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Pre-service Teachers' Perspectives on Teaching Scripture in Primary Religious Education

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Pre-service teachers' perspectives on teaching scripture in primary Religious Education

Introduction

The delivery of Religious Education (RE) in Catholic schools globally plays an important role in the formation of young people in today's society (The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 49). RE in Western Australian (WA) Catholic primary schools is a mandated area of curriculum to be taught with the same rigour as all other learning areas (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997). Within the RE curriculum, teachers are required to teach scripture, that is, they are tasked with presenting scripture stories in a way that effectively passes on their knowledge and understanding of these stories to the children they teach in a pedagogically appropriate way. Godly Play, which originated from the work of Cavaletti and was further developed by Berryman (Berryman, 2007), includes a method of sharing scripture stories. Although Godly Play was intended as a catechetical tool for use in parishes and hospitals, it is applicable to the teaching of RE in Catholic primary schools when used to influence the teaching of scripture. This paper presents findings from an investigation into pre-service teachers' perspectives of Godly Play as a strategy for influencing the teaching of scripture within RE in WA Catholic primary schools. The research is significant in contributing to the literature on teaching scripture in Catholic schools and responds to the call of earlier research that identified the need for pre-service teachers to develop confidence in sharing biblical texts (Hackett & Lavery, 2012).

Context of Religious Education in Western Australian schools

Catholic schools are places of evangelisation (Congregation for Catholic Education [CCE], 1988, para. 66) working toward the mission of the Church which encompasses, "the teaching of Christian doctrine imparted, generally speaking, in an organic and systematic

way, with a view to initiating the hearers into the fullness of Christian life” (Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC], 1997, para. 5). Therefore, to ensure that the mission is achieved, the teacher of RE plays a significant role in the development of a child’s knowledge of the faith tradition. For that reason, it is imperative that teachers of RE participate in the necessary training required of them in order to teach this subject “with the same systematic demands and the same rigour as other disciplines” (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 73).

In WA, an aim of RE is to assist students in developing an understanding of the teachings of the Gospel and of “how Christians are trying to live their lives” (Holohan, 1999, p. 27). The Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia (CECWA) policy on RE states that it is “the first learning area in the Catholic school curriculum” and refers to the particular time spent in the classroom focused on the “knowledge and understanding of the Gospel” (2017b, p. 1). The teaching of RE in WA is unique in that only one mandated RE curriculum is taught in all 162 Catholic schools across the state (Hackett, Sayce & Alteri, 2017). The Bishops of the four WA dioceses have promulgated collectively a Mandate Letter to all staff working within Catholic schools that articulates their key responsibility in the Church’s mission (CECWA, 2009). Included in the principles and procedures required to teach RE is the acknowledgement that RE should be planned for, taught and assessed using the same processes as one would for any other learning area (CECWA, 2009, para. 62; CECWA, 2017b). In WA, these policies and procedures also include the amount of time that is allocated for the teaching of RE. Pre-Primary and Year 1 teachers are required to plan for fifteen minutes of instruction per day whereas a minimum of thirty minutes per day is compulsory for teachers in Years 2-6.

Requirements of pre-service teachers to teach Religious Education.

RE teachers in Catholic schools in WA are required to not only assist children in developing knowledge and understanding of the Gospel but also provide faith-related experiences (CECWA, 2017b). The development of RE knowledge and understanding occurs in the classroom during the allocated teaching time for RE. To achieve these expectations, it is imperative that teachers of RE have undertaken necessary training in this learning area. The Accreditation policy from CECWA states that teachers of RE must have a comprehensive understanding of the Catholic faith to ensure they are able to execute their role effectively within the school (CECWA, 2017a). The process includes an orientation day at the Office of Catholic Education Western Australia (CEWA), a school-based induction program known as 'Faith, Story and Witness', a study component which requires the completion of three approved tertiary units (or their equivalent) and an 18 hour in-service on the methodology and pedagogy required to teach RE. For students who study at The University of Notre Dame Australia, the study component and in-service can be completed during their undergraduate degree in the form of three Theology units, two RE methods units and through the teaching of RE during their final practicum. It is within the RE methods units that pre-service teachers learn about 'why we do what we do' in a Catholic school. The Congregation for Catholic Education emphasises developing "appropriate programs so that the teachers of tomorrow will be able to carry out their task with the competence and efficacy that is expected of them" (1988, para. 97). The implementation of programs such as the CECWA (2017a) policy on Accreditation not only ensures teachers remain up-to-date with innovative and current practices in this learning area but allows them to develop confidence to implement effective strategies in RE (Ryan, 2014).

