

Dangerous Games: Play and pseudoplay in religious education

Abstract

In *Godly Play*, an invitation is given for play with the language of God and God's people: sacred stories, parables, liturgical actions and silence. Through this evocative language, through wondering, and through the community of players gathered, the deepest of invitations is issued – the invitation to come and play with God (Berryman, 2002). But what happens when, albeit with the best of intentions, play is substituted with activities emanating from a directive based on power, as opposed to an invitation, which are more concerned with the attainment of predetermined outcomes than with genuine play for its own intrinsic worth? Such occurrences often result in pseudoplay, which is understood to be the opposite of play. This paper argues that when pseudoplay occurs in the early years' religious education classroom, dangerous games are instigated which can stifle both the spirituality of children and their learning in religious education.

“Play is much more important to religious education than either science or theology have led us to believe” (Berryman, 2002, p. 47).

Introduction

This paper is provocative. It highlights the tension which exists between approaches to religious education which have been influenced by *The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd* (Cavalletti, 1983) and *Godly Play* (Berryman, 1991, 2002), that have become prevalent notably in the Catholic Archdioceses of Melbourne and Sydney for students in the early years' of schooling, and outcomes based approaches to religious education¹. In the former approaches, the notion of genuine play is a central concept. It is necessary then that any approach to religious education which takes its impetus from *The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd* and/or *Godly Play* will emphasize the centrality of play in its pedagogy. However, as with other subjects in the curriculum more generally, approaches to religious education in Catholic schooling in Australia have been impacted upon by outcomes based philosophies in which knowledge and skills are agreed upon according to utilitarian purposes. This has also impacted upon the religious education curricula in the Archdioceses of Melbourne and Sydney. The influence of outcomes based approaches presents a tension and challenge for religious education curricula which are influenced by the approaches of Cavalletti and Berryman, because genuine play does not feature significantly in outcomes based philosophies, since it does not serve a utilitarian purpose.

This tension is explored within this paper in terms of two key concepts – play, and its opposite, pseudoplay. It argues that, when pseudoplay in religious education is effectually disguised as play, as is a common, albeit unintentional occurrence in early years' classrooms whose religious education methodology has been influenced by the work of Cavalletti and/or Berryman (Hyde, Greene & Luttick, 2008), four particular types of games, dangerous in nature, are instigated – compulsion, entertainment, manipulation, and competition. It is also argued that these games operate so as to effectually stifle both the spirituality of children and their learning in religious education.

Play

Play constitutes one of the most enduring discourses in early childhood education, and includes the notions of play as development, play as education, play-based learning, and play-based curriculum (see for example

Frost *et al.*, 2005; Johnson *et al.*, 2005). Although it is recognized that play encompasses many dimensions, and that it has been considered as an ambiguous concept (Sutton-Smith, 1997, Walker, 2007), for the purposes of this paper play has been conceptualized as comprising four dimensions which have implications for approaches to religious education which are influenced particularly the Godly Play methodology: the elements of play, the bounds of experience of play, the metaphor of play, and the theology of play. Each of these dimensions may be viewed not as being mutually exclusive, but rather as being connected.

The elements of play

In reviewing the literature on pretend play, Sawyers and Carrick (2008) outline five elements which comprise this activity – themes, roles, object substitutions, fantasy and reality, and children's understanding of pretense. The themes of play centre around script theory, in which children's play imitates events they have experienced (Shank & Abelson, 1977), and emotive theory, in which children enact events which enable them to express emotions (Fein, 1991). Roles in play refer to the behaviour of children which enables them to simulate the identity and characteristics of another person (Fein, 1981). Object substitution refers to the ability of children to symbolically transform a common object from its original purpose to a pretend purpose (Copple, Cocking & Matthews, 1984), for example, a spoon becoming a telephone. The complexity of a child's object substitution skills mature as the child grows. Children's understanding of fantasy and reality is complex, and studies have shown that during pretend play children are capable of layering the pretend world onto the real world without losing the properties of the real world (Lillard, 1993). For example, a child pretending that a block is a biscuit will not attempt to eat the block. Children are able to "act among the layers of pretense and reality" (Sawyers & Carrick, 2008, p. 139). One of the major requirements for pretense is the child's ability to make a mental image of the object of pretense, although some studies indicate that children do not necessarily view pretending as primarily requiring mental representation (Lillard, 1993).

