

AGENCY AND NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY FROM A GODLY PLAY CLASSROOM

Abstract

Contemporary thinking in relation to the social constructions of childhood places an emphasis on the concept of agency – the ability of children to understand their own world and to act upon it. Children are not merely individuals but also active participants in a wide range of meaningful social interactions. Agency may not always involve the child’s literal voice. It could entail non-verbal communication through play and through acting upon the world. This paper examines, through a case study from a Godly Play classroom, the way in which agency may be exercised through a child’s non-verbal communication in religious education. It argues that the concept of agency for children in religious education, although often neglected or assumed, is critical if children are to make meaning from the faith tradition, and if they are to be enabled to confront existential issues and concerns.

Introduction

The notion of agency and other related concepts such as the rights and voice of the child, abound in early childhood literature generally. However, it is only recently that such concepts have been applied in a serious way to catechetical religious education in early childhood and early years’ of schooling contexts, often with some tensions emerging (Grajczonek, 2008). In many instances, religious education curricula purport to take into account the needs of children, yet present learners with a fixed account of the Christian worldview with little genuine attempt to take into account children’s own voices and experiences (Ota, 1998). Children in the early childhood religious educational contexts are highly capable learners who bring rich and diverse experiences to the classroom. This paper seeks to highlight the importance of the notion of agency in enabling both learning and spiritual development to occur in early childhood religious education through the non-verbal communication system and play. To achieve this aim, the paper begins by exploring both the concepts of agency and non-verbal communication. It then presents a case study involving a three-and-a-half year old child from a Godly Play classroom to illustrate how, in practice, agency may be exercised through non-verbal communication and play in religious education. It tentatively suggests how such agency resulted in both learning and the spiritual development of this child, particularly in relation to making meaning and confronting the existential concerns of the child.

Agency

Whereas once children were viewed in a paternalistic way – as being passive, helpless and incapable of making decisions for themselves, the contemporary literature understands and promotes the notion of children as being active participants and co-constructors of meaning (Adams, in press; Leeson & Griffiths, 2004; MacNaughton, Robertson, 2006; Smith & Davis, 2007; Soo Hoo, 1993). As noted by Adams, Hyde & Woolley (2008), the voice of the child has been legislated for and has been high on the political agenda for quite some time. One of the key reasons for this was The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), which gave children the right to participate in decisions that affect them (Article 12), the right to freedom of expression (Article 13) and the right to thought, conscience and religion (Article 14). Children now have a voice in a range of formal areas, including health, family separation and child protection. Children now have more opportunities to express their views and to shape their experiences than ever before in history (Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2008).

However, the notion of children as being active participants and co-constructors of meaning entails more

than voice alone. A key concept emerging from the idea of the voice of the child is that of agency – the ability of children to understand their world and to act upon it (Waller, 2005). Ansell (2005) maintains that children are not simply passive recipients of adult culture. They are “not ‘human becomings’ but [are] ‘human beings’ with culture of their own” (p. 22) (emphasis added). Children are socially competent, not in terms of having acquired a range of adult competencies, but rather because they already successfully manage interactions with both their peers and adults, and pursue agendas of their own. They are “active agents in their own lives” (p. 22). In support of this argument, the research of MacNaughton (2004) clearly indicates that by the age of four, children have learnt “the meaning of many of our cultural artefacts, to construct their own meaning in and through those artefacts, and to manipulate meanings according to context” (p. 43).

In discussing the possible constructions of Christian theologies of childhood, Bunge (2006) also notes that children have agency. Not only do children have extrinsic worth (as well as rights and responsibilities that correspond to that worth), but they should be fully respected as persons, valued as gifts, “and viewed as agents” (p. 58). Viewing children in this way, as “gifts of God to the whole community” (p. 59) challenges some of the commonly held assumptions of children by Christianity as being the “‘property’ of parents, as consumers, or as ‘economic burdens’ to the community” (p. 59). Such thinking echoes the thoughts of others who have worked with children in religious and pastoral roles (for example, Carter, 2007). More specifically in terms of religious education, Grajczonek and Hanifin (2007) argue that the child in the early years’ religion classroom should “be seen as an agent of learning and an active constructor of knowledge” (p. 159). Children in the early years’ religion classroom should be viewed as highly capable learners who bring rich and diverse experiences to the classroom.

