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Telling Stories – Creating Attitudes

A consideration of the contribution of story and the use of story in an educational setting

By
David W Lankshear

Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit
University of Warwick

Address for Correspondence
Professor D.W. Lankshear
22, Shrub End Road
Colchester
Essex
CO2 7XD

Email: david.lankshear@msn.com

Abstract

This paper takes the form of a reflection on experience and is designed to stimulate or renew discussion amongst those working with children between the ages of 5 and 11 years about the role of story, storytelling and reflections on story as ways of contributing positively to the creation of attitudes towards other people, the environment and violent behaviour in all its forms. In considering the choice of story, the selection of presentational methods and the way in which reflection is stimulated, the paper will seek to contribute to the way in which practitioners understand their task. The paper will use story and reflection on story as a key part of its consideration of the topic.

Presentation

I was wrestling with the topic of this conference and wondering what I could contribute while making a visit to my son's family. During the course of that visit I heard my eight year old grandson make reference to Germans as the 'enemy'. I was really quite disturbed by this, particularly as my grandson lives not in Europe, but in New Zealand and has done so since he was about a year old.

How could he have picked up such a prejudiced and outdated concept?

I can only offer a possible explanation. This makes the assumption that he has heard stories about the Second World War or its aftermath and has absorbed this attitude from them.

I begin this presentation with a story because it is to do with story, storytelling and reflections on stories that have been heard and absorbed. To my mind it would be bizarre to discuss 'story' without telling some, so this presentation will be punctuated by stories. I bring to this presentation my experience as a teacher of young children, a parent and grandparent and also my alter ego as poet and writer of stories for both children and adults.

Do you accept my hypothesis about my grandson's expressed prejudice? If you do then you have acknowledged the power of 'story' to affect our attitudes to ourselves and to each other, and in this lies my link to the theme of this conference. We gain much of the stereotypes that we all live with through the stories that we tell each other. To illustrate this another story -

I was facilitating a meeting of students from different parts of Europe a few years ago. The group included students from Germany and Poland. Towards the end of the week one of the German students shared with the group her pleasure at meeting Polish people for the first time and finding them to be 'just like us' she explained that she had discovered her former anti-Polish prejudice by sharing a joke which she said was widely quoted in Germany, it goes 'Come and visit Poland, your car, that was stolen, will be there before you!'

Children encounter story in all aspects of their lives. Consciously or unconsciously the stories they hear from their parents, their contemporaries and from the mass media will begin to shape their attitudes to each other, to the stranger and to the wider world around them. Much of this 'informal learning' will be positive, but some may contribute to the development of stereotypes or attitudes to violence which if adopted and acted on may have negative consequences. At its ultimate a consistent story which labels other people, racial groups, nationalities as contemptible or sub-human can then be used to justify terrible acts of violence.

The impact of this 'informal learning' from story may be mitigated for good by two distinct factors. Firstly the intervention of parents, or other adults that enables children to reflect on what they have heard or seen and therefore to understand better how it has impacted on them. Secondly the balancing of these stories by others which present a different perspective. The main location for such a balancing of story will be in those contexts labelled education. It may be only in an educational context that stories are deliberately selected and used for the purpose of developing attitudes and enabling children to reflect. Therefore it is important that all those engaged in work with children should consider the criteria that they are using, how story is presented and the way in which reflection on story is enabled and stimulated.

There are three distinct aspects of ‘telling stories:

1. Selection
2. Presentation
3. Reflection

1. Selection

As religious educators we have a major responsibility to select the stories we tell with care and sensitivity to the needs of the children as well as to the dictates of any syllabus that we might be required to follow. I want to suggest that a good syllabus places on us a responsibility to select stories that have significance at the core of the faith. For Christians this will imply that the stories are chosen for their relevance when viewed through the key event of the death and resurrection of Christ. Thus the Christmas story is important because without it there can be no death and resurrection, the story of the Exodus is important because of the importance it has within Christ’s Jewish upbringing and because it is an earlier model of redemption. The finding of the infant Moses in the bulrushes is rather less important. The area that many Christian syllabi omit or undervalue is what happened as a result of the death and resurrection of Christ and how it changed and changes the lives of ordinary people. Thus in some contexts children may grow up well versed in ‘Bible stories’ but almost completely ignorant of the great saga that is the spread of the Christian Faith around the world through all generations.

For teachers working in a multi-faith context this same approach will need to be taken to the selection of stories from all the major world faiths. But there is more. We also need to be telling our children stories which help them to understand and relate to some of the ‘building blocks’ of religious experience, so stories of love, of wonder, of joy and of sorrow and so on.

There is a great deal to do and a huge range of stories from which to make a selection.

I was once asked to help the staff of a primary school to review their Religious Education syllabus. As a starting point I asked each of the teachers to write down the stories that they ensured were covered during the year for which they had responsibility. There were seven year groups in the school covering the ages 4 to 11. When the lists were completed the story of Joseph and his brothers appeared on five of the seven lists. When I challenged this the teachers said that they had noticed this as well and could not understand why the story was omitted from the other two classes. Personally, while the story is important I believe that it did not justify its place in so many years, given everything else that should or could be included.