The bounds of experience of play

Garvey (1977) offered a five-part description of play which sets up the bounds of the experience of play. Firstly, play is pleasurable. It is enjoyable. A child plays because the very act of playing brings pleasure and enjoyment. It is essentially satisfying (see also Winnicott, 2005, original work published 1971). Secondly, play has no extrinsic goals. It is played for itself, and has no predetermined outcomes. Thirdly, play is spontaneous and voluntary. It is freely chosen by the player and initiated by the player. This notion is important since it effectually suggests that play is not a directive based on power or authority. Play is engaged in for its own sake. This does not mean that, in the case of a child, an adult cannot suggest, prompt, guide or scaffold the play. However, it does mean that play is *owned* by the child (Walker, 2007). Fourthly, play involves a deep and active engagement on the part of the players. Those who play may become lost in the very act of play, and experience its delight (see also Hyde, 2008). Berryman (2002) refers to an excerpt from the novel *Lord of the flies* to illustrate this point. When the character Ralph swims, he dives and surfaces with his eyes opened – her turns over in the water, holding his nose as the sunlight dances over his face. The fifth of Garvey's description is that play has systematic relations to what is not play, such as creativity, problem solving, language learning, the development of social and other cognitive and social phenomena. These activities are not play, but play may nourish such endeavours. As will be discussed, Garvey's five-point description of play in particular highlights the tension between religious education influenced by the Godly Play methodology, and approaches which emanate from outcomes based philosophy.

The metaphor of play

The concept of play has also been drawn upon in hermeneutics by Gadamer (1989; original work published in 1960) as a metaphor to describe the interaction which takes place between a text and its interpreter in the creation of meaning and understanding. For Gadamer, play expressed the human capacity for

engagement and responsiveness that are to be found at the centre of understanding. The playing of a game, according to Gadamer, had the capacity to draw the players into its power, leaving them with no control over the outcome. In fact, the whole point of playing a game is that its conclusion is unknown. It is not exactly clear what will happen – what a player's next move might be, who will win, and so on. Play leads the players, or dialogue partners in Gadamer's words, to become lost in the encounter.

The notion of *middle space (Zwischen)* is central to Gadamer's reflection on play. He suggested that understanding is an event which unfolds in the middle space between the text and its interpreterⁱⁱ. Just as the playing of a game is resolved on the playing field, game board, or in some other designated space, common meaning between a text and its interpreter is to be found in the encounter between them, that is, in the middle space. It is seriously playful. An interpreter takes seriously the challenge to enter the middle space that is opened up in a playful and dialogical engagement with the text which is the object of the interpreter's interest.

The key insight from this dimension of the conceptualization of play, in terms of approaches to religious education influenced by the Godly Play approach, is that genuine play results in understanding. Seriously playful play results in the production of something new, which in Gadamerian terms, reflects the perspective of both players – the text and the interpreter.

Theology of play

The fourth dimension of the conceptualization of play involves the theology of play. Specifically in religious terms, a theology of play, as Berryman (2002) conceives it, is summarized by three propositionsⁱⁱⁱ. The first concerns the awareness that Christians have of the great game of Hide-and-Seek with God. In theological terms, this is known as Revelation. Relationship with God for the infant and very young child is one of Peekaboo and, as it develops, one of Hide-and-Seek. Berryman uses the phrase "Deus Absconditus atque Praesens" (p. 131), meaning God is hidden yet also present to capture this notion. People do not play Hide-and-Seek with people they know are not there. The possibility of a presence that can be revealed is necessary for the game to go forward. Play with the language of God and of God's people – sacred stories, parables, liturgical actions and silences – are the means through which the elusive presence of God may be encountered and discovered.