Children may be seen, then, not merely as individuals but also as active participants in a wide range of meaningful social interactions. They have agency and are able to influence their own learning, as well as to construct and make meaning for themselves – sometimes in areas in which this has not always been deemed appropriate or necessary. Christensen and James (cited in MacNaughton, Smith & Davis, 2007) remind those who work with young children that “[We need to treat children] as social actors in their own right in contexts where, traditionally, they have been denied those rights of participation and their voices have remained unheard” (p. 169). Some would argue that religious education in faith-based contexts has often been one such area in which children have been denied such rights and voice (see for example, Gearon, 2001; Human Philosopher’s Group, 2001; Marples, 2005). Specifically in Catholic educational contexts, Grajczonek (2008) notes that both official Church and local diocesan documents tend to place children “in the passive voice” (p. 7). They are acted upon. In these documents children are often constructed as recipients of the faith tradition, and are subject to the school, their parents, and the parish. It is imperative therefore, that the agency of young children in the Catholic religious education classroom is recognised and affirmed.

However, the notion of agency may not always involve the child’s literal voice, that is, formal language. It could entail non-verbal communication through play and through acting upon the world.

Non-verbal communication

Berryman (2001) argues that non-verbal communication is important in religious education and that it signals expressions of spirituality. It involves the idea of *connotation*, which is rooted in the human being’s pre-object-formation way of knowing, and which ultimately influences the use of verbal language. It communicates through what Gardner (1993) terms as modes and vectors - kinds of deep body knowing. Berryman (2001) draws on Gardner’s work to explore the notion of non-verbal communication and its centrality in both spirituality and religious education through reference to a series of paired modes and vectors. These modes include: full and empty, animate and inanimate, crying and laughter, ecstasy and devastation. Of particular relevance to this discussion and the case study presented in this paper, are the modes and vectors associated with the notion of silence.

According to Berryman (2001), silence communicates and signals as a “call” but involves no sound¹. There is a cluster of words in English which refer to communication without sound – “stillness”, “silence” and “quiet”. All three words in this cluster are needed, since no one single word captures all that reflects the essence of silence. By pairing these words on related axes of modes and vectors as represented in Figure 1 below, Berryman articulates the non-verbal nature of silence to signal an aspect of spirituality.

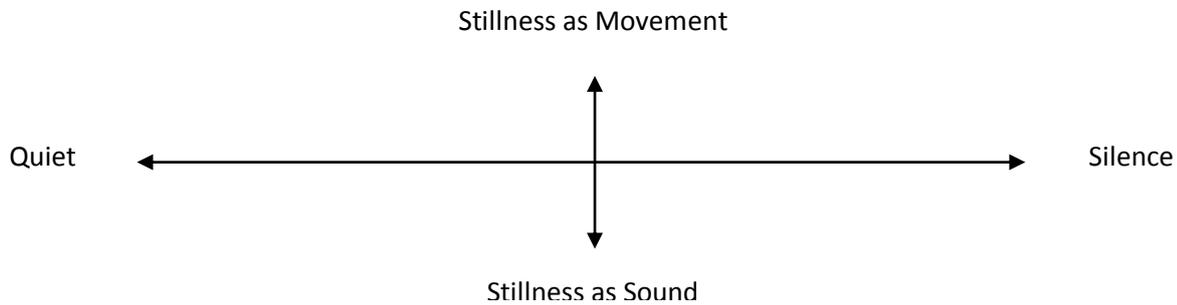


Figure 1: Pairs of modes and vectors for silence (Berryman, 2001)

The vertical axis depicts stillness with reference to movement and sound. For example when a lake or forest is still, it is not moving. It is also silent. Movement and sound are related. In terms of physics, the relationship concerns the movement in the medium of light (waves or quanta) as it stimulates a person’s eyes and in the medium of air as sound waves may stimulate a person’s ears.

