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THE DRAMA OF TEACHING THE GOSPELS: WHAT WORKS IN THE CATHOLIC PRESCHOOL?

Abstract
The teaching of the gospels to young children needs to be interactive and involve them in play, a critical aspect of early years development. It needs to enable them to become familiar with the context of the stories – the culture at the time including society, its different traditions, beliefs, religious customs, people's occupations, etc., and also the geography and the climate of the area. This context allows students to become more literate about the gospels, the language of the gospels and their settings and also facilitates their deeper understanding of the stories and their purposes for the audiences at the time. The teaching of scripture follows an educational approach as distinct from a catechetical approach wherein students' faith responses are sought. This article explores the role that process drama may play in the teaching of the gospels to young children within an educational framework.

Introduction
Teaching young children gospel stories, if this experience is to be both rewarding and educational, needs to be interactive and play-oriented. As teachers of religion to young children in the early years that is from ages five to eight years, we are challenged to facilitate their 'getting into' the texts of these stories so that their religious literacy is developed in ways that are age appropriate. First we must ask ourselves what specific skills, processes and understandings are we aiming to develop? I would suggest that appropriate outcomes for young children would include their understanding of the key characters, events and settings of the gospel stories. They would also include a familiarity with the register of the gospels – what particular language and terms do young children need to become familiar with, so that they may themselves understand the stories and then in turn communicate this understanding and knowledge?

If young children are to become familiar with the key characters, events and settings of the time of Jesus, they need an understanding of the context of these stories. A context allows them to become more familiar with characters, their occupations, and their daily lifestyles and subsequently allows them to unlock unfamiliar language and concepts.

Religious literacy is a term that is much used in contemporary religious education curriculum documents. Dwyer (2001) comments on the emergence of this term: "*Religious literacy*, in a significant section of the nation at least, has taken its place at the literacy table. Here it may be seen as a metaphor for an approach to religious education that is strictly *educational* as distinct from catechetical" (p.119). Religious literacy suggests that students need to develop an understanding of specific language so that they can use it confidently within the correct context in order to communicate about religion. Language does not exist isolated from particular contexts and this exploration focuses on the language and contexts of the gospels. In view of the developmental stage of early years' children, language needs to be introduced on a number of different levels and in a variety of interactive ways to enhance children's familiarity with and understanding of it. The implementation of process drama is one possible way to assist children to become familiar with biblical context and language, and, to a lesser degree, become confident in communicating about biblical characters, and events using religious language.

Importance of Drama in the Early Years
The importance of play and drama in the early years classroom has been well documented (Dunn, 1995; Warren, 1999; Winston & Tandy, 1998; Hendy & Toon, 2001). Hendy and Toon (2001) argue that play is a critical aspect of early childhood learning and a natural point of access to the curriculum. They distinguish between socio-dramatic play and thematic-fantasy play arguing that while both are critical in the early years' setting, thematic-fantasy play is a more complex activity of interactive story-making which develops language skills and creative imagination (p.12). The two forms of thinking first described by Bruner in 1986 were paradigmatic thinking, being involved with logic, sequencing and the ability to be analytical, and narrative thinking which is more creative and requires construction of real or imagined events (Hendy & Toon, p.12). Young children need to be interactive and involved with their learning and at the same time have their creativity stimulated. Thematic-fantasy play through drama develops narrative thinking.

O'Toole and Dunn (in press) suggest that "drama as an art form explores and lays bare human behaviour for us to examine and reflect on" and

Marcuse (in Dunn, 1996) suggests that dramatic play gives children the opportunity to step out of their everyday and enter a world "where there is a reshaping of language, perception and understanding" (p.21). The use of drama in the curriculum has critical implications for the teaching of biblical texts to young children since through drama they may be able to enter another world, the worlds of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. They are then able to become familiar with the people and the thinking of this world, hence allowing their understanding of and familiarity with the text to develop. It may allow them to empathise and understand the behaviours of the people at the time and perhaps enable them to understand the context more fully. It may also provide them with some of the language in terms of the specific register used then. "In language terms, drama offers wonderful possibilities for gaining control of new language registers, verbal and gestures" (O'Toole & Dunn, in press).

Process Drama

The integration of process drama in the classroom was first proposed by Heathcote (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995) and more recently described by Warren (1999) as "an approach to drama in the classroom that involves children and teacher/s taking roles and through those roles becoming immersed in a fictional situation which occurs and is enacted in the present" (p.4). Its critical element is that it involves everyone – all children and teachers. No one is a non-participant waiting their turn, and everyone has equal opportunity of contributing to the on-going movement of the drama. O'Toole and Dunn describe process drama as "that which involves all children in the classroom, is based on role-play and improvisation and explores fictional situations through various kinds of role-play, mixed with theatrical and dramatic conventions, games and exercises" (In press).

