

INTEGRATING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE INTO THE CLASSROOM RELIGION PROGRAM

Abstract

With its capacity to captivate and ignite the imagination, story is often central to the classroom religion program offering students opportunities to engage with and develop spiritual, moral and religious concepts and the language to express such concepts. Children's literature may provide doorways into the life-worlds of others. It offers glimpses of how others interact with life and all life has to offer. Children both relate to and identify with characters, events and issues and in the process can learn a little more about themselves and their own life-worlds. This article explores a number of children's literature titles and specifically outlines how each can introduce religious concepts and language to students. Introducing students to such language and concepts using contemporary picture books immediately captures their imaginations, as they are able to relate to the characters, events and ideas conveyed in the books. It also affords students opportunities to explore sensitive and personal issues from a safe distance, as they do not have to declare their own involvement.

Introduction

Children's literature offers classroom religion teachers creative and concrete ways of introducing, supporting and extending the classroom religion program. Saxby (1997) maintains that worthwhile books that endure do so, "not only because they challenge the reader but because they illuminate the human spirit. They reach down to the core of what it is to be human" (p. 12). The value of children's literature in nurturing children's spiritual and religious development has been extensively documented (Pike, 2004; Trousdale, 2007; Witte-Townsend & DiGiulio, 2004). Among other things, children's literature affords teachers opportunities to facilitate children's "access and entry" into religious language, symbols, images, and rituals, all of which have to be "translated into personally meaningful categories" (Tacey, 2000, p. 205). As teachers, if we facilitate students' entering these doorways, they are able to engage deeply with the stories, developing their skills to analyse and critique such stories, to gain deeper understandings and meanings into what it is to be fully human.

This article explores a number of children's literature titles and specifically outlines how each can introduce religious concepts and language to students. Introducing students to such language and concepts using contemporary picture books immediately captures their imaginations, as they are able to relate to the characters, events and ideas conveyed in the books. It also affords students opportunities to explore sensitive and personal issues from a safe distance, as they do not have to declare their own involvement. Luke (as cited in Anstey & Bull, 2000) suggests "that children will construct their characters and future in relation to the cultural texts they encounter", and believes "the characters and contexts found in books provide templates that children use to interpret and explain their identities and the world around them" (p. 190).

Before we explore how specific picture books can be used in the religion classroom, it is first important that we consider a number of issues surrounding students' abilities to learn and understand in the religion classroom. Although the theory of developmental psychology as proposed by Piaget has limitations, it is, nonetheless, a theory that has lasted and continues to inform us about children's cognitive development

(Siegler, 1998). Children are not able to think abstractly until the formal operational stage at the ages of between 12 and 15 years and it is during the preoperational stage, when children are between the ages of 2 and 7 years that their development of language and other symbolic systems take place. Many religious concepts and symbols are complex and abstract, beyond the thinking abilities of early childhood and primary aged students. The links between their own concrete experiences and environment to the more abstract ideas of religion need to be scaffolded. It is at this point that we can turn to, and call upon, Vygotsky's (1978) theories of development which take on a sociocultural view arguing that children's social and cultural environments shape their development. Vygotsky argues that higher mental functions are developed through social interactions between adults and children, in which children's language and cognitive development is scaffolded within the zone of proximal development (ZPD).

Influenced by Piaget and Kohlberg, Fowler's (1981) theories about the stages of faith development provide religious educators with many insights regarding children's cognitive development specifically within the religion classroom. He emphasised the role of trusted adults in the first stage, which he initially described as a pre-stage and named it as Undifferentiated Faith. In the next stage of Intuitive-Projective Faith when children are between the ages of two and six years, powerful images presented in stories give form to the child's understanding and feelings towards the ultimate environment. During the Mythic-Literal Faith stage which includes children between the ages of six and eleven years, "story becomes the major way of giving unity and value to experience" (p. 149). As the child develops in this stage, awareness of the clash or contradiction between stories compels greater reflection on meanings. The reliance on literalism begins to break down. The developing child begins to take the perspective of others in confronting the contradictions they encounter.

