

Godly Play: see things differently, do things differently

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You often hear it said that religious education is all about the big questions in life. And we've all experienced that terrifying moment when a child asks the unanswerable: 'Will the world ever end?' 'Why did my hamster die?' 'If God loves the world, why does God let wars happen?'

Young children are often the ones to raise the most profound questions and yet research shows that we sometimes disregard or dismiss them, whether intentionally or unintentionally, because we think children are too young to understand or because we know there is no neat 'answer'¹. Perhaps, also, we lack confidence in exploring for ourselves the challenges offered by ultimate questions and ethical issues. And yet, it is when exploring the 'big questions' posed by life and living that religious education (RE) starts to come alive; when we develop the confidence to ponder the stories, the wisdom and the experience of the great religious and philosophical traditions.

Teachers regularly grapple with the requirement to teach RE as 'learning about' and 'learning from' religion². But how can this be effectively put into practice in a brief RE slot, once a week? Is there an approach to RE that effectively promotes knowledge skills and understanding as well as discernment, self-worth and spiritual growth? It was with this quest in mind that I came across *Godly Play*. I was introduced to it by colleagues working in Christian education where the method attracts a great deal of interest. From their experience of Godly Play, strong learning communities have been created in which children encounter Christianity and explore deep questions of life and faith.

Could this method have something to offer teachers working in schools? Is this process only of relevance for Christian nurture or could it have its place in a non-confessional setting? My own experience of Godly Play suggested it required further investigation. These initial explorations elicited some very positive responses from both children and their teachers and seemed to point towards a method that had much to offer RE teachers in schools. With funding from the St Christopher's Trust, a three year project was instigated by the National

¹ See Hay, D. and Nye, R. *The Spirit of the Child*, Fount, 1998, especially chapters 6 and 7.

² QCA, *Religious Education: the non-statutory framework*, 2004

Society³ to enable teachers from a group of community and Church primary schools to explore the Godly Play approach through controlled, classroom based research.

So what is Godly Play?

Godly Play is an imaginative approach to religious education that invites children to participate in the wonder and meaning found in the religious stories of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Jerome Berryman, the originator of Godly Play, is a priest in the Episcopal Church in America⁴. His approach to teaching and learning and classroom management is influenced by the educational methods of Maria Montessori and by Sonia Cavalletti's research into the religious formation of children⁵. Berryman's experience extends over more than 40 years, working with children and researching the method in a variety of settings. A worldwide network of Godly Play practitioners has supported and informed this research process. Berryman encourages teachers and children to become partners in religious education. The aim is to help the child make connections between religious stories and their own experience and to support their spiritual growth. It is not a rote or transfer method of learning.

A Godly Play session lasts between 45 minutes to an hour. It can, of course, be longer if there is time available. Traditionally two adults facilitate the session, a 'storyteller' and a 'doorperson'. They have distinctive but complimentary roles to ensure special time and space is created in which the children will encounter and engage with the story and each other. A clearly defined structure is followed. This structure, with a welcome, story, response time, feast and dismissal mirrors the liturgical pattern of Christian worship.

The Godly Play lesson structure

Children are welcomed at the door and asked, "Are you ready?" The doorway acts as a threshold; something is already different from the usual rough and tumble of school life; children stop and get themselves ready to go inside the classroom. Teachers who have used Godly Play in their classrooms⁶ have noted the impact of devoting time to this 'getting ready' process. One commented,

³ The National Society (Church of England) for Promoting Religious Education

⁴ Berryman, J. W. *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education*, Augsburg, 1991

⁵ Cavalletti, S. *The Religious Potential of the Child*, Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Publications, 1992

⁶ The teachers involved in the National Society's project have described their experiences of using Godly Play in their classrooms. These can be found on the National Society's website, www.natsoc.org.uk

“When the children first entered the room, there was a sense of excitement and anticipation that something special was about to take place.”

Another said,

“Something about the controlled process of getting the children ready to cross a threshold, into the space where the session was to be held, enabled them to experience that space as special.”

The children are invited by the doorperson to sit in a circle with the storyteller. The storyteller is already in place as the children enter and quietly talks with them as the circle is built. A community is being created; a safe space for learning and in which ideas and experiences can be shared. Stillness is encouraged helping the children to prepare for the next stage of the session.

Getting ready for the story involves slowing down the pace. The storyteller uses a quiet voice. Time is needed to appreciate the story and to explore its ideas in depth. By using a quiet voice the storyteller encourages concentration and creates a calm reflective atmosphere. Teachers are often surprised at the amount of stillness and silence that is generated in a Godly Play session.

In Godly Play, one of the most important ways in which the storyteller engages the children’s attention is by focusing his or her attention on the special materials used to present the story. These are usually three dimensional figures crafted in natural materials. For many teachers, keeping one’s eyes on the materials can seem unnatural especially in a classroom culture where engaging eye contact between teacher and pupil is the norm. The materials, however, help to tell the story and by focusing on them the storyteller is signalling that something important is happening. The children’s attention is drawn into the story. As one teacher commented,

“As the story progressed, the children became very quiet. They were all totally absorbed and there was a physical stillness across the room. This level of concentration continued for some time.”

As the presentation comes to a close, the children are invited to reflect on the story and explore their responses to it through open questions. Some think aloud, others in silence. Questions always begin with the words, “I wonder?” and elicit a variety of responses. Children are encouraged by the storyteller to be creative and imaginative; to relax and play with the wondering. They bring their own experiences to the story; “it’s like when...”, “it sounds strange but...”, “I’ve learnt from that story that...”, “I wonder if it’s true...” Playful comments and laughter sit side by side with serious and profound ideas; it is as though one leads to the other as children glimpse and try to grasp new ideas; as they make connections and new discoveries.