The direct participation of the teacher is a crucial aspect of process drama and whilst Dunn (1996) acknowledges that teachers' intervention and non-intervention in drama has been a subject of many debates, she argues that for those children who cannot sustain dramatic play and who may become bored and restless may lack essential elements of dramatic play and teachers' roles here are critical: "Somebody needs to be 'taking care of the drama', ensuring that the play is well structured and therefore capable of generating meaningful and enjoyable outcomes for the participants" (p.27). Tizard (in Dunn, 1995) after completing observational studies of nursery children in United Kingdom found that passivity on the part of adults lead to children's play which was "frequently of short duration, poorly elaborated, repetitive and involved a narrow sampling of materials" (p.25). Process drama involves the teacher as a participant along side the children who are all in role together. However, it is crucial to keep the children at the centre of the unfolding drama, to allow them to guide and control it. Hence the teacher's role is one of a delicate and sensitive nature, as s/he has to decide at what point do they enter to ensure the drama continues without becoming the controlling force.

Another critical feature of process drama is that the children are indeed experts and are treated as such throughout (Heathcote 1995; Warren, 1999). It is important that time always be given for them to answer the questions that may be asked. Teachers are encouraged not to be tempted to rush in with answers. Rather, give children time; be comfortable with the silence; be prepared to rephrase questions. Also, use correct terminology. Process drama is an effective means to develop children's specific literacy skills. For example, when presenting stories from the gospels, introduce them to the names of towns, buildings, such as synagogue, market place, town gates, and to occupations, such as shepherding. Discuss with them the many tasks that shepherds, would perform and their tools of trade. All of this develops their communication skills within biblical literacy.

Applying Process Drama to the Gospel Stories

The following drama activity can be adapted to any of the gospel stories. The key is to find a problem that will involve children in the plot in which they are the experts able to solve the problem. It is not necessary to follow the gospel story itself – adapt the stories to make the contexts more familiar to the children. Put them into as many different roles from biblical times as possible – shepherds, apostles, tentmakers, tax-collectors, friends of Jesus, Roman soldiers, and don't ignore roles of women such as Mary and Martha, Mary, the mother of Jesus, her cousin Elizabeth, and so on. They will learn so much about the context of these times, the characters, places, and events through rich experiences.

Before you begin you need to decide whether the children will be familiar with the story or whether you will introduce them to the characters, events and setting through the process drama before you read or tell the story. Also you may have to make the children familiar with certain aspects of the story before the drama begins, such as the place - Jericho, Jerusalem, Bethany, or the shores of Lake Galilee. Rather than incorporating all of these details into the one drama session, perhaps one aspect at a time could be the focus of a preceding session outside the drama activity wherein the teacher discusses some of these details making use

of illustrations, posters and reference books. Dau (1991) outlines the role of the teacher as resource person during play wherein children are developing a theme: "Having observed the children developing a theme for their play, ... the adult can expand the children's understanding and therefore extend the play by displaying posters relating to the theme, having reference books available for the children, reading stories about (the topic) and by discussion" (pp.78,79). There is a role for teachers to provide resources when a new area is being explored.

Finally process drama is concerned with children's involvement. It is not meant to be a polished dramatic performance. At its core are spontaneity, interaction and participation. It is not drama to be performed for an audience – it is to be enjoyed by the children, as involved and participatory experts.

Warren (1999) suggests that process drama is one form of drama that easily facilitates teachers' confidence and use of drama in the classroom. She outlines a series of steps that develop process drama in the classroom which include:

- Setting the stage: topic, role and focus
- Curtain up: getting started
- On with the play: coordinating the play
- Directing the action: techniques and conventions.

Using the story of "The Lost Sheep" as an example, the above steps in the implementation of process drama will be described.

Setting the Stage: Topic, Role and Focus

The **topic** is the topic of your specific area, in this case, the parable of "The Lost Sheep" Luke 15:3-6 and Matthew 18:12-13. The **role** is simply that - the roles to be played by the children and you and any other adult who may be present and willing to participate. In this story you could be the shepherd who has lost the one sheep and the children could be other shepherds who have come to give you some assistance. So that their roles may be seen as more expert than yours, you could be a new shepherd, almost an apprentice with much less experience than the children. The **focus** is the problem to be solved and in this particular passage the problem is already set for you, the shepherd has lost one of his flock. Sometimes the problem needs to be set or created by you, for example if you were wanting to use process drama with the story of Zacchaeus the problem could be how does Zacchaeus make friends with the people of Jericho after the way he has treated them.

Curtain Up: Getting Started

Before the drama begins, sit the children down and discuss the topic, the roles and the focus with them. Tell them as much about the context as you can without taking too long, familiarise them with necessary details such as the setting, what it looks like, the time, in the past, and the climate and time of day and so on. Talk about what they would wear and hold. You may decide that they could have a staff. Some illustrations, or posters of the areas around Jerusalem and shepherds could be shown at this stage. It may enhance the drama to have them practise some of the actions a shepherd would do – for example, building simple pens out of bushes or thorny branches to keep sheep, using their staffs to guide the sheep along a narrow track, or trying to pull one out of some bushes, or leading them into the pen.

