth, cardboard, and/or wood. Some patterns are available (see Stewart and Berryman, 1989, and the *Complete Guide to Godly Play* series by Berryman, 2002-2008).



When working with a story, it is carefully prepared, read, studied, and re-read from the Bible. Stewart and Berryman (1989) have shared "scripts"

of their presentation style. These scripts show the form of words they have used to introduce and follow the storytelling. Cavalletti prefers teachers to learn, orally, from others. However, in *The Good Shepherd and the Child* (1996), indications of how a lesson should be conducted are given. Diana Santleben (1989; 2000) offers a profoundly simple approach, using press-out cardboard figures.



The story is presented to the learning group.



Members of the group are invited to respond to the presentation, and to work with the materials themselves.

Presentation (an example only, as for a 'parable box' in Berryman's approach)

The storyteller lays out the cloth from the gold box. She spreads it out lovingly. She demonstrates her care for each figure, which she places flat on the floor. She does not look at the children, but looks down at the materials. The storyteller speaks quite slowly and uses silence as she moves into the story, touching and moving the figures as she tells it. She speaks slowly, varying her voice with subtlety. Then comes the time for *wondering*. Questions are asked. Questions which begin with the words, "I wonder". For example, "I wonder what this [the story and the materials] might really be?" The storyteller pauses after each question, leaving space for the children to interject. If there is no interjection, she moves on to the next question. The questions are very open-ended. She neither claims to have answers to them nor tries to portray herself as the 'answer person'. She is the storyteller. Every question is valued.

Is it really playing after all?

Yes, it is play. We are invited to enter the world of a story, only to discover that the story enters our world and addresses us. It is play, as the *wondering* can be pursued playfully. No questions are barred. After the "lesson" (during which the story is told to the whole group, for the first time, when only the storyteller touches

the figures and cloth), the whole story can be laid out again and re-told by the group members. Such re-telling may be done individually or in smaller groups, arranging the pieces and asking more questions of the story, or experimenting with re-arrangements. It can be great fun, in a peaceful and quiet kind of way. It is also important for the storyteller and the participants to take good care of the materials.

Conditions for effective learning

The methodology described in this paper is best suited to groups of fifteen or less, and of children aged between three and seven. However, I have used it with older children and even some adults. It can also work with larger groups. I very much enjoyed using the method with three Kindergarten classes in a local state school, with up to thirty children in each class. In those situations, small group work was essential for the activity times so that every student had access to the story materials during the weeks when they were used. The care taken in preparation, in telling, and in closure (which also includes the packing away of the materials) underlines the significance of the stories. The meticulous openness of the 'wondering' segment serves to highlight the commitment of the storyteller to the children, as an intermediary between them and sacred story. The storyteller is like a midwife to revelation and discovery, an agent to assist the children in taking responsibility for their own learning.



Work and play?

Each child is encouraged to choose some work to do in response to the story - with other media, on their own or in a group, or with the story materials.

This is not an approach to use in front of adults or for adult entertainment. However, adults are needed and welcome as storytellers and helpers.

For adults who want to work with the materials for their own enrichment, it would be advisable that they work with other adults

on the stories. Adults may well be attracted by the integration of movement and visual stimuli with reflection upon the meaning of the stories for them. I sense that the economy of language and the space for thought and reflection appeals greatly to some adults.

However, teachers and leaders should not allow adult needs to dominate a process particularly designed to bring the qualities of reflective play and self-directed learning to children.

Sacramental shape

The pattern for learning sessions in Berryman's work is imitative of a service of Holy Communion. There is an approach, a sharing of the sacred story, and time for response. This is followed by what is called the *feast* (a very simple meal, carefully prepared, usually consisting of juice and a biscuit, or slice of fruit, served on a napkin). The feast is followed by prayer (in which the children have opportunity to participate if they wish) and an act of dismissal.

Religious language?

Sofia Cavalletti (1992) and Jerome Berryman (1991 & 1995) have high regard for religious language. Religious language is the language that values the worship traditions of Christian faith. Each author would claim that the relevance of religious language *per se* is not the problem of communication for the Christian church. Problems arise when language becomes divorced from sacred story. Perhaps it is not the language of Christianity that has been the problem in teaching the faith. Attempts to define teaching faith with children as the transfer of knowledge from one who 'knows' to one who 'does not know' have damaged the church's mission. There has been a lack of respect for the way children understand language. There has also been a lack of opportunity for small

children to explore sacred language in a safe environment, using concrete objects to express themselves. Such opportunities need to be offered, free from what I would call the 'suppositional invasion' of adults, who do not understand how large and loud they are in the world of small children. The method recommended in this paper provides an opportunity for children to use religious language, as expressed in their play with tangible materials, to deal with their own life issues.

Learning to wonder again

Many years ago I heard a professor of education say that the greatest problem for religious educators was the failure to respect the freedom of students. Sadly, from time to time, I continue to see evidence of that problem. Sometimes it is a problem created by an excess of zeal and a lack of patience. Sometimes it is a problem created in minds that retain knowledge but lack genuine hope that persons may learn for themselves, if the environment is well prepared.

Some of the stories shared in the method begin with wondering. We may sometimes wonder whether Bible stories really will connect with modern (or postmodern!) children. I am sure that we can never take it for granted that any person or group will engage with parable or sacred story. That applies to people of any age. It is the risk we take. In sharing the stories of faith we cannot have a guarantee that those who hear will *know*. We can never be sure they will understand. But if we tell these stories with love, respect, and faith-*fullness*, those who hear will know of our love and our respect. I wonder what such faithfulness might reveal? I wonder where the story will go? I wonder who will tell that story next?



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