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Children and Imagination: Envisioning and creating change together

Abstract

Imagination is a divine gift that helps persons enter into a relationship with the Holy and participate in the creative process of transforming the world. This paper presents data collected from an extensive qualitative research study with children that reveals imagination as a tool children use to engage, recognize, claim, and respond to God's presence in their lives. Suggestions are made for a pedagogy that encourages the use of imagination in order to develop creative and critical thinking, self-discovery, and awareness of others. This opens a space for compassion and understanding inviting children to engage in the world around them with empathy and creativity as they seek to be voices that connect, disrupt, and transform.

Introduction

Imagination is a divine gift that helps persons enter into relationship with the Holy and participate in the creative process of transforming the world. As we seek to envision, articulate, and promote lifelong religious learning, it is essential that we begin by pausing our forward thinking, taking a step back, and reminding ourselves of how persons make meaning. We must remember how people learn and discern how to show up in and respond to the world around them. When we take time to review our theological assumptions, developmental theory, and effective religious pedagogical methods, we are reminded of fundamental truths that impact the creative process that leads to discovering possible solutions for modern day issues.

A qualitative research study with 28 children reveals imagination as a tool children use to engage, recognize, claim, and respond to God's presence in their lives. When this tool is modeled for and encouraged in children, and when the children are invited to practice using their imagination, new possibilities emerge. The process of imagining equips children for their work in the world as they question the status quo and seek to discover faithful ways to participate in all that God is doing in and through them and others for the transformation of the world.

A call to listen to children

Childhood has been understood differently throughout history. In North America, these views of childhood often made their way into theological discourse, religious education, and many other facets of the church, influencing how faith communities view, interact with, and teach children. Whether viewed as asset or burden, deprived or innocent, spiritual or unable to claim God's presence, these ambivalent views of children continue to influence modern theological assumptions of children and cause many to underestimate the value of the child's presence in the faith community. Current anthropological and theological conversations often present adulthood as the normative understanding of humanity, placing children as other. It is as

adults that persons are perceived and welcomed as full participants in the life of the faith community and, therefore, God's transformative work. This normative theological framework presents a negative and oppressive narrative that does not value children or their experiences. It overlooks the creative possibilities that come from within the youngest members of God's good creation. When religious communities do not pay attention to God at work in children they silence children, ignore their creative potential, and prohibit them from participating fully in creation. This minimizes their ability to connect, disrupt, and transform the world.

Religious educators must shift their perspective. In order to move forward, we must not ignore God's active presence in the lives of all people, nor shall we look past the gifts God's given children for this Holy work. The expectation should not be "that the child is to grow up in sin, to be converted after he comes to a mature age; but that he is to open on the world as one that is spiritually renewed."¹ As Karl Rahner argued, children are partners with God and are aware of the divine transcendence. God is with every person throughout the "individual phases of human life."² God, through prevenient grace, goes before creation inviting each person to participate in the creative process of transformation through imagination, wonder, and play.

This theological truth calls religious educators to pay attention to God at work in the lives of the youngest members of their community, to honor their presence and gifts, nurture their spirituality, and guide all children as they seek to live in relationship with God and neighbor. As we seek to reimagine the world around us, discerning a new vision- a radical hospitality is needed. Religious education must move beyond welcoming and caring for children creating an environment that honors the divine within every person. A faithful pedagogy will seek to discover with and learn from the youngest members of the faith community. This requires active listening, wondering, creating, and discovering together.

Qualitative Research Study: Experiencing God together

Responding to this call to listen to children, a space was created in which children could wonder and share together. During this extensive qualitative research project, twenty-eight children demonstrated how they make meaning and respond to God's presence in their lives. The children demonstrated how they engage their imagination as they connect with the Holy and envision a better world. Their work revealed eight tools they use to engage their imagination as they recognize, claim, and respond to God's active presence.

Method

Through this research project entitled *Experiencing God*, I observed and actively listened to children. I collected and coded that data as I attempted to interpret and make sense of the meanings within each child's narrative. Five qualitative research methods were used in this

¹ Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (Wipf & Stock Pub, 2000), Kindle E-Book, Part I:1. What Christian Nurture Is.