The RE Curriculum in WA Catholic Primary Schools.

In WA, the mandated RE program aims to pass on the teachings of the Catholic Church by contributing to students' knowledge and understanding of the Gospel (CECWA, 2009, para. 62). One way this aim is carried out is through the teaching of scripture. The mandated RE curriculum for Catholic primary schools in WA requires teachers to present and interpret scripture stories. Within each RE Unit of Work a diverse range of scripture is integrated to emphasise key understandings and learning points for each year level. Teachers are therefore tasked with passing on the knowledge and understandings of each scripture story. To ensure that these understandings are being conveyed accurately, it is imperative that teachers develop the skills and knowledge needed to be able to interpret and deliver scripture confidently. Whilst the RE curriculum outlines specific scripture to be taught and provides suggested pedagogical practices for presenting and interpreting the scripture story, much is also left to the ability of the teacher. By developing a deeper understanding of scripture and how to deliver it in a meaningful and relevant way, the teacher is able to relate the messages of the Gospel to the lives of the students today (CECWA, 2009, para. 32).

Review of the Literature

Scholarly and research literature is reviewed within the following themes: teaching scripture in schools; Godly Play as a strategy for teaching scripture; and teacher confidence. These three themes frame the research presented in this paper. Literature reviewed is drawn upon within the findings and discussion section.

The teaching of scripture in schools.

The teaching of scripture is an important element of the RE program in primary schools. McLarney and Rymarz (2009) draw on the work of Coles to state, "scriptural

narratives allow a certain cognitive space to develop around all those involved in the teaching and learning process” (p. 21). When the curriculum includes the teaching of scripture it is suggested that this be both purposeful and meaningful whereby play, imagination and curiosity are deeply entrenched (Grajczonek & Truasheim, 2017). As with any other learning area, in RE children should be engaged, participative and active in their learning (Grajczonek, 2013). Storytelling is one technique identified in existing literature to be effective for the teaching of scripture. Storytelling is a strategy that engages the imagination, supports the natural inclination to wonder and imagine, and connects the storyteller with the listener (Keeble & Burton, 2013). McLarney and Rymarz (2009) discuss the idea of a narrative, or story, having the potential to engage the hearer on many levels whilst Keeble and Burton (2013) describe storytelling as being an enriching opportunity for students to experience listening to, and reflecting upon, Biblical stories. Keeble and Burton’s (2013) research on Reflective Storytelling (RST) found children’s intrinsic engagement and motivation led to meaningful and memorable learning. In particular, “RST has shown to be an effective tool in teaching RE and particularly learning from religion” (Keeble & Burton, 2013, p. 13).

Several approaches exist that assist educators and catechists to teach scripture. Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS), created by Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi, is one approach inspired by the work of Montessori and that has been widely adopted (O’Shea, 2017). CGS presents scripture as one component, although its major focus is the Mass (Standing, 2017). CGS has been compared to Godly Play as both are considered a form of storytelling (O’Shea, 2017). Whilst similar in technique, one way that CGS differs to Godly Play is with the role that the storyteller assumes. O’Shea (2017) compares these two strategies in his work and concludes both to demonstrate worthiness as ‘tools’ for teaching scripture in the primary RE classroom.

Godly Play as a scripture strategy.

Godly Play takes the form of an imaginative strategy for religious storytelling, developed by Berryman and influenced by the research work of Montessori and Cavalletti. In its original form, Godly Play is catechetical in that its focus is on the faith formation of children who belong to a parish community (Grajczonek & Truasheim, 2017). Godly Play places importance on the teacher and children becoming partners in RE to aid the child in making connections between their own experiences and religious stories, supplementing their spiritual growth (Hemmings, 2012). In research carried out by Hyde (2010), it was found that the process of Godly Play nourishes childrens' spirituality and is a method that engages the whole child with Christian language. Godly Play is described in the literature as presenting a play-based opportunity where children creatively discern meaning and purpose in life (Hyde, 2011).