It becomes apparent that these theories of cognitive and faith development provide us as teachers with key insights into how to best scaffold students in their development of religious concepts and language. Story provides us with an effective starting point. Our teaching roles are therefore pivotal in opening and developing such templates for students. These roles involve making the phenomena, experiences and feelings known, deeply known, as well as constructing the language to express such knowing. It is through these encounters that young students can begin to understand and articulate their own identities, their relationships with each other and their environments, all of which contribute to the religion program's capacity to be more relevant and transformative. This article will discuss the following strategies for integrating children's literature into the classroom religion program:

- ☐ Sacramental themes
- ☐ Themes of liturgical seasons
- ☐ Religious themes such social justice

Sacramental Themes

DiGidio (1991) argues that sacraments are lived long before they are celebrated and they are lived in community. Children come to understand sacraments through living in relationship in families. Part of sacramental education should include an exploration of sacramental themes and such themes are embedded in relationships. The overriding conceptual understanding embedded in all sacraments is that of relationship. Each sacrament plays its own unique role in developing and strengthening relationships: Sacraments of Initiation in welcoming, identifying, nurturing, building, affirming, nourishing, and celebrating relationships; Sacraments of Healing in renewing, repairing, reconciling, healing, empathising with and supporting relationships; and Sacraments of Commitment in deepening, strengthening, committing to, and sharing relationships.

When students are introduced to the sacraments, it is essential that they are able to understand how the Church emphasises sacramentality with its members. What do these sacraments mean in the life of a believer? How does what happens to them in and during a sacramental rite translate to their own lives?

Before students can begin to comprehend what it means for believers to live sacramentally, they must first know what aspects of the sacraments translate to life. Initially then, before complex theological concepts are explored, sacramental themes and concepts need to be introduced so that students can see the 'lived' elements of the sacraments. A concrete way for introducing such a seemingly abstract concept is to highlight sacramental themes in children's literature.

The sacrament of Eucharist celebrates community, nourishing, sharing, memory and sacrifice. All of these themes are evident in the book, *Let's Eat* by Ana Zamorano and illustrated by Julie Vivas (1996), which is suitable for students in the early years. *Let's Eat* is a story of a family who gathers everyday to share lunch. This meal is filled with much talking, laughing, and sharing of great food. During one week, these gatherings were not the usual joyous and boisterous times, as a different family member for one reason or another was missing each day. Each day Mamá would sigh, "Ay qué pena! What a pity." Even Mamá herself is missing on Saturday, as she has gone into hospital to have baby Rosa. "Ay qué pena!" sighs Antonio. However, the following Sunday much excitement and merriment abounds, as everyone is together at last, including baby Rosa! "Qué maravilla!" sighs Mamá. "How wonderful that everyone is eating together!"

Initial discussions could focus on community and the importance of having everyone present to share the lunchtime meal. Teachers could emphasise the concept of community by comparing the feelings and atmosphere at the family meals on those days when someone was missing for the two meals where, usually, everyone was gathered. Draw out from students why on those days when everyone was present, was so much more celebration and joy obvious? Draw a picture of a big table and surround it with students' descriptions of all the feelings and happenings of those times when everyone gathered. Make comparisons to students' own family celebrations when many of their relatives and/or friends are present and how they differ from other times. Discuss table fellowship and link to the concept of the Mass as a form of table fellowship around which the family of the Church gathers to celebrate.

Discuss with students those times when the extended family comes together to share not only good food, but also wonderful stories, which are memories of times gone by. Relate this to believers' experiences in coming together at the Eucharist to remember Jesus at his last supper. To make the term, sacrifice, more concrete, discuss it in terms of the sacrifices Mama and Papa in the story may have made to provide these wonderful meals for their family. What sacrifices do students' parents and caregivers make? What sacrifices can students themselves make, not only in helping prepare meals, but also in sharing their own food or possessions during times of collecting for the missions and so on? All of these actions are living the sacraments. Introducing them through literature affords students opportunities to see how such themes can be lived.

A book that develops Eucharistic themes suitable for upper primary is *The Keeping Quilt* (Polacco, 2001). This is a story of a quilt and its significance for Patricia's family who migrated from Russia to New York. It spans six generations. Not long after they arrived, Anna (Patricia's great-grandma) grew out of her dress and babushka. While her mother sewed a new dress from other family members' discarded clothes, she decided to make a quilt, which would remind everyone of their homeland. Family and friends cut out animals and flowers from the scraps of clothing and sewed an intricate quilt bordered with Anna's old red babushka. The quilt was used during the family's most memorable and significant events. Teachers could draw two big "Symbol Wheels" (Hill & McLoughlin, 1995). Place the word "quilt" in the middle of the first circle and ask students to add the things for which the quilt was used:

- As a tablecloth used every Friday evening at Sabbath;
- As a picnic rug on the day that Patricia's Great-Grandpa asked Anna to marry him;
- As the huppa under which they were married;
- As a shawl to be wrapped around their first daughter to welcome her into the world;
- As the huppa at Patricia's own wedding; and
- As the shawl to be wrapped around her own baby daughter.