2. Presentation

Having decided on the most appropriate story, it is then important to consider how the story is to be conveyed to the children. There are many ways of ‘telling a story’. There is the specific art of storytelling; there are books, drama, art, film, television and many more. Each method has its merits and its demerits and no-one can be an expert in the use of all of them, but children will need variety of presentation and as far as is possible the method of presentation should be tailored to match the demands of the story. Equally teachers and

leaders will have their own preferred ways of presenting stories. Within this short paper I would not presume to enter into a discussion on what each of you should or could be doing. As teachers you will be developing your skills and confidence in this area all the time, but one thing perhaps is worth restating as a truism. If you are not enjoying what you are doing when you tell a story then neither will the children be enjoying it as they listen.

3. Reflection

If the story is to make a positive contribution to the development of the attitudes of the children, the consideration needs to be given to how the children will be enabled to reflect on the story. Sometimes it will be appropriate to explore the story and its possible meanings in an open discussion or through its reinterpretation through art or drama. Occasionally it may be appropriate to draw out a particular one of the many possible meanings and draw the children's attention to this. At other times it may be most appropriate to let the child interact with the story as he/she will, for this is what happens with most of the stories that she/he will encounter. The story will enter her/his mind 'as the seed enters the ground' and there it will grow or not. What fruit it bears will depend on the interaction between the child's individual experience, the child's own personality and the quality of the story.

I was once inspecting an RE lesson in which a teacher explained one of the Parables told by Jesus to a class of eight year olds. According to the exposition the meaning of the story that Christ told in Galilee was 'behave yourself in the school playground'. Those with a theological turn of mind might wish to speculate on which of the parables was intended by Christ to carry this meaning.

I tell this story because it illustrates, for me, the perils of 'explaining' the meaning, rather than allowing reflection.

By way of contrast, during the course of an act of worship the story of creation in Genesis 1 had been told. Later, during the school lunch break, a group of eleven year olds was discussing it with their teacher. "You don't believe all that rubbish about God making the world in seven days, do you sir?" one boy said to the teacher. "What do you think about it?" was the wise response. There followed an animated discussion about the topic which covered aspects of creationism and the use of allegory (although neither of those words was used). Sometimes the most difficult thing a teacher has to do is to be quiet and let the children think.

Perhaps the most overt way of telling stories to enable reflection is contained in Berryman's work on Godly Play (Berryman, 1991), but not all stories will be told like that.

I began by seeking to justify this reflection by speaking about the role of story in creating stereotypes. I want to finish with two stories, which might challenge some stereotypes.

1. A few years ago I was part of a committee that organised an international conference on RE in Ankara, the capital of Turkey. On the penultimate night the conference was hosted to dinner by the minister for Religious Affairs of the Turkish Government, who, of course, is a Muslim. As a member of the committee I was on the table with the minister. As the waiters were serving the meal it was the minister himself who intervened very gently to prevent the

waiter serving to our colleague who is an orthodox Jew from an Israeli University with non-kosher food. A Kosher meal had been prepared and flown in especially from Istanbul.

2. I was lucky to attend one of the athletics sessions of the 2012 Olympics in London. One of the events I saw was the heats of the 800 metres for women. There was a competitor from Saudi Arabia, the first woman from that country to compete at that level. In absolute terms she came last in her heat by some 200 meters. The cheer as she crossed the line was nearly as great as that earlier in the day when Mo Farrar on his heat of the 10,000 meters on his way to a double gold medal. Why?, well partly because the crowd cheered everyone who had the courage to come and do their best, but mostly because, I believe, the 80,000 people in the stadium knew that this young woman's presence was important and they wanted to welcome her.

Story is not the only way in which attitudes are formed, experience and the attitudes of those who are most important to the child will also play their part, but it is one of the areas which is open to educators to use in helping to combat attitudes that justify the use of violence towards other people or the living of selfish lives built on the exploitation and violent consumption of the world's resources or of other people's labour. As such, it is important that it is used wisely within the educational context.

Indicative Reading

The indicative reading is drawn from both the statutory education sector and the education done within the Christian church. It deliberately spans a wide period for this is not a new topic, but rather one that needs revisiting in each generation.

Barnes D. (1975) *From Communication to Curriculum*, London, Penguin Books

Berryman J.W. (1991) *Godly Play – an imaginative approach to Religious Education*, Minneapolis, Augsburg

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Essex County Council, (1987) *Building into the Future - Agreed Syllabus for religious Education and Handbook*, London, Collins

Hayes, D. (ed.) (2007) *Joyful Teaching and Learning in the Primary School*, Exeter, Learning Matters

Sayers, S (2003) *How to be a Catechist*, Stowmarket, Kevin Mayhew

Withers, M (2001) *Fired Up not Burnt Out – effective children's leadership for today's church*, Oxford, Bible Reading Fellowship