A Godly Play session in its original form includes the elements of a welcome, story, response time, feast and dismissal. The lesson is described by Hyde (2010) as comprising:

a sacred story from scripture (stories that are concerned with the identity of God's people), a parable (stories which Jesus told to challenge a worldview or way of thinking), or a liturgical action (an element from the liturgy, such as Baptism, or from the flow of the liturgical year, such as Advent). (p. 507)

In the educational setting, Godly Play has been adapted to follow a more educationally and pedagogically appropriate structure of gather, wonder, tell, respond (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia [CEOWA], 2014). Educators do not deliver Godly Play sessions as they were originally intended, rather the scripture element of Godly Play influences the telling of sacred stories, parables and liturgical actions. The storyteller manipulates two and three-dimensional objects to model the story for the children. The storyteller then poses specific wondering questions to the whole group where the children are invited to reflect on

the story to encourage playful engagement of the story. The role of the storyteller is to support the children's wondering which emerges from their own experiences and relationship with God (Hyde, 2010). Children respond to the experience of the storytelling and their wondering by choosing from a range of activities that best suits the child's reflection process.

Teacher confidence.

Bandura's research (1994) on self-confidence indicates that "...individuals who possess high levels of self-confidence in their abilities would approach difficult tasks as challenges rather than obstacles" (Willis, Weiser & Smith, 2016, p. 200). Therefore, higher levels of self-efficacy produce higher levels of performance (Willis, Weiser & Smith, 2016). Self-efficacy and self-confidence are strongly related variables researched in the area of education. Self-efficacy and self-confidence refer to an individuals' perceived competence within a particular area or skill (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001); "simply put in everyday terms, self-efficacy is expressed when we talk about feeling confident to do something" (Malandrakis, 2018, p. 539).

Investigations on teacher self-efficacy and self-confidence in relation to RE are limited with most research undertaken in the areas of teaching music, science, physical education and technology (Girgin, 2017; Howitt, 2007; Lemon & Garvis, 2016; Petrie, 2010). Although outside the learning area of RE, these studies inform the literature on pre-service teacher self-confidence in teaching scripture. Research suggests that the attainment of pedagogical content knowledge is key to teacher self-efficacy (Malandrakis, 2018). Pedagogical content knowledge consists of both knowing the curriculum and knowing how to teach it. Hackett and Lavery (2012), in their research on the formation of pre-service teachers through experiential programs, found that "providing opportunities for experiential content

knowledge as part of pre-service teacher formation in religious education enhances the identity and integrity of these teachers as faith witnesses to their students” (p. 21).

Research Design

The research adopted a constructivist epistemology with a qualitative approach to investigate pre-service teachers’ perspectives of Godly Play as a strategy for teaching scripture in RE in WA Catholic primary schools. A constructivist approach centres on the manner in which people construct meaning from their experiences (Creswell, 2013). Within a constructivist approach, an individual assimilates new experiences with their own perspectives (Hyde, 2015). The researchers sought to interpret the multiple perspectives of the pre-service teachers to understand the patterns and to construct meaning from the point of view of the subjects (Yin, 2016) in a particular timeframe, that is, before the teaching of Godly Play as a scripture strategy and again after the teaching of Godly Play. Within a constructivist epistemology, an interpretative theoretical perspective most appropriately framed the project. A qualitative approach influenced the design of the research into Godly Play. Survey was deemed to be the most appropriate method to collect the data on two different occasions whilst the pre-service teachers were learning about Godly Play.

Participants and sampling.