Emphasise with students that the quilt became a symbol of precious memories for the family. It represented their struggling times as a family (making clothes from other members' clothes rather than being able to buy new ones) and happy times.

Write the word, Eucharist, in the middle of the second symbol wheel. Ask students to state what believers remember and celebrate in the Eucharist. Students will be able to realise the significance of both symbol and Eucharist for Christians, as they explore the quilt's place in the lives of this family.

Themes of Liturgical Seasons

Children's literature also offers opportunities to explore themes related to the Church's liturgical seasons. The Christian year passes through five main liturgical seasons, which revolve around the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ: Advent, Christmas, Ordinary Time, Lent, and Easter. The liturgical years follow a three year cycle: Year A which focuses on the Gospel of Mark, Year B whose focus is the Gospel of Matthew and Year C which focuses on the Gospel of Luke. The seasons follow the same rhythm and pattern but focus on each of the different gospels according to the designated year. It is important that students understand the nature of the liturgical seasons and their significance to the Church's liturgy. Each liturgical season emphasises particular themes:

- Advent in preparation for the birth of Jesus emphasises themes of expectancy, anticipation, awakening, journey and so on. It focuses on the Annunciation, Mary's role as the mother of Christ, John the Baptist as the herald of Jesus' ministry and so on.
- Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus.
- Lent is a time of repentance, conversion and a change of heart.
- Easter celebrates the death and resurrection of Jesus and its key themes are hope, new life, salvation and so on.
- Ordinary Time focuses on all other aspects of the life of Jesus. During these times, we hear about Jesus' relationships with those around him, the role of discipleship and what that means in the life of believers.

In making students more aware of such themes in everyday contemporary life, they are able to relate more realistically to liturgical themes. Such themes are the central focus of many children's literature titles. The following sections outline specific books, which can be used for the liturgical seasons of Advent, Lent and Easter.

Children's Literature and Advent Themes

The Arrival by Shaun Tan (2006) - a picture book with no text - depends on its images to tell the many stories of people who have left their home countries to come to live in new lands. Through these sepia images we meet the new arrivals and empathise with their joys and frustrations, as they encounter new and confronting experiences. Each image captures people in different moments: being processed on arrival in officious and bureaucratic ways; trying to communicate their needs in a foreign language; experiencing sights, sounds and tastes that are unfamiliar; and unexpectedly finding a welcoming stranger and a place to stay. This book evokes many themes centred on journey including: expectancy, anticipation, belonging, acceptance, tolerance, generosity, hospitality, and so on. Such themes are central to the season of Advent and thus *The Arrival* provides an effective entry into these themes of Advent.

One way of bringing such themes to students' awareness is to focus on various characters' senses, feelings and emotions during their experiences. An effective activity for engaging students in such ways is the completion of a sense story. Place students into groups and assign each group a different series of images from the book, which tell the story of one of the characters. As they view these images, ask them to brainstorm and list what this character sees, hears, smells, tastes, and feels, as he/she is involved in the

various activities shown in the images. When they have completed this task, ask them to then discuss what would some of these characters' emotions be as they went through such experiences.

Children's Literature and Lenten Themes

Lenten themes of repentance, conversion and change of heart are evident in the book, *The Red Tree* also by Shaun Tan (2001), which is more suitable for upper primary or lower secondary students. *The Red Tree* focuses on themes of a desolate journey encompassing loneliness, isolation and depression. It eventually leads the main character to a conversion, a change of heart and renewal. A young girl wakes one morning surrounded by floating dark leaves, "sometimes the day begins with nothing to look forward to." As the story continues, her day becomes increasingly darker, as she is consumed by her own troubles, loneliness, fears and a growing sense of confusion and concern. The strong, stark illustrations echo the thoughts on each page, but on each page a solitary red leaf is somewhere to be found. Finally, upon entering her room at the end of the day the young girl finds that it is amassed with the colour of a dazzling, red tree:

... but suddenly there it is
right in front of you
bright and vivid
quietly waiting
just as you imagined it would be.

This book is ideal for the season of Lent and it correlates well with Jesus' forty days in the desert where many real parallels can be made. Just as the many images of darkness and monsters are metaphors for this young girl's despair, so too the image of the devil for Jesus. In the end, the full blossoming of the red tree is a powerful symbol of the hope, new life, and renewal of resurrection.