With reference to the horizontal axis, Berryman (2001) notes that the distinction between quiet and silence concerns motivation. The motivation for quiet is inward, whilst silence is imposed from the outside. For example, a child may choose to work quietly, whilst, alternatively, a teacher may impose silence to force an outward calm, yet this outward calm could simultaneously increase inward agitation.

The intersecting axes then provide the possibility of situating an individual’s non-verbal communication in any one of four quadrants. For example, a person’s non-verbal communication may be expressed as silence (imposed from the outside) and may also involve that person remaining quite still. This is represented by the upper right quadrant. Similarly a person’s non-verbal communication may involve quiet (inward motivation) and contemplative listening. This would be represented by the lower left quadrant.

Young children in particular communicate using non-verbal cues – body language, facial expressions, a smile, a grimace, and so forth. This is in part because they have not as yet learnt to master language, and so rely on non-verbal cues as a means by which to communicate. They can especially communicate through quiet and stillness as indicated in the series of modes and vectors in Figure 1 above. For Berryman, play is signalled by the non-verbal communication system to which children are particularly sensitive and through which children often express their spirituality (Berryman, 2009; see also Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2008; Hyde, 2009). Therefore, terms of religious education and young children, the non-verbal communication system is important. Educators need to be able to “listen to” and “listen for” (Champagne, 2001) expressions of children’s religious and spiritual development through play and the non-verbal communication system.

Agency and non-verbal communication can combine in powerful ways in early childhood which may promote both spiritual development and active learning in religious education if educators cultivate environments which enable this to occur. Through play and non-verbal communication, a child may exercise agency and construct meaning in the very act of her or his acting upon the world.

Presented below is a case study from a Godly Play classroom, which is indicative of the way in which agency may be exercised through a child’s non-verbal communication (specifically the notion of silence) in religious education. The case study involves a three-and-a-half year old child, whose fictionalized name is Daniel. The

case study has, in the first instance been written as a hermeneutic phenomenological text (van Manen, 1990), consistent with the author's original program of research (Hyde, 2005, 2008). The discussion which follows attempts to illustrate how this child exercised agency through the non-verbal communication system to construct meaning and to act upon the world.

The case study

Daniel was three-and-a half years of age and of Anglo-Saxon descent. His grandparents were well known within the parish community. In fact, it was his grandfather who had brought him to the Godly Play classroom on this occasion. The following text centres on the work in which Daniel chose to engage during the response element of the Godly Play process, when the children were invited by the Storyteller to take out their work. Although the Parable of the Great Pearl was the presentation of that day, Daniel chose to work instead with the Parable of the Good Shepherd materials.

Daniel was attracted to the Parable of the Good Shepherd materials, which had been presented some weeks beforehand. With care, he unpacked the contents of the parable box. Slowly and deliberately, he manipulated the pieces of the presentation. In particular, he took great care in placing each of the sheep, one by one, onto the shoulders of the Good Shepherd, just as the Good Shepherd put the lost sheep onto his shoulders in the parable. He then manipulated the materials so that the Good Shepherd individually took each one of the sheep on his shoulders into the sheepfold. Daniel seemed to be absorbed in this activity. The care with which he displayed in moving of the pieces suggests that, for him at that moment in time, nothing else existed outside of this activity.

Daniel appeared to have "unfinished business" (Lamont, 2007) with this parable. The Storyteller later indicated to me that Daniel had also chosen this parable for his work in the session the previous week. He was in the process of making meaning from this parable. He had taken the Storyteller's words to heart – that if at first you can't get inside the parable, don't be discouraged, but keep coming back to it. For Daniel it seemed that this presentation held particular significance. He was searching for that significance by revisiting the parable and manipulating the materials. The significance may have been in his placing, one by one, each of the sheep onto the shoulders of the Good Shepherd so that each could be individually carried safely back into the sheepfold.

Throughout his engagement in this activity, Daniel did not speak. He looked intently at the materials as he manoeuvred them, slowly and deliberately. He was engaged in seriously playful play, which carried with it a sense of sacredness, which he honoured through quiet and reverence.

Discussion

The first thing to note about this particular case study is that Daniel did not speak. His communication was situated clearly and solely within the nonverbal system, and this combined with his own agency. In terms of Berryman's (2001) modes and vectors in relation to silence, Daniel was "positioned" in the upper left quadrant, in which silence is depicted as both "quiet" and "stillness as movement". He *chose* to work in quiet. Silence was not imposed by the Storyteller, but rather, quiet was freely chosen – an inward motivation on Daniel's part. In fact, it could be described as meditative quiet². The repetitive action involved in manoeuvring the sheep and the shepherd are reflective of the type of movements a person may make when meditating upon the mysteries of the Rosary (in manipulating the individual beads), or in becoming aware of one's own breathing in meditation (the conscious act of slowly breathing in, and out). As well, in Daniel's meditative quiet, there was movement. Daniel was engaged in a sensorial and tactile activity. He used his hands and fingers to manipulate each of the individual pieces of the Parable of the Good Shepherd slowly and deliberately in his quest to find meaning in the parable. This bodily movement involved both mental and physical capacities. His perception of and physical interaction with the materials led to a conscious thinking and acting upon the task. He was drawing upon the wisdom of his body – his felt sense – as a natural way of knowing (Hyde, 2008). Therefore, in this instance stillness and movement for Daniel may have resulted in a type of sensorial logic (Berryman, 1991) as a way of knowing. In other words,

Daniel exercised his agency in working quietly, meditatively, and physically upon this task as a means by which to learn about this parable.

Constructing meaning

The fact that Daniel had chosen to work with this parable on more than one occasion during recent weeks in the Godly Play classroom – and had been allowed to do so – is significant. Daniel was able to exercise agency in his choice of work in order to make meaning from the parable. Lamont (2007) employs the term “unfinished business” in relation to children who return again to Godly Play materials which have been previously presented, and with which children themselves previously have worked. The notion of having “unfinished business” suggests that a child who chooses to work with a set of materials again is still attempting to uncover the meaning which that particular presentation (sacred story, parable, or liturgical action) may have for the child her or himself (see also Cavalletti, 1983). For Daniel a key to the significance of this parable lay in the way he moved the sheep and the shepherd. Individually, he placed each one of the sheep on to the shoulders of the Good Shepherd, and took each safely back to the sheepfold. In doing so, it is possible that he was confronting at least one existential issue in his life. Berryman (1991, 2009) maintains that existential issues mark the boundaries of human experience. They include the experience of what happens at death, the sense of aloneness, the need to create meaning, and an appreciation of what it means to be free. Berryman maintains that these limits are just as fundamental to the lives of children as they are to adults. While children may experience them, speak of them and approach them in ways different to adults, they are nonetheless real for them.

The case study suggests that there may have been two existential issues Daniel was confronting. Firstly, he was confronting the need to create meaning from this parable. Earlier work with this parable in previous weeks had not enabled Daniel to derive sufficient meaning, and so he chose deliberately to work with the parable again in an attempt to complete his unfinished business. Some early research of Berryman (1991) indicates that children may return to the same presentation many times over a number of Godly Play sessions in order to make meaning from it. It is therefore necessary that children be allowed to do so, and that they are supported by the adults in the Godly Play classroom in their quest³. Secondly, Daniel may also have been confronting the existential issue of freedom. Freedom can present as a paradox for human beings. People crave freedom, yet when it is acquired people often retreat to the safety of boundaries. In some sense, freedom is perceived as a threat by people. It is eagerly sought after, yet when attained people often do not know what to do with their new found freedom. Somehow, it is safer to remain within the confines of boundaries. In the parable, the Good Shepherd guides and shows the way. He shows the sheep *how* to be free by leading them to the “good grass”, to the cool, fresh water, through the places of danger, and back safely to the sheepfold. When freedom leads to one of the sheep finding itself lost and in dangerous territory, the Good shepherd leads it to safety. The Good Shepherd even searches in places of danger for a sheep, which, because of an excess of freedom, has become lost. In working with the parable materials again, Daniel was confronting this existential issue, and possibly coming to see that Jesus – the Good Shepherd – was one who, rather than curtailing his freedom, could lead and guide him safely to it.

In this sense, it could be argued that Daniel encountered Jesus *as* the Good Shepherd. In the process of making meaning from this parable and confronting his existential limits, Daniel discovered the Good Shepherd to be Jesus, who guides, protects, and himself to be one of the sheep. Put another way, it was as if the creator of the parable (Jesus) and the seeker of meaning (Daniel) met in their common creative acts as Creator and creature, both of whom play and co-create together.

Daniel’s agency is then reflected not only in his choice of work – the revisiting of the Parable of the Good Shepherd materials – but also in terms of his ability to understand the world, that is, to construct meaning in and through a series of artefacts in relation to the particularity of his own context (MacNaughton, 2004). The adults in the Godly Play classroom respected his agency and his ability to construct meaning for himself, and allowed him to attend to that task. They supported, but did not interfere, with his confrontation with existential issues and his ability to derive meaning from them in relation to his own context.

Conclusion

There are two important points which have emerged in light of this case study in terms of Daniel's exercise of agency. The first concerns his choice and use of the Good Shepherd parable materials. If Daniel had been allowed only to work with lesson of the day (which was the Parable of the Great Pearl), he would not have been able to return to the Parable of the Good Shepherd to create meaning, to confront his existential limits and so complete his unfinished business with the parable. Similarly, if Daniel had simply been told by the Storyteller that, in reality, he was one of the sheep, and that Jesus was the Good Shepherd, then he would have been robbed of the opportunity of making such a discovery for himself, and the parable would not have impacted upon him in a way that enabled his spirituality to be nurtured. Therefore, children must be given agency in their choice of work. This reiterates Berryman's (1991) contention that children need to be able to choose their own work in the Godly Play classroom so that they can return again and again to images that bear meaning for them to enable them to confront and cope with their existential limits and ultimate concerns.

Secondly, while Daniel was using the Parable of the Good Shepherd to make meaning about his life, he was internalizing not only the parable itself, but also how to use it in his developing understanding of the Christian language system. Although in this particular case study, Daniel used meditative quiet rather than spoken language, he has clearly drawn on the Storyteller's original telling of the parable in his usage of the materials. This became evident in watching him manipulate the lesson materials. In meditative silence, Daniel used the Storyteller's original language in his own meaning-making process. This has implications for the Storyteller in facilitating and nurturing Daniel's transition from non-verbal communication to the use of the language of the Christian tradition. Berryman's work stresses the importance of rendering non-verbal spirituality in a specific language tradition. However, such a transition will carry with it the challenge of supporting Daniel in his use of the language of the Christian tradition, while at the same time, enabling him to continue to exercise agency. A danger here is that when religious language is formally taught, it can, however unintentionally, become uprooted from its creative and life-giving source, and result in indoctrination as it becomes full of "animus and destruction" (Berryman, 2001).

It is pertinent to note, also, that Berryman (2002) reiterates the Christian language system includes not only parables, sacred stories and liturgical actions, but also meditative silence. There was considerable meditative silence – quiet – in Daniel's work in this particular case study. His exercise of agency enabled him to engage meaningfully with this parable, thereby not only facilitating his own learning in religious education, but also nurturing his spiritual life.

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¹ Berryman's use of the term "call" does not simply imply language without words. A call refers to the signalling of an internal state. As such, calls can convey complex and important information.

² This particular insight was developed through personal communication with Jerome Berryman, 9 July, 2009. Although Berryman used the phrase "meditative silence", I have used the term "meditative quiet", consistent with his original usage of the modes and vectors in relation to the call of silence.

³ Berryman (1991) documents the work of two boys over a ten week period during the response time of the Godly Play process and their continual returning to the Parable of the Mustard Seed in order to make meaning from it, particularly in relation to confronting the existential issues of freedom and death.

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