The participants in the investigation were pre-service teachers in the final year of an education degree. These pre-service teachers included those undertaking a degree in early childhood and primary teaching. There were 81 pre-service teachers enrolled in the course titled, ‘Principles of Primary Religious Education 2’ which is a compulsory course that must be completed to obtain Accreditation to Teach Religious Education in Western Australian Catholic schools. Pre-service teachers within this course were invited to participate during a class tutorial on two occasions. One tutorial for data collection occurred prior to any content

being delivered on Godly Play and scripture and the second data collection occurred in a tutorial post the teaching of Godly Play and other scripture strategies. There were 61 total respondents to the first SurveyMonkey survey. The 61 respondents comprised of 22 Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) and 39 Bachelor of Education (Primary) pre-service teachers. In the second survey, a total of 55 respondents participated, comprising of 17 Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) and 38 Bachelor of Education (Primary) pre-service teachers.

Instrument.

Surveys were used as the data collection tool. Survey is the most widely used social science data gathering tool and has many uses (Neuman, 2011). The use of survey as a research tool offered an opportunity to examine patterns for a representative sample. Surveys have been shown to effectively measure teachers' perceptions (Desimone & Le Floch, 2004). SurveyMonkey was used to deliver the two surveys. The first survey occurred before the delivery of content on scripture. The pre-service teachers were asked 11 questions in the first survey. Questions included, for example:

What strategies have you seen or used to effectively teach scripture stories?

What would make you select one strategy over another when presenting scripture stories?

In the second survey the pre-service teachers were asked 11 questions. Questions included, for example:

Describe how confident you feel in using Godly Play in your Religious Education lessons?

What strategies would you prefer to use when teaching scripture? Explain your answer.

The following question was asked in both surveys:

Write a sentence to describe how you feel about teaching scripture in primary school.

Ethical considerations.

Ethics approval was granted by the HREC committee of a tertiary institution. In accordance with this approval, participation was voluntary and consent was given by the participants within the first item of the SurveyMonkey survey. To provide confidentiality to the participants, the researchers used an unidentifiable online program, SurveyMonkey, to deliver the surveys to participants. The survey link and the supervision of the pre-service teachers whilst completing the survey was delivered by an impartial colleague not involved in the research project. Actions were taken to ensure that the power differential was removed, in particular, this was achieved by ensuring the impartial colleague administered the survey, rather than the researchers. The researchers did not discuss the survey with the students nor were they present at the time the survey was completed.

Data analysis.

SurveyMonkey responses were analysed by item. Each item was coded using a process of thematic analysis, as this is a widely adopted qualitative analytical method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process of thematic analysis involved identifying patterns, generating initial codes and then reviewing these to determine the emerging themes for each item. As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), the themes that emerged represent the patterns within the raw data. Themes across each survey item were then grouped to present the findings.

Findings and Discussion

As detailed in the explanation for the analysis of data, findings are presented as themes that emerged through a process of thematic coding and these are presented in this section along with the discussion. Two key themes emerged from the analysis of data that provide insight into pre-service teachers' perspectives of Godly Play as a strategy for teaching scripture in RE in WA Catholic primary schools. These themes are: confidence in teaching scripture in primary schools and pedagogical perspectives of teaching scripture in primary schools.

Confidence in teaching scripture in primary schools.

Overall, findings revealed that prior to completing the RE course, the pre-service teachers lacked confidence in teaching scripture in primary schools. In the initial survey, 80% of participants responded with a statement regarding their own lack of confidence in teaching scripture. Responses included, for example; "I feel nervous about teaching scripture" (Participant 17); "I don't feel as confident as I would like to be" (Participant 22); and "I feel apprehensive. I want to be able to correctly teach scripture stories so they actually have a positive impact on students" (Participant 29).

The initial survey included responses by pre-service teachers that they had experienced limited opportunities to observe teachers teaching scripture and this was connected, in their responses, to their own lack of confidence in teaching scripture. Almost half, 49% of the pre-service teachers, commented that when they had observed the teaching of scripture, drama-based strategies were most commonly used, such as the re-enactment of a scripture story. Half of respondents stated explicitly that the reason they did not feel confident to teach scripture was due to their own lack of knowledge of the meaning, background and message within scripture. For example, Participant 44 responded: "I enjoy

teaching scripture in a primary school although I feel that I need more help with the organisation and knowledge behind scripture”. Similarly, Participant 55 commented “I am very unsure about teaching scripture because of my own lack of knowledge”.