This opportunity for exploration and reflection is allowed to deepen as the children move into the next stage of the process. They are invited to respond to the story using a range of materials. This can include painting, drawing, modelling, writing, reading, construction materials or computer work. This enables the wondering to continue; it helps the children to extend the process of thinking things through for themselves. One of the distinctive qualities of the Godly Play approach is the freedom the child is given during this period to do the work *they* want to do; this activity is totally self-directed. When so much of children’s time and how they use it is prescribed, this part of the session can be liberating for both pupil and teacher. Secondly, the storyteller and the doorperson stand back and observe, enabling the children to deepen their experience of the story. Teacher intervention is kept to a minimum; it is a way of protecting the children’s time and space so that they can make the story their own and create a learning community with their peers. Children instigate interaction with the adults, not vice versa.

Again for many teachers, this aspect of the approach is challenging. They initially have to trust the process and resist the temptation to initiate conversation with the children.

Experience has shown that in a Godly Play classroom, children know help is there if it is needed and they come to the storyteller, or the doorperson, or interact with other children when *they* need to. Teachers, having tried using this ‘free response’ time in their classrooms, found themselves reflecting more deeply on the whole process of teaching and learning. One described differences in the way she interacted with the children.

“My teaching strategies were a little different from usual in that I ‘stood back’ from the children as they took the lead in working through their ideas. The tasks were much more open-ended than those in the normal teaching situation.”

The approach seems in stark contrast to the target driven culture in which teachers and children now operate.

“The environment is very 'user friendly'. The children are able to move around freely and uninhibitedly without the usual constraints of time or 'targets'.”

Spending time on the ending of the Godly Play session is as important as the preparation at the beginning. Work is put away and everyone returns to the circle. This can be a time to share experiences but there is no expectation that this will be a ‘show and tell’ session. Some children are keen to speak about what they have been doing but others remain silent. As one teacher commented,

“I sometimes ask the children how they feel or how the figures in the story might have felt. But it’s always important to remember that children wonder in many different ways, often not using words at all!”

and another said,

*“... I have learned that appearances can be deceptive. On many occasions, the child who was silent or appeared to have drifted off during the wondering, was the one who was the **most** focused during the work time, or who offered something very personal during the feast. We used the term ‘disengaged engagement’ to describe this. We can never be sure of exactly what is going on in a child’s head!”*

Then some food is shared: this could be a drink and a biscuit or something as simple as a few sultanas. When everyone eats together the simplest of food becomes a feast. Again, the children take responsibility for sharing the feast and clearing away afterwards. One of the great strengths of Godly Play appears to be the way in which it builds relationships and community and in this final stage of the Godly Play session the building of community is an essential element in the process. This provides a secure base in which children use their own experience to learn about and learn from religion. As one teacher commented

“Using this approach gives children tools through which they can give voice to the rich experiences that are deep within them.”

Each child is spoken to, by the storyteller and the doorman, before the session ends. In Godly Play, the ending is as important as the beginning.

Can Godly Play work in a school setting?

Following the explorations of Godly Play in a school setting it became clear that Berryman's carefully designed method could offer some helpful insights into approaches to teaching and learning in religious education. It soon became clear to the teachers in the Godly Play schools' Project, that this was more than just another approach to religious storytelling. They became increasingly skilled in using open ended questions to help children discover meaning; language was developed to build bridges between the children's own experience and that of the Godly Play lesson. This was done during the group wondering session following the presentation of a Biblical narrative or an event in the Christian liturgical year. Children were guided into wondering about what they had just seen, heard and experienced.

This was when the playing really began, for both teacher and pupil, but as Jerome Berryman says, it is seriously playful. Serious because it is giving children something they need; a language to seek meaning in life. This is quite different from finding out whether the children can remember what has been said. In Godly Play, learning is done not to please the adults but to profoundly please the children.

The impact of Godly Play is experienced within the RE lesson and beyond. The method promotes not just the learning of knowledge and skills, but also empathy, values and spiritual growth. It develops the needs of the whole child: mind, body and spirit and is a multisensory approach to learning. One teacher describes how she saw this impact in her classroom.

“The pupils' thinking was very creative. Their behaviour was calm and purposeful. I felt that the deeply thoughtful responses from many of the children were evidence that the session had made some impact on their perception of the world around them.”

In a Godly Play session everyone has the opportunity to speak for themselves and children are given time to think and reflect in depth in every session. This is an approach which slows down the pace and gives time for learning. The way in which the sessions are structured

ensures there are opportunities for visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learners and originality, independent choice and decision making are promoted throughout.

But the last word should come from children who have taken part in Godly Play as part of their RE programme. Their comments have included the following. From one, "*The story was excellent because you had to guess loads.*" Another said, "*Keith (the storyteller) made a picture of the story - kind of like a puzzle; it was very quiet.*" From another, "*It made me really think about the story. You had to use your imagination.*" And finally, "*I know it sounds strange, but I keep thinking I'm lucky to be alive*"

Acknowledgments

All quotations come from the teachers and children who piloted the Godly Play method in their classrooms as part of the National Society's project.

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www.godlyplay.org.uk is the UK website with comprehensive background information about Godly Play and details of training.