Children's Literature and Easter Themes

Death, despair, then hope and new life are the central themes of Easter. These themes can be challenging ones to introduce to students but there are a number of books, which link to them effectively and poignantly. *Rain Dance* by Cathy Applegate and Dee Huxley (2000) set in central Australia is a young girl's experience of drought and its effects on her family whose farm has had to be put up for sale. The smell of rain is in the air, clouds are gathering and soon thunder resounds: "Pit...pat...pit...pat...Pitter, pitter, pat... The first drops beat out a hesitant rhythm on the corrugated-iron roof." As the rain falls everyone breaks into laughter. Their joy and excitement are expressed through this young girl's wild dancing until she falls soaked and exhausted onto the veranda into her mum's arms. The final page radiates hope as the paint on the new "FARM FOR SALE" sign is shown to be washed away and the family waits more optimistically for their father's return from the bank. The promise of a new beginning follows seeming despair and hopelessness.

Following the reading of this story some discussion questions to put to students include:

- How did the main character feel at the beginning of the story? At the end of the story?
- Why did the main character dance when the rain fell?
- Which is the best page of the story? Why?
- What is the message of the story?

After this exploration, students could compare and contrast the girl's experiences and feelings with those of Jesus, before he was crucified and in one of the gospels' accounts of when he met some of his disciples after his resurrection, such as in Luke 24:13-53, when he met two of the disciples on their way to Emmaus.

Circles of Hope by Karen Williams and illustrated by Linda Saport (2005) is a book of hope, faith and perseverance and is also ideal to share with students during the Easter season. It is young Facile's story of

his gift to his newly born baby sister. As his father did for him when he was born, young Facile plants a tree for his sister. The tree his father planted for him is Facile's and is the only tree in Haiti. Facile gets great joy from climbing his tree from which he can see everything near and far. However, the first seed he plants is eaten, the second is washed away and the third is burnt. These setbacks are not enough to daunt Facile who then builds a circle of small rocks around the seed to protect it from all kinds of harm. Finally, one of his seeds survives and grows into a tall tree for Lucia to climb. The tree planting did not stop there, and both Facile and Lucia continued to plant more mango seeds and eventually the mountainsides of Haiti became covered with trees, surrounded by circles of rocks.

Students could be encouraged to name each of the steps Facile takes to ensure his gift for his sister actually happened. It would also be useful to be explicit about the title and its many levels of meaning:

- The circle of rocks became the circle of hope for the tree;
- As the tree grew it became a symbol of Facile's hope for his gift to his sister;
- The successful planting of the many trees also gave hope to the island ensuring that it could indeed experience regrowth.

Teachers could explore the Easter story for these same themes and the central Easter message of hope becomes more tangible for students.

Social Justice

Other key elements in the religion classroom are Catholic social justice and social teaching. Catholic teaching on justice has its foundations in Scripture, namely the teachings of the prophets and in the Gospels as both taught and lived by Jesus, and in the teachings of Thomas Aquinas (McBrien, 1995). Since the nineteenth century Catholic social teaching has been articulated in conciliar, papal and other official documents (Office for Social Justice). Some key principles of Catholic social teaching include:

The sacredness or dignity of the human person: The social ministry of the Church places particular emphasis on the protection and promotion of the dignity of each person as the image of God.

Rights and responsibilities: Each person has basic rights which include the right to life, food, clothing, shelter, protection, freedom (including religious freedom) and autonomy. It is also acknowledged that each person has basic responsibilities to each other, his/her family and communities.

Community and common good: The social nature of the person is recognised and relationships are essential. Each person is obligated to work for the good of society, for the common good.

Option for the poor: John Paul II spoke of "a preferential but not exclusive option for the poor." Special attention to the needs of the poor is a moral obligation for all. We are all to be concerned for the common good but we are asked to weight more concern toward those without a voice and those in need.

Two worthwhile books that can be used together with upper primary students to explore themes of social justice and the above principles are *Dancing the Boom Cha Cha Boogie* by Narelle Oliver (2005) and *The Rabbits* by John Marsden and Shaun Tan (1998). *Dancing the Boom Cha Cha Boogie* deals with the theme of refugees and takes the perspective of the landowners who immediately suspect that the new arrivals have come to take their valuable food source, sea slugs. These peaceful and playful arrivals have been washed ashore after their own island was washed away in a devastating storm. The Boss Snig locks them up and demands that they leave the island as soon as their own boat is repaired. The fun-loving Murels, who only want to dance the Boom-cha-cha Boogie, are harmless and pose no threat to the island's inhabitants; in fact, they have much to offer this community. However, they are perceived as dangerous and threatening, and are treated accordingly.