In comparison, findings from the post survey clearly indicated that utilising the Godly Play strategy increased pre-service teachers’ confidence in teaching scripture. Specifically, 76% of respondents commented that they felt more confident in teaching scripture after undertaking the RE course. Participant 2 responded, “I feel more confident now that I have learnt a little bit about Godly Play in class.” Similarly, Participant 27 stated, “I feel excited about teaching scripture and far more confident since beginning this course.”

Although it is recognised that confidence in teaching a subject does not correlate with the ability to teach, confidence is acknowledged as a contributing factor in teaching success (Petrie, 2010). This view is reflected by Bandura’s (1994) findings that teachers are more likely to view difficult tasks as a challenge rather than an obstacle (Willis, Weiser & Smith, 2016). If teachers possess self-confidence in the curriculum they are teaching, they are more likely to be creative in their lessons and to persist longer in their efforts to ensure student achievement (Bangs & Frost, 2012). Additionally, when pre-service teachers possess the required pedagogical content knowledge this has been identified as critical to the development of self-confidence (Malandrakis, 2018). These same principles apply for the teaching of scripture. Literature affirms the need for teachers to feel confident about teaching scripture (Hackett & Lavery, 2012). Godly Play is a strategy appropriate to the needs of children in primary schools. Godly Play is one strategy for the teaching of scripture in RE that can assist pre-service teachers to gain essential pedagogical content knowledge. Hackett and Lavery (2012) suggest that pre-service teachers need to be able to connect to the content themselves and that this in turn may assist them in feeling better equipped in teaching scripture to their students.

Pedagogical perspectives of teaching scripture in primary schools.

Pre-service teachers who participated in the survey were in their final year of their four year teaching degree so were familiar with pedagogical practices in education both from their theoretical studies at university and from their practical experience in schools. The implementation of Godly Play in educational settings requires teachers to be clear and intentional about their teaching as they are developing skills, knowledge and understanding in the teaching of scripture (Grajczonek & Truasheim, 2017). Consequently, the aim of the Godly Play training for the pre-service teachers was to develop the necessary skills, knowledge and understanding to teach scripture stories in a pedagogically appropriate way.

Overall, the findings revealed that the pre-service teachers perceived Godly Play to be an effective pedagogical strategy for the teaching of scripture in primary schools. Prior to completing the RE course, the majority of participants, 83%, were aware of some strategies for teaching scripture in primary school and 86% were able to provide pedagogical examples. The pedagogical examples provided in these responses included storytelling, role-play, drama and the use of children's literature. Participant 29 responded:

I have seen students having to role play stories. In primary school we used to have to find out the moral of the story and relate it to our own lives and role play this. I think having students illustrate scripture stories could also be powerful, integrating with art”.

Only 13% of participants had not seen or were not aware of any strategies for teaching scripture. Participant 1, for example, stated, “I’ve never taught in a Catholic school nor seen anyone teach scripture stories.

The Godly Play training that occurred within the RE course included pre-service teachers observing and participating in Godly Play storytelling as well as learning about the underpinning principles of the strategy and skills required when delivering a Godly Play session. In comparison to the pre-survey findings, the post-survey clearly indicated that not only did the pre-service teachers feel more confident about teaching scripture, they would opt to choose Godly Play as their preferred pedagogical strategy. All participants indicated that they were aware of the Godly Play strategy for teaching scripture and 73% included Godly Play in their response to preferred scripture strategies. As an example, Participant 10 stated, “I would prefer Godly Play over any other strategy as it is the most appealing.” Similarly, Participant 28 stated:

I would prefer to use a visual stimulus like Godly Play as it is more engaging to the students. I also feel like it allows them to involve themselves into the story and have that personal opportunity to wonder and make sense of what is being presented, teaching scripture as scripture I feel will not allow this to happen.

Pre-service teachers felt that, with pedagogical training from experienced Godly Play experts; access to the script; the required resources and with practice, they would be confident to teach scripture utilising the Godly Play strategy. The pre-service teachers in this investigation echoed the findings in existing literature on the implementation of Godly Play within educational contexts. It is recognised by Grajczonek and Truasheim (2017) that although Godly Play originated as a catechetical strategy, it can have a worthwhile place in the educational setting when appropriately facilitated by the educator. Specific benefits relate to the role of wondering offered in Godly Play sessions, which provide for the voice of the child and encourage the use of imagination. Grajczonek and Truasheim (2017) caution educators to ensure that any inclusion of the Godly Play strategy for the teaching of scripture within an RE program is done so from an educational and pedagogical viewpoint; meaning

Godly Play should not be adopted in isolation but rather as one tool selected to align with contemporary views of the child and to meet the needs of the children in primary schools. When Godly Play has been adopted as one pedagogical strategy for the teaching of scripture, as was the case in this investigation, literature suggests it has an important role in nurturing children's spirituality and religious development (Grajczonek & Truasheim, 2017; Hyde, 2010).

Implications and Recommendations

Several implications and subsequent recommendations arise as a result of this investigation. These implications pertain to pre-service teachers as well as current teachers of RE in Catholic schools. In addition, considerations for future research are presented.

Pre-service teachers.

Catholic teachers in the 21st century require tertiary training in teaching the RE curriculum and need to learn effective strategies to teach specific content in this learning area (Hackett & Lavery, 2012). Whilst Godly Play, in its original form, was initially intended for use in parish and hospital settings, this strategy is a meaningful approach for the teaching of scripture in schools (CEOWA, 2014). As such, it is vital that those who provide pre-service teacher education in RE should themselves have the confidence and capacity to pass on the necessary skills and knowledge required to teach scripture effectively using the strategy of Godly Play. Three significant recommendations arise from this. Firstly, tertiary educators must themselves possess a depth of knowledge to the background, context and message of scripture and use this to effectively deliver Godly Play as a strategy for teaching scripture in primary schools. Secondly, accurate demonstration of the Godly Play strategy by the tertiary educator who is proficient in the skills and processes of this strategy is required. Lastly,

sufficient time, space and opportunities to practise the skills required in Godly Play are also required if pre-service teachers are to become confident teachers of scripture.

Current teachers of Religious Education.

Teachers are required to remain informed about current content knowledge and pedagogy (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2017). By attending relevant professional development in the area of RE, teachers will be able to implement new skills into their current practices to ensure that they teach RE effectively; namely, with the same demands and rigour as other learning areas (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 73). With this investigation revealing Godly Play to be of such value to pre-service teachers, the researchers propose this as an effective form of professional development for current teachers in Catholic schools. Seeking professional development in how to deliver scripture through Godly Play has the potential to also improve current teachers' confidence in teaching scripture. A key recommendation for current teachers is to ensure that Godly Play influences the current mandated RE curriculum, to be added as an approach to teaching scripture alongside other strategies.

Future research.

The strategy of Godly Play is not only about storytelling. In addition to knowing how to recount the story, it is vital that educators understand the 'truth' or message contained within each story. Educators should be "so fluent with the language that no energy is diverted to the mechanics of presenting it" (Berryman, 2009, p. 44). When fluency is achieved, together with the acquisition of knowledge about the scripture story, the focus for the educator shifts from telling the story *by* heart to telling the story *from* the heart (Berryman, 2007). As a final recommendation, future research in this field is required to explore how this

change in approach to telling the story contributes to enhancing the spiritual and religious capabilities of the educator (McGunnigle & Hackett, 2015).

Conclusion

Most pre-service teachers in this investigation identified Godly Play as an effective strategy for teaching scripture within RE in Catholic primary schools. As a scripture strategy originally designed for use in parish and hospital settings, it is acknowledged that when Godly Play is included in RE it should be done so as one strategy within a teacher's 'tool-box'; that is, the teacher discerns when it is the most educationally and pedagogically appropriate strategy. In this investigation the pre-service teachers preferred the Godly Play strategy to other means of teaching scripture and, most significantly, indicated that their experience with Godly Play had increased their self-confidence in teaching scripture in a meaningful and engaging way.

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