The second proposition of this theology of play is the notion of the nonverbal communication system – the silent child as Berryman (2002) describes it. All people, but children in particular, communicate using non-verbal cues – body language, gesture, facial expression, a smile, a grimace, and so forth. For Berryman, play is signaled by the nonverbal communication system, to which children are particularly sensitive, and through which children often express their spirituality (Berryman, 2002; Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2008). Children tend to be more open to spirituality than adults because they draw upon their nonverbal powers of communication, whereas adults rely more upon their abilities to use words and language, which often cannot express the spiritual. Through the silent child, adults may learn about their own spirituality, and if particularly observant and astute, something of what it means to stand in the presence of God.

The third proposition of Berryman's (2002) theology of play concerns the quality of loving relationships people experience with others, their deep selves, with nature and with God. These four areas of relationships – with the deep self, with others, with nature, and with God – form the basis of what much contemporary scholarship understands to be the essence of a person's spirituality (see for example Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2008; Champagne, 2003; Eade, 2005; 2006; Fisher, 1999; Hyde, 2008). When words are relied upon as the only way of expressing these relationships, development and a sense of grounding in these relationships is hindered. The non-verbal and play enhance the quality of these relationships.

These four dimensions of play – the elements of play, the bounds of the experience of play, the metaphor of play, and the theology of play – comprise, for the purpose of this paper and workshop, the conceptualization of play. Each of these four dimensions is summarized in Figure 1.