² Karl Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood." In *Theological Investigations: Further Theology of the Spiritual Life*, VIII (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 33.

project. These methods include grounded theory, researcher as participant, participatory action research, and individual interviews within group context. During the project, the final and potentially most useful method in engaging children's imagination was revealed- active wondering. The method used to create a safe space and engage children in active wondering was built on Jerome Berryman's *Godly Play* curriculum and liturgy alongside other Montessori-based religious education methods.³ The ontological approach of this project took a deep look into the child's reality. Active listening and wondering helped create a space for children to share their stories as they demonstrated how they experience God.

This project reflects nine months of intentional work. Twenty eight children (ages 5-12) gathered every week for seven weeks at two different site locations to participate in this program. While both sites were United Methodist Churches, the first site was a downtown urban congregation. The program took place during the Sunday school hour with children who have experience with the Christian faith tradition. The other site took place during a neighborhood United Methodist after-school program. These 16 children came from a diverse faith background, and only one child was a member of the United Methodist church. Over all, the children reflected a diverse community in faith, race, and economic status.

Findings

The data gathered from these twenty-eight children demonstrates how children use their imagination to engage with God and others. Paying attention to children offers "an understanding of how children develop" and "helps us know better how to relate to them and what to provide for them."⁴ Coding the data from both sites revealed eight reoccurring categories- story, awareness of God, awareness of others, wonder, location, liturgy, work, and objects. These categories reveal eight tools for children as they begin to engage, recognize, claim, and respond to God.

Taking these eight tools and rearranging them into specific groups helps bring order to the categories:

Story and liturgy are brought together demonstrating how religious language helps children in their meaning-making experience. Story provides an entryway into imagination and discovery. Through the words and/or the text, children *engage* in the meaning-making process.

"Good liturgy engages our imaginations to a point where the question of God and how we stand before [the Holy] become inescapable... liturgical gestures... heal, mobilize and ultimately lead us deeper into the inexpressible mystery of our faith and our hope."⁵

³ Jerome Berryman, *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1991), 7-8.

⁴ Catherine Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 44.

⁵ Richard Cote, *Lazarus! Come Out!: Why Faith Needs Imagination* (Canada: Novalis Press, 2003), 43.

The children shared that they often experienced God in the story. They felt off-balance when a piece of the liturgy was forgotten or skipped. Body postures revealed every child's focus as they listened and responded to the story, took care as they handled the stories, actively participated in the liturgical actions, and showed concern when space for reflection, silence, and stillness was not given. When children are invited into a story alongside stillness and moments of silence, the imagination has space to breathe, live, and move. They yearned for a space where they can actively participate and reflect on the information presented. When the story is told in an engaging way, children stop and pay attention. "Story is one of the most powerful ways we pattern our world and discover its meaningfulness."⁶ As children experience the story and hear the words of their faith, they engage with God and with each other- making meaning out of what they see and hear. It was with a listening heart and a highly creative imagination that the children were able to engage with and capture the spirit of the text.⁷

Awareness of God, Self, and others reflects the children's ability to make meaning in response to their relationships and experiences as they *recognize* God's active presence in their lives and the lives of others. Through the children's interactions their "awareness of being in relationship with something or someone else" became clear.⁸ Their relational awareness offers a lens through which the children experience the words presented in the story and the liturgy. The story and liturgy do not simply reflect something that happened at a specific place or time to some unknown character. Children recognize their place within God's creation and hear how the story provides information about themselves, about others, and about God. This realization creates a space for children to make deep connections and meanings in response to the text presented, because the story says something about them, about God, and about others.

Object and location offer ways for children to *claim* and share their experiences remembering the information they collected through this essential process. Over time the children began to share their experiences, of God describing how they "'see' a reflection of God in the 'everyday' sights and sounds of their otherwise quite ordinary" week.⁹ When the children shared their stories they always included location and an object in their narrative as a way of marking their experience. For example, one child shared: "I experienced God on the swing [object] at my grandparents farm [location]." It became clear that these memory markers help children take a mental photograph of their experience. These memory markers (or stampers as the children described them) help children claim and remember God's presence in their lives. They provide

⁶ Sarah Arthur, *The God-Hungry Imagination: The art of storytