The Swimming Pool. The Teachers Role in the Didactics of Dialogue School, Using Godly Play

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Abstract

With the purpose of guiding a child in his own life philosophical development, a research-group of HAN University designed the didactic principles of Dialogue School. In this project different ideas and methods were explored. This article looks at the possibilities and problems teachers encounter, using the method of Godly Play as part of the Dialogue School didactics. It is concluded that the teacher has to learn to let go, to understand symbolic communication, to create a safe and relaxed learning environment, to combine various subjects and, most of all, to really communicate with every single pupil.

Key words: Life philosophical development, Godly Play, Dialogue School, storytelling

Preface

It was the week before the Easter celebration of the Protestant Koningin Juliana School in Apeldoorn, the Netherlands. All the parents had been invited to come and see what their children had made. The teacher of groups 1 and 2 (age 4 – 6 years) came up to the researcher (one of the authors: TS) and showed him the object in Figure 1, one of her pupils made. This was his representation of the Easter story. She, however, was surprised and also worried: ‘It is a swimming pool. I can’t show this to the parents, can I?’

This question triggered the authors to analyse what was going on? What did the child mean? Why was it difficult for the teacher to understand the child? This apparently was a religious symbol, but the adults, not even the researcher (TS), the religious expert, understood what it meant. Why didn't we?
Introduction

This scene happened during a large project called Dialogue School. In this project, the authors, several elementary school teachers, (as well as a few) students – were looking for new didactics on guiding children in primary school in developing their own life philosophy. Up till now, in most schools, it is the professional, i.e the teacher, who decides what will be taught in religious education or life philosophy. The teacher may decide to do nothing, as in public schools, or teach from a certain religion, as in denominational schools (Roebben, 2007).

But what happens if we take the life philosophy of the child itself as a starting point? What will happen when we do not impart religious truths, but stimulate children to discover their own truths? (Parlevliet, 2013)

From the moment a child is born, it receives life philosophical experiences such as images and feelings. A little later it will start asking itself life philosophical questions (Fowler, 1981). This is important for a child in order to grow up to be an all-round human being who knows how to tackle rational problems, and how to address problems that are not just rational. Not too long ago, we had religion to help us relate to these issues. However, in a secular society, where there are many different religions, and even more people who are non-religious, we started talking about life philosophy. Ina ter Avest (2007, p. 216) also uses the terms ‘informal religion’, ‘wild devotion’, ‘spirituality’ and ‘sense-making processes’.

The question now is how we can help children to develop the tools and learn the language to address these life philosophical questions?

In the project Dialogue School we worked together with different Protestant elementary schools to try out different perspectives, ideas and methods. These schools were not satisfied with the religious education they were offering the children. Not only didn't they want to impart religious truths on the Protestant children, they also acknowledged the fact that over half of their population is non-Protestant and thus not interested in these religious truths. The question therefore is how to be a Protestant school without imparting religious truths but, instead guiding children in developing their own life philosophy. They, as a starting point, chose the idea, that religious stories, rituals and symbols are not necessarily truths that need to be imparted, but esthetical elements that need to be discovered and given meaning by every child as an individual.

In this particular sub-project, we worked together with the Koningin Juliana School, using the method of Godly Play (Berryman, 2009) to help children discover the story of Easter. The research group recognized how Godly Play might be a good method for working with Dialogue School. Therefore we invited a professional teacher of Godly Play to tell the Easter story to every single class separately. Afterwards the class would decide on how to respond creatively to this story and the results would be presented to the parents. The whole process was closely monitored and is presented here as good practice.

This led to our research question:

*What are the possibilities and problems for a teacher, using the method of Godly Play, as part of the didactics of Dialogue School?*
The aim of this research is to explore the possibilities and problems of the didactics of Dialogue School in order to find out if the ideas behind the method of Godly Play might assist teachers to adequately work with the five tasks (see below).

Theoretical background

Dialogue School

The didactics of Dialogue School is a so called self-exploring didactics in which children are not only stimulated to develop their own identity, but also learn to act upon this. Thus the diversity of life philosophies of the children in the classroom as well as that of the teachers is greatly valued as a rich learning environment. The vast amount of very diverse life philosophical influences a child receives every day through parents, the street, multimedia, literature, clubs and even the shopping mall is valued in the same manner (Oosterheert, 2011). Dialogue School is a way to help children to assert themselves in this enormous wave of influences – how will they find solid ground? It sees these influences as an opportunity to create a learning environment where children can rise above themselves and in which they can experience something that transcends themselves (Schoemaker, 2011).

The didactics of Dialogue School consist of five tasks for the teacher (Schoemaker 2014, p. 27-28).

1. The teacher shows the pupils different life philosophical influences and makes them aware that they experience these influences every day.
2. The teacher has the possibility to add some influences of his own.
3. The teacher stimulates the pupils to make choices which influences are relevant to them or not.
4. The teacher stimulates the pupils to make connections between the different relevant influences. Thus the pupil creates his own life philosophy.
5. The teacher stimulates the pupils to find words for their life philosophy and to find ways to act upon it.

Dialogue School is not only based on social constructivist theories of learning (Vygotsky, 1978), but also on the presumption that life philosophy is not so much a cognitive process but a more philosophical, aesthetic process (Schoemaker, 2004). It uses symbols, rituals, arts and narratives to express what it means, always knowing that these have different layers and a diversity of meanings. For the teacher to guide the children in this process, it is important to be comfortable with this symbolic language (Ganzveoort, 2005; 2007) and to know how a child develops in using this language.

According to Paul Ricoeur (1991), children can go through four different stages or phases in dealing with symbolic language. In the first naïve phase, the child cannot distinguish between fact and symbol. To the child they are the same. As the child reaches the first critical phase, it knows there is a difference and it values fact over symbol. In the second critical phase the child knows the difference between fact and symbol, but it also recognizes how important symbols
can be to others. Finally, they reach the second naïve phase where they still know the difference between fact and symbol, but they value both.

**Godly Play**

Godly Play is a method of working with biblical stories, designed by Jerome Berryman, based on the principles of Maria Montessori. The main focus for the children is to find their own meaning in these stories and learn to express their own spirituality (Berryman, 2009).

The role of the children’s mentors is not to impart religious truths, but rather to present the lesson and to provide a safe environment, equipped with the necessary rules and structures (orthodoxy), so that the play between each child and God in community is scaffolded, enabling Creator and creature to play at the edges of knowing and being, to co-create together. (Berryman & Hyde, 2010, p. 42).

As a method, Godly Play was originally designed for children aged 3 – 6 years old. In the forty years that followed, the method was expanded to children aged up to 12. The method has also been used in different kinds of adult groups (Berryman, 2009, p.141).

Godly Play works with scripted stories – the storyteller does not improvise – to show that the storyteller is not the expert, but to invite children to step into the story themselves and to explore it on their own (Berryman & Hyde, 2010). In the script, not only the words are given, but also the symbolic objects which are used to tell the story.

For instance: In the scripted story called: "the Easter story", eight different drawings are used (Berryman, 2003). Every drawing depicts a scene in the life of Jesus: his birth, in the temple as a twelve year old, being baptised, in the desert, healing someone, teaching, the last supper, crucifixion and resurrection. In every story and drawing, the focus is on how Jesus wants to be close to people. This is also presented as the essence of the resurrection: Jesus is still close to people.

After the story is told, the children relive the story by reflecting on different questions. Every question starts with the phrase “I wonder…” to indicate that the teacher does not know the answer and that every child’s answer is as good as the other. But also to state that exploring a story is like a miracle. The questions are also scripted and are used to start a dialogue. In the Easter story, the following questions were raised (Berryman, 2003):

- I wonder, what part of the story did you like best?
- I wonder, which part of the story is least important?
I wonder, in which part of the story would you like to be present?
I wonder, which part of the story could you leave out, without changing the essence of the story?

Finally, the children are invited to respond to the story in a creative way. In the classroom different creative materials are present and every child can choose which materials he or she wants to use and how he or she wants to respond to the story. For the teacher, it is very important to create an atmosphere of being relaxed and silent. This is important for the children to take their time to explore the story and their own feelings, but also to gain respect for the thoughts of the other children. No discussions, but listening and dialogue (Hyde, 2010).

Method

Before this sub-project was executed, the Koningin Juliana School participated in various other sub-projects. The largest one was the project: “De Lichtstad” (Schoemaker, 2013; 2014). In “De Lichtstad” every class tried to find out what a “city of lights” could be, using all the different school-subjects. In this sub-project we noticed how the teachers where very good at working with the first (pointing out life philosophical influences) and second task (adding their own influences) of Dialogue School, but had problems working with the other three tasks. The teachers took over, made the choices, made the connections and told the children what to say and do. In working with Godly Play, we wanted to see if these didactics would help them to work with the other three tasks of Dialogue School: to let go and stimulate the children to make their own choices.

To find an answer to the main question the researcher just observed what the professional Godly Play teacher and the schoolteachers did during the storytelling, the wondering and the creative response. During the observations, the researcher took notes and also videotaped what was happening in order to check afterwards if his notes were accurate. After the sub-project had ended, he interviewed the teachers to find out which parts of the didactics of Dialogue School had helped them and which had raised problems for them in guiding the children in discovering their own life philosophy.

In this article, we focus on what happened in first and second grade (age 4 – 6 years) because this gives us the opportunity to present in depth what had happened. Afterwards everything that was said and done was labelled according to the five tasks of the teacher in Dialogue School. What was said and done by the Godly Play teacher and the schoolteachers was analysed separately. After the sub-project the researcher questioned the schoolteachers and asked them two questions:

- What were the problems and possibilities of the five tasks of Dialogue School in this project?
- How did this project help you to work with the five tasks of Dialogue School?

The answers were also labelled according to the five tasks of Dialogue School.

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1 For the complete research paper, see: ‘Ook al weet ik het niet, jij hebt het bedacht dus mag je het onthouden’, De rol van de leerkracht in de didactiek van Dialoog School tijdens Godly Play” by Tom Schoemaker and Fedor de Beer on [http://www.samenonderwijsmaken.nl/page/78/eigen-onderzoek.html](http://www.samenonderwijsmaken.nl/page/78/eigen-onderzoek.html)
Results

Godly Play teacher

First the researcher looked at the way in which the Godly Play teacher had told the story of Easter and had wondered with the children about the story. Looking at the possibilities and problems of using the five tasks of Dialogue School he saw:

1. Pointing at the different influences
By asking the question ‘I wonder, in which part of the story would you like to be present?’ she stimulated the children to explore their own influences. When a child started talking about being baptized, she responded: ‘we don’t know about each other who is baptized or not. We can ask each other later.’

2. Adding influences
The most important influence she added for the children was of course the story she told. She did not, however, tell the children what she thought was important or relevant in this story. But also, when a child stated that the mystery is gone now that she had told the story, she replied that it was actually still a mystery. It was something you can get closer to, but you are not there yet.
When a child replied that you cannot come back to life once you are dead, she reminded the child that Jesus had said ‘I will always be close to you’. Maybe he will be close to you as well. Maybe that is part of the mystery. In this manner, she revealed some of her insights, but left room for the children to find their own.

3. Making choices
During the wondering she used four questions. For this third task the most important questions were:
I wonder, what part of the story did you like best?
I wonder, which part of the story is least important?
I wonder, which part of the story could you leave out, without changing the essence of the story?
Using the drawings, the children could point out what was important to them. Another option was that the Godly Play teacher removed one or more of the drawings to see if the story was still complete.

4. Making connections
The question that helped the children make a connection between the story and their own lives was: I wonder, in which part of the story would you like to be present? The children were also invited to stand next to the drawing of the scene they picked. By using these concrete objects, it was easier for the children to make up their minds.

5. Finding words and acting upon the insights
In the wondering the teacher facilitated the children to find words for what was important to them. There was a relaxed and safe atmosphere and the children could take their time to find words. It was also important that she left the drawings behind. They were hung in the classroom for the following two weeks so that the children could look at them and play with them.
Schoolteachers 1
When the children came back to their regular classroom, the schoolteacher took over. In first and second grade, the classroom has corners with different materials children can use for free work. They have a corner for construction material, a drawing and painting corner, a corner for acting out situations and a corner where children can play with letters and words.

The question the schoolteacher raised was: I wonder, in which part of the story would you like to be present? Every child was invited to choose one of the scenes of the story. He or she could take their drawing to one of the corners and use the materials that were available. Here the schoolteacher was acting out her third and fourth task: stimulating the children to make choices and make connections. But by doing so, she also stimulated the children to scan their own lives and the influences they had already experienced, which was the first task. It was here, in the construction corner, that the child made his swimming pool.

Intermezzo: A few days later the teacher came up to the researcher and asked what to do with this swimming pool. She did not recognize it as being part of the Easter story. The researcher advised her to ask the child what he had done and why he had done so. This advice turned out to be very important for her and the children. Not only did she ask this child what he had done and why, but she asked this every child. This appeared to be very important for the children, because now the schoolteacher helped them to find words for what they had done. Instead of it only being an image in their head, they could now communicate about the things that were important to them in a manner that adults could understand. Now the teacher could also understand what the children had created and thus she also gained insight in how the children actually were thinking. As she wrote down what the children had said and when she presented this together with the children's work, the parents also were able to understand the ideas of the children. This turned out to be a very important step in the fifth task of the teacher: helping the children to find words.

What this child did was the following: in the story he heard about Jesus being baptized by John. Jesus had to put his head under water and he was lifted up by John so that he could breathe again. This was a feeling the child knew. He was taking his swimming lessons and he did not like to be with his head under the water. This frightened him. He was afraid he would die. Just like Jesus.

Schoolteachers 2
A few months later the researcher asked both schoolteachers what had been the possibilities and problems of working with the five tasks of Dialogue School, using the method of Godly Play. They were both surprised to see how easy it was for the children in second grade to relate the old Biblical story to their own lives. In their opinion this project had been too difficult for the children in first grade but it was nice to see that the children could not do anything wrong, all answers were good answers. They both were also very happy with the individual conversations they had with the children.

On the other hand it had been difficult for the children to listen to each other’s stories. They were not yet able to stay focussed long enough. It also was a problem that, once one of the children started talking about i.e. his baby brother, everybody wanted to do something with the
baby. Moreover they noted that working in this manner means that you have to have enough time and that you have to see the possibilities. You have to recognize what the children mean to say.

Asking the teachers how the project had helped them with the five tasks, they stated that it had been an eye-opener to them. It had become clear to them where there are chances and possibilities. One of the teachers told that she was used to let the children subjects like nature, physics and history. Now she saw a lot of possibilities to combine the life philosophical lessons in the morning with the exploring lessons in the afternoon. Both liked the way of starting a question with the words ‘I wonder…’.

**Conclusions**

*What are the possibilities and problems for a teacher, using the method Godly Play, as part of the didactics of Dialogue School?*

Using the example of the swimming pool, we want to answer this question using theoretical insights as well as using the results from the practical research.

In this project the focus was on children exploring the story on their own. To do so it was important for the teacher to make himself less important than the child and the story. It was not important what the thoughts or insights of the teacher were. It was also important for the teacher to create a safe and relaxed environment for the children to start exploring. You need time, but most of all, the children need time. Another thing that proved to be helpful is that every question starts with the phrase ‘I wonder…’. This invites the children to wonder with each other and with the teacher. Finally, using the symbolic objects also helped the children to explore the story. They could watch it, move it, stand next to it or even place objects in its vicinity.

Next it appeared to be important, that the child makes the choice which part of the story is important to him or her. But the child also makes a connection between the story and its own life. Helpful was the question: I wonder, in which part of the story would you like to be present? The children talked about this question, they were invited to stand next to the drawing of the scene in which they wanted to participate and they were invited to create something linking the story to their own lives. In this manner, the teacher worked with the third, the fourth and the first task of the teacher.

However, in making this connection a communication problem emerged. The teacher did not understand what a child was trying to say. And because she had to present it to the parents, she also felt uncomfortable about it. This situation opened the eyes of the research-group to some different ideas:

When you want to stimulate children to explore a story, be careful in inviting the parents. Teachers want to make the parents proud, or want to receive appraisal from the parents. This is not always in the interest of the child.

When you want to stimulate children to explore a story, you have to let go of what you think the story means. Especially with such an important story as that of Easter, it will be difficult to look at it from a whole new perspective, let alone from the perspective of a five year old child.
When you want to stimulate children to explore a story, it is important that you feel comfortable in symbolic communication. This is even more important, when working with young children. As Ricoeur shows, the young child does not know the difference between the symbolic and the factual reality.

Sometimes, the teacher did not understand what the child meant. In this project they learned how important it can be to just ask the child. This takes some time, but it is very important for the learning proces of the child as well as that of the teacher. Task five states that the teacher has to help the child to find words for what is important for him. That is exactly happened here.

It is also important for the teacher to have an open eye for the life philosophical questions a child has to deal with in his life. Questions of fear, of abandonment, of having pleasure in life. These issues could be more important than the ‘message’ of the story adults may think of.

The work of the children was also given a place in the classroom so the children themselves could look at everything they had created and they could proudly show it to their parents.

The teachers also noticed how important it was for the children: They could use these images to start a new conversation.

The teachers saw some difficulties in the time a project like this would take. Even the children in first and second grade have a full program. But both also saw possibilities, because the whole idea was to help children make connections between different parts of their lives. This created a lot of possibilities to combine different subjects during the day or the week. Having a story in the morning and exploring lessons in the afternoon could create the rich learning environment teachers are looking for.

**Discussions**

Of course this case study was limited, so that we cannot make any claims about the method as such. But in researching this process many possibilities emerged for further practice and further research.

It is clear that Godly Play as a method has much to offer to the didactics of Dialogue School. But, being designed for church, there are several problems that should be addressed before implementation in elementary schools.

The first problem would be the name “Godly Play” and the sole fixation on biblical stories (Black, 2011). In a mixed population in the Dutch schools, even in Protestant schools, it would be a good idea to design scripts around other relevant stories as well.

In the same line of argument it can be stated that the development of the didactics of Dialogue School started out with the fact that many children in Protestant schools do not believe in God. When Berryman states that the intention of Godly Play is ‘so that the play between each child and God in community is scaffolded, enabling Creator and creature to play at the edges of knowing and being, to co-create together’” (Berryman & Hyde, 2010, p. 42), it can be argued that these children are (at least) stimulated to play with a God they do not believe in. For this research it can be stated that the researcher, as well as the professional Godly Play teacher, did
not stimulate the playing with God as much as the playing with the story. For the didactics of Dialogue School this is a very relevant distinction that has not been extensively explored yet.

In Godly Play the children respond to the story by being creative with arts and crafts. In elementary school it would be a good idea to try and make combinations with far more different subjects and topics like history, nature, creative writing, social and emotional education or citizenship. This could open up their world with life philosophical dimensions and it might help the teachers with their problem of time.

Teaching the (future) teachers the rather simple tasks of Dialogue School and Godly Play does not seem to be a problem. Helping them change their mind-set with respect to the transfer of knowledge and knowing what is good for the child, with respect to guiding the children with their own explorations, seems to be far more difficult. This needs further research and practice.

References


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