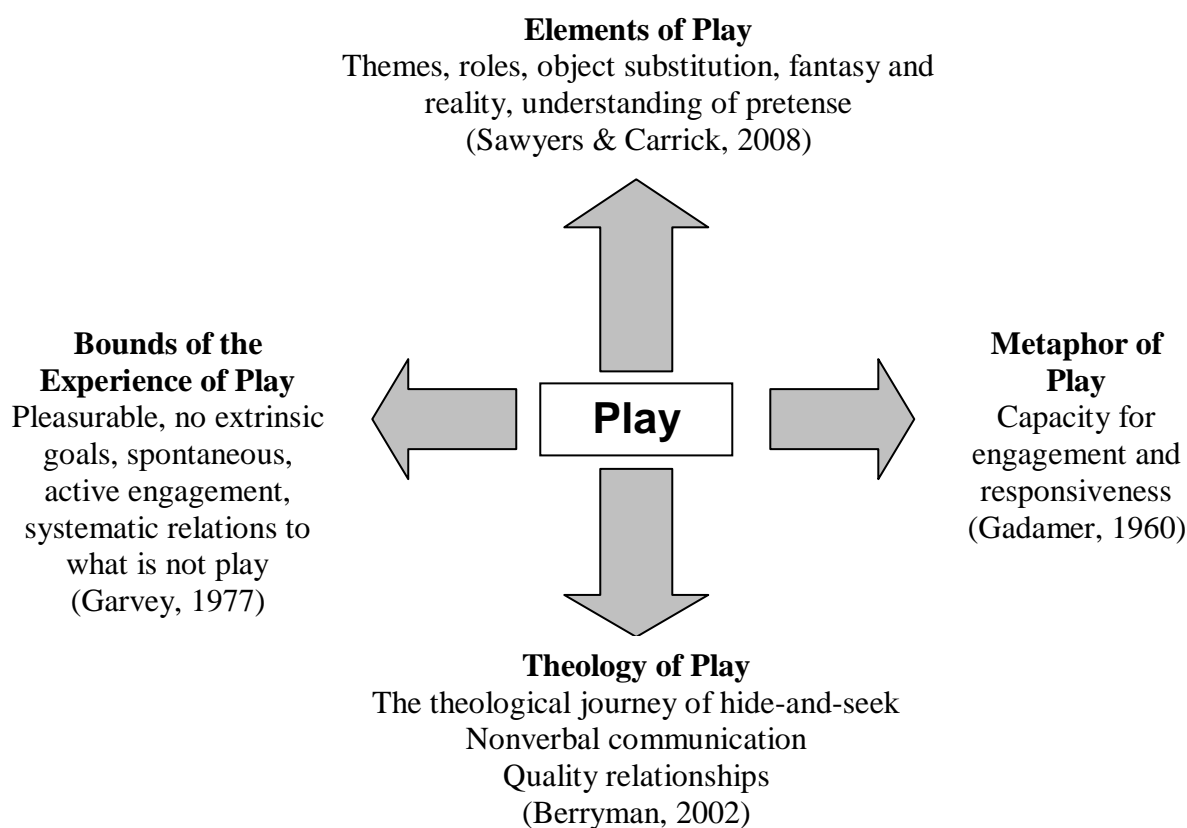


Figure 1: A conceptualization of play

In approaches to religious education influenced by the Godly Play method the above conceptualization of play has great relevance. The bounds of the experience of play form an underpinning philosophy for the nature of play itself. The elements of play – themes, objects, substitutions, and so forth, are present in one form or another. The experience of play results in deep engagement and responsiveness, as well as in the creation of meaning and understanding, and Berryman’s (2002) propositions for the theology of play provide a rationale for the way in which the religious education session may be structured. They certainly have relevance for the Godly Play approach and impact upon the way in which a Sunday school Godly Play session is constructed.

However, despite the relevance of the of the above conceptualization of play, approaches to religious education in Australian Catholic early years’ classrooms influenced by the Godly Play method are also swayed by the educational paradigm with its focus on outcomes based approaches. Genuine play is not afforded a high priority in outcomes approaches to education because it does not serve the utilitarian purposes inherent in the outcomes based philosophy. Adherents of such approaches would also argue that play does not easily lend itself to observable, measurable competencies^{iv}. The outcomes based movement is indeed a considerable force with which to contend. Attempting to find a balance then between these two approaches – Godly Play on the one hand, and outcomes based philosophy on the other – has often resulted in a series of misconceptions and misunderstanding as teachers of religious education, who try to accommodate the Godly Play influence into an outcomes based approach to education. The research of Hyde, Greene and Luttick (2008) showed that such an accommodation on the part of religious educators, no matter how well intentioned, has the potential to develop into something potentially destructive. For what is conceived of as play in such an accommodation often results in the opposite of play. Berryman (2002) describes the opposite of play as “pseudoplay” (p. 43).

Pseudoplay

Pseudoplay is not only an artificial and simulated portrayal of play. It is in fact the opposite of play. Berryman (2002) describes the opposite of play as emptiness. People at play are full of life, connected to the game and to players in the game. Those who are empty isolate themselves from play with the deep self, with others, with nature and with God. In terms of spirituality, this represents *disconnection* rather than connectedness with self, other, the world and with God, which much of the contemporary literature describes as spirituality (see for example, Eade, 2005, 2006; Fisher, 1999; Hyde, 2008). Pseudoplay therefore is potentially destructive to an individual's spirituality. However, and as Berryman warns, those who cannot play are not necessarily perceived by others as being dull, or lifeless. They often appear as being full of energy and are attractive so as to lure others to them. Their aim is to consume the energy of those around them. Berryman cites the example of the character of Jack from *Lord of the Flies* as epitomizing pseudoplay. Jack's play is not play for play's sake, but is calculated to attract followers. Jack makes several invitations to pseudoplay, for example, "Who'll join my tribe and have fun?" (Goulding, cited in Berryman, 2002, p. 42). But Jack's fun ultimately involved a frenzied dance of death in which another of the story's characters – Simon – is killed by the other boys. Such is what "fun" and "play" had come to mean under Jack, the empty one.

Berryman (2002) goes on to describe pseudoplay as numbness, parasitic and obsessed, aimed at attracting others, to claim their energy. Pseudoplay disguises itself as play to maintain dominance, and exploits others for their energy and creativity. Such a description is both derisive and sobering. Is it really fair to describe the misconceived attempts to incorporate play into mainstream religious education in early years' classrooms in Catholic schools as pseudoplay?

The Godly Play influence in Australian Catholic early years' classrooms – *The Good Shepherd Experience* (Elliott, 2005) (as it is known in the Archdioceses of Melbourne and Sydney) – is, in many cases, becoming pseudoplay. Because of the sway of the educational paradigm, it is outcome driven and constitutes a directive based on authority. Activities such as problem solving, language learning, and the like are being disguised as genuine play, but are effectually concerned with the attainment of predetermined outcomes. In other words, it is pseudoplay, rather than genuine play, which has, albeit with the best of intentions, been designed for students' engagement. When the notion of pseudoplay in religious education is compared with each of the bounds of experience of play as outlined by Garvey (1977), a juxtaposition can be made which clearly indicates the way in which pseudoplay may be conceived of as the opposite of play. Table 1 below illustrates this juxtaposition.

Table 1: A juxtaposition of play with pseudoplay in religious education

Play	Pseudoplay in Religious Education
Play is pleasurable.	Pseudoplay is a task in which the student is required to engage, regardless of whether or not it brings pleasure.
Play has no extrinsic goals.	Pseudoplay is concerned with the attainment of predetermined learning outcomes. It is not played for itself.
Play is spontaneous.	Pseudoplay is a directive based on authority. It is calculated by placing it into a defined timeslot. It is not freely chosen by the player.
Play requires engagement.	Pseudoplay requires a passive rather than involving a deep engagement on the part of the players.
Play has systematic relations to what is not play, such as problem solving, language learning, and other cognitive phenomena.	Pseudoplay disguises itself as genuine play in the curriculum through problem solving, language learning, and so forth. Genuine play nourishes these endeavors, but does not disguise itself as them.

Hyde, Greene and Luttick (2008) have highlighted the tension which exists in approaches to religious education influenced by the Godly Play methodology and the outcomes based approach to the curriculum which has dominance in western education. They contend that much of what is described as play, in approaches to religious education which are influenced by the Godly Play methodology in early years' classrooms in Catholic schools, is, in fact, pseudoplay. Activities such as problem solving, language learning, creativity and other cognitive skills and phenomena which have been favored in outcomes based approaches have been disguised as play, albeit with the best of intentions. The aims of such activities are not play for play's sake, and they are almost certainly not freely chosen by the children. They constitute a directive based on power and have quite explicit goals behind their motivation – that being the achievement of specific outcomes related to the religious education curriculum. They are pseudoplay. Pseudoplay is calculated in that the play has been programmed into a defined space and time within the curriculum. The activities designed for children – problem solving, language learning, and the like – have been disguised as play, instead of allowing genuine play to nurture and enhance these endeavours.

As well, pseudoplay is not compatible with the three propositions of the theology of play as outlined by Berryman (2002). It does not advance the game of hide-and-seek with God (Revelation). It frequently bypasses or ignores the non-verbal communication systems of children. It stifles rather than enhances the loving relationships a child might experience with her or his deep self, with others, with the world, and with God.

Because of its emphasis on genuine play, Godly Play represents a counter-hegemonic approach to curriculum (Hyde, Greene & Luttick, 2008). It is concerned with more than cognitive development. In placing an emphasis on the centrality of play, the methodology gives prominence to the affective and spiritual dimensions of education (Hyde, 2004, 2007), which have a focus on nurturing relationships with self, others, nature and with God. Generally, these are not viewed as being compatible with the outcomes based approach to education. Religious education programs influenced by the Godly Play method have then been implemented by teachers attempting to accommodate this method into an outcomes based approach to education. This may in part explain why teachers have experienced difficulty and misunderstandings in relation to its implementation (Hyde, Green & Luttick, 2008). The result in many instances is that pseudoplay, rather than genuine play, has been instigated and encouraged.

Dangerous Games

When pseudoplay in religious education is effectually disguised as play, four particular types of games, dangerous in nature, are instigated which operate so as to effectually stifle both the spirituality of children and their learning in religious education. These four games, based on Berryman's (2002) understanding, are compulsion, entertainment, manipulation, and competition. It is argued that all four of these dangerous games are, at one time or another, being played in early years' religious education classrooms whose programs are influenced by the Godly Play method. Each is explored in turn below.

The game of compulsion

Games in which individuals are coerced into playing are always ultimately destructive. Adults often find themselves the unwilling participants in such games, for example, games which involve the use of particular language which serve to include or exclude others, or games which involve the taking on of particular responsibilities, or forming particular alliances in order to ensure success or promotion. One has to "play the game" in order to succeed, or in order to get ahead. Reality television abounds with such games. Although the participants may have voluntarily agreed to take part in the first instance, the twists which are typical of these types of games soon require that participants become obedient servants of the game itself if they are to succeed in the game. This is because such games are aimed at winning at all costs. If one is to be the winner, then one is compelled to act in certain ways, or to do certain things to ensure success. Ultimately, this cannot be anything but destructive, particularly to those who loose (for whom the game is

soul-destroying), but also to those who “win” for they are left with nothing but emptiness and isolation from the other players.

The compulsive nature of schooling in Australian Catholic schools generally highlights the tension which exists here in terms of religious education in early years’ classrooms influenced by the Godly Play approach. Students have no choice but to engage in this curriculum area (as they have no choice but to engage in any other subject area of the curriculum). Additionally, since particular outcomes and standards must be achieved by the student to measure success, it could be argued that children are beginning to be inducted into a culture which effectually teaches them to succeed at all costs. They are becoming obedient servants of a game not their own, in which there are winners and losers. Such a game also stands in clear opposition to the principles of early childhood education generally, which indicates that predetermined outcomes and standards are not appropriate for young children because individual development trajectories are unique and individual. Children develop at their own rates and in their own time (see for example Walker, 2007, Cupit, 2005, 2007). The best religious education, according to Berryman (2002), does not use force. Rather, it is concerned with the deep engagement which results from voluntary involvement in such an activity. This paper does not advocate that children in early years’ Catholic classrooms not be involved in religious education, or in the attainment of standards and outcomes. However, it does highlight the potentially dangerous game into which they may be coerced in religious education curricular which, although influenced by the Godly Play and Catechesis of the Good Shepherd approaches, has at its core the achievement of compulsory outcomes and standards against which schools are increasingly having to report.

The entertainment game

When pseudoplay in religious education requires a passive rather than a deep engagement on the part of the players, a teacher can effectually create passive consumers of religion. Many forms of entertainment serve so as to render both children and adults as passive consumers. In entertainment, the energy flow only in one direction. Much of what passes as play in contemporary western culture could be considered passive entertainment. Television is a typical form of entertainment which renders individuals as passive consumers. So too do many electronic games, Ipods, and MP3 players. In the case of Ipods in particular, people utilize these so that they can intentionally “tune-out” from the events of life surrounding them. There is nothing inherently wrong with these forms of entertainment. However it needs to be acknowledged that they lead the individual to a passive rather deep engagement with the elements of the activity. A religious education curriculum which encourages passive rather than deep engagement on the part of the players constitutes a potentially dangerous game. Such a game can empty children of life rather than stimulating them to play and “be filled with life” (Berryman, 2006).

Manipulation

This is indeed a highly dangerous game. To manipulate someone effectually means to control or exert influence over them for one own advantage, often in a devious manner. Generally, religious education offered by Church-sponsored schools, irrespective of the faith tradition sponsoring the school, has been the subject of much criticism for precisely this reason. It has been argued by some that that this type of manipulation has resulted in indoctrination which does violence to the rights of the child (see for example Marples, 2005).

Berryman (2002) argues that religious education which is manipulative involves the teacher directing the activities to produce a product which meets the teacher’s needs. In the case of early year’s religious education, those needs could be conceived of as including the need to address and have students achieve particular standards and learning outcomes. Students are not led to genuine play, but are manipulated through pseudoplay to engage in activities which have a predetermined end. The learners’ links to creativity and authentic learning are severed. Children tempted to participate in such games may be “play-burned” (Berryman, 2002, p. 46) by the deception and thus influenced to avoid future invitations to play.

Again, the tension is highlighted here for religious educators working with curricula influenced by the Godly Play method. The question as to whether it is possible to enable students in early years' religious education classrooms to engage with genuine play without manipulation is one which needs to be seriously considered.

Competition

The outcomes based nature of the curriculum generally renders this a particular challenge for religious education influenced by the Godly Play method, since the philosophy from which the outcomes based curriculum emanates is based on comparison and competition (Ryan, 1998). In the business and economic contexts which have given rise to outcome based philosophy, an essential requirement would be the comparison with competitors as a means by which to assess a company's relative performance. A term such as "competitive market forces" is among those which reflect such understandings. Translating this notion to education generally, and to religious education in particular, is a dangerous game in which to engage. The basis of comparison of students groups cannot be equal, even if the groups in question are broadly similar, and differences between student groups, teachers, and the kind of teaching provided is highly variable. To attempt to compare them is, according to Ryan "fanciful" (p. 18). It is also dangerous. Since learners are compared to one another, they are also encouraged ultimately to compete with one another. As Berryman (2002) notes, the product of this dangerous game becomes the winning itself, and not the playing for itself. Pertinently, Berryman also notes that for every winner there are many losers. While educators would maintain that their programs (in any curriculum area) are geared towards enabling students to reach their full potential, the question needs to be raised as to whether, albeit unintentionally, the game of competition is effectually setting up large numbers of students to fail. Winning and losing are both potentially isolating and destructive to spirituality, since winning excludes losers, and losing results in experiences of disconnection. Winning may temporarily fill the hunger of those who seek such success, but the craving is never satisfied.

The four dangerous games outlined above are not mutually exclusive. Together, they hinder children's access to the natural qualities of genuine play. Berryman (2002) argues that when religious education teaches pseudoplay to children it relays to them that pseudoplay is normal for the Christian game. This serves to distort the players' relationships with their deep selves, with others, with nature and with God, since "the dysfunctional language taught inevitably shapes the learners' world view" (p. 47).

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has not been to condemn the attempts and efforts of educators who implement approaches to religious education influenced by the Godly Play and Catechesis of the Good Shepherd methodologies, nor has it been to reprimand the bodies who plan and direct such curricula for use in early years' Catholic classrooms. The Godly Play approach has considerable merit, and nurtures not only children's religious development, but also their spirituality. Its emphasis on genuine play in religious education is unique and resonates generally with much of early childhood theory and practice. Therefore it is appropriate that approaches to religious education in early years' classrooms be influenced by this methodology. However, and as highlighted in this paper, there are tensions which need to be acknowledged. Dangerous games are instigated when genuine play, central to the Godly Play method, is substituted with activities emanating from a directive based on power which are more concerned with the attainment of predetermined outcomes than with genuine play for its own intrinsic worth (pseudoplay). It is critical then that religious educators are aware of both the tensions that exist, as well as the potentially dangerous games instigated by pseudoplay, which can stifle both the spirituality of children and their learning in religious education. It is essential that they are instead prepared to enable students to engage in opportunities for genuine play as a means by which to nurture their students' religious and spiritual development.

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ⁱⁱ A similar concept was developed by Winnicott (1971/2005), who posited that playing implies trust, and belongs to the *potential space* between a baby and its mother in the first instance.

ⁱⁱⁱ While Miller (1973) was among the first to conceive of the notion of a theology of play, purely in theological terms, Berryman framed and developed this notion within a larger project which he understood as a theology of childhood.

^{iv} Although this may be the case, research indicates that 20% of the energy of young mammals in the wild is spent solely in play (Palmer, 2007), that is, in activity which seems to serve no observable purpose. This being the case, Berryman (2006) questions why nature would favor the use of so much energy in the service of what appears a useless activity. Perhaps play is not as useless as it first appears.

^v The phrase "to reach their full potential" is an interesting one, as it seems incomplete. To reach one's full potential to do what exactly? To become an independent learner? To take one's place as a citizen in society? To become a better person? Or to win at all costs? It seems that this phrase require significant further clarification.