Emphasise that shepherds were highly protective of their flocks and would never let anything happen to them. They were loyal and completely reliable. They would never just leave their sheep and goats anywhere. They would make sure they were with them all the time. You could allow them to choose a name for themselves, but this is not essential.

Then, indicate that you will leave and on return will be the shepherd who has lost one of his flock. Remind them of the problem they have – they are to give assistance and advice to this shepherd helping him find this lost sheep. Tell them that when you enter they will also be in their roles as shepherds who have been in the job longer than this new shepherd. Dress in a simple tunic pulled over your head, maybe carrying a staff. Give children their staffs.

On with the Play: Coordinating the Play

Once you have left and put on your costume, re-enter the area looking around. Appear worried and anxious. Acknowledge the children. Ask if they have seen a stray sheep anywhere? Tell them that you have not been a shepherd for long and you know that the owner of the sheep will be upset. You have always wanted to be a shepherd and you know how important it is to look after the whole flock. Give time for them to answer; prompt them but don't rush in with answers yourself. Remember they are the experts here – not you: they must feel that they are. Can you show me where sheep have been lost before? Do you know these areas well? You have been shepherds for such a long time and you know more than me. Where do you suggest we go? Which direction first? This is another chance for them to describe their roles and be involved.

During this phase it is important that you use effective language. Use correct terminology and ask open questions that allow children to imagine, reflect, predict, hypothesise and so on. Warren (1999) also emphasises that it is important that you as the teacher don't take-over. Refrain from providing missing expert knowledge. Allow the

children time to respond; ask the question in another way perhaps. She also suggests that you slow the drama so that it is not rushed to an early ending. Keep the drama going by taking different turns, going into different places along the way, finding another problem, inspecting some piece of equipment or some artefact that you may have found along the way. When a decision or solution is needed have children consider all implications of their decision and defend their suggestions. Continue to produce tension, as this is the key element of drama.

Be interested in their jobs. Ask them how long they have been shepherds? If they have ever lost any of their sheep or goats? Have they always been shepherds here around Jerusalem or have they worked in other places? Tell them about some of the places you've been to. Keep the conversation going, as you wander through the bushes, among caves and rocks, along narrow tracks and even perhaps into parts of the nearby town of Jerusalem. Talk to them about the different places they are passing, or some of the more dangerous narrow, steep tracks that they are leading you down. Remember: they are the experts. Perhaps point to some of the buildings, such as the synagogue, or the market place, and the inn where you are tempted to go in and get a drink to refresh you. Ask if they would mind? This gives them the chance to declare their own knowledge of the importance of the role.

Directing the Action: Techniques and Conventions

Some of the essential techniques and conventions that keep the drama moving include oral communication between you and the children. This allows children to sort their thoughts. Encourage them to explain, defend, argue, suggest, justify and so on. There may be times in the drama where it is appropriate for children to make signs or labels or even to write a letter or message to be left at someone's place. There may be times when you can have them form a freeze-frame or tableau or sculpture for a photograph.

At other times it may be appropriate to move some scenery into place. Do not make special scenery; make use of what you have. Ask students what can be used or can they see how a particular part of the scene can be constructed. For example, maybe ask them how a corner of the room and some big boxes can be constructed to make a cave so that some shepherds can go into it to see if the lost sheep is in there.

Bringing the Drama to an End

When a number of places have been explored and various problems solved, the drama could be brought to a close. Perhaps you could leave the group to search a small hidden gap on the side of a track and you are successful. Be relieved and extremely happy as you struggle with the 'sheep over your shoulders' to rejoin the group. Share your happiness with the other shepherds inviting them to also be happy. As you find your way back to your flock, ask the shepherds for ways that could ensure that you will not lose any more sheep. As you arrive at your original starting point explain to the children that the drama has ended and that all of you will be returning to the present.

It is important to return to the present. The group can be taken to the carpet area and thanked for their co-operation. Before they leave you could suggest that as the new shepherd you have learnt much about shepherding from them and thank them for their wise advice. Debrief the children about their experiences, what they saw, enjoyed and felt. At this point you could ask them to draw some part of the activity, or to make a map of the areas you visited labelling the places, such as narrow tracks, hidden caves, bushy areas, some lanes and buildings in Jerusalem. All of this could then be displayed or made into a Big Book.

Conclusion

Teachers are not new to drama and often children are asked to role-play stories from the gospels. Many of us have also familiarised children with gospel stories through the use of videos, posters, and reading bible stories to the children. Whilst these strategies and resources have increased their knowledge of the characters and places, the children's direct involvement and participation in creative ways has not always been facilitated. Straightforward role-plays do not allow them to be problem-solvers or apply critical thinking skills in the same way as process drama does. Process drama enables this. It facilitates children's language use of biblical terms, their more personal and intimate knowledge of characters, settings and society. Implementing process drama when teaching the gospel stories to young children, allows children to enter the stories themselves and become actively involved in the events. It enables direct access to the scriptures.

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