Many relevant themes, which are now part of our everyday world in which fear is promoted, emerge from this colourful encounter between innocent arrivals, the Murels and suspicious landowners, the Snigs. An effective strategy with this story is to have students explore the feelings, characteristics and attributes of

both the landowners and the refugees as both are explicitly described and inferred in the story. Photocopy or scan an image of both the Snigs and the Murbels and ask students to list characteristics as described or implied in the book. Direct students' attention to the illustrations, which also provide insights into the implied attributes and characteristics.

| Animals | Explicit descriptions or quotes suggesting characteristics & attributes | Inferred attributes & characteristics |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Landowners: The Snigs | <p>"No doubt you have your shifty eyes on our precious sea slugs."</p> <p>"Silence!" snapped the Boss Snig.</p> | <p>Judgmental and suspicious.</p> <p>Powerful and bossy. Not willing to listen to arrivals' explanations.</p> |
| Refugees: The Murbels | <p>Murbels did not have a worry in the world...</p> <p>The murbels awoke with a jolt. They were trapped!</p> | <p>Carefree and fun-loving.</p> <p>Are prisoners and judged as criminals.</p> |

Once the circumstances of this story have been explored, John Marsden and Shaun Tan's (1998) book, *The Rabbits* can then be read. This darker book focuses on the arrival of Europeans to Australia. Its perspective is from the arrivals who are not refugees as were the Murbels in the previous story. Rather, they are invaders. The images of this book depict the indigenous landowners hiding behind trees and bushes, as they observe the arrival of strange white coloured humans with their menacing machines. These landowners are unable to prevent the eventual destruction of their land and the abduction of their children by these new arrivals. In contrast to *Dancing the Boom-Cha-Cha Boogie*, the landowners in this story are the victims and the new arrivals are far from refugees. Students can complete the same task as for the previous story: noting the feelings, characteristics and attributes of both the arrivals and the inhabitants.

| People | Explicit descriptions or quotes suggesting characteristics & attributes | Inferred attributes & characteristics |
|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Invaders: The Rabbits (Europeans) | <p>They won't understand the right ways. They only know their country.</p> <p>They chopped down our trees and scared away our friends...and stole our children.</p> | <p>These people do not know anything of how to live here.</p> <p>These people destroyed our landscape and pushed away the animals that lived there.</p> |
| Landowners: The Aborigines | <p>But some of the food made us sick, and some of the animals scared us.</p> <p>Rabbits spread across the country. No mountain could stop them or desert or river.</p> | <p>New foods and species were introduced to the environment and caused problems.</p> <p>These people were strong and could not be controlled.</p> |

When students have completed the retrieval chart discussion can follow. Scaffold the discussion with such questions or prompts as:

- In what ways were the stories similar?
- How were they different?
- Who had agency in the first story? In the second?
- Why do you think, the landowners have such agency in the first story and not in the second? What gives some people agency and how do other people come to feel submissive?
- What moral issues are expressed in these stories? How do you respond? Can you say who is moral? Who exhibits social justice?
- On what grounds or foundations can you argue the morality of these stories?

It is essential that students are made aware of the moral foundations and Church teaching that underpins an appropriate response to the issues in these stories. Students should not respond to such questions in uninformed ways, such as, “It is just not right. You do not treat people that way.” Alternatively, “Christians do not support such actions.” This latter statement is a concern, as students should not think that only Christians are concerned with social justice. What they should know is why Christians abhor such actions. They should know the Church teachings that underpin social justice and morality.

At this point teachers may refer to gospel values and how they inform and underpin Church teachings. Jesus proclaimed in the synagogue in Nazareth:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour. (Luke 4:18-19.)

Ask students to argue the moral issues in the stories using the above passage as a basis of their arguments. Completing such tasks and discussions with students affords their engagement with critical moral issues that do not impose on their own personal decisions. At times when teachers focus on morality and social justice, they can almost place their students on trial. Using children’s literature not only facilitates constructive and informed discussion and debate, but it also facilitates reference to scripture in engaging ways. Students are reading and interpreting scripture with purpose.

Conclusion

Many quality children’s literature titles are published each year that can effectively be integrated into the classroom religion program. Many rich and deep meanings contained in stories are not always immediately recognised by students. When teachers utilise appropriate and creative teaching and learning strategies they open a story’s possibilities. Well-crafted stories are doorways for students; teachers can facilitate their entry and access into such stories. Lessons learned will endure for a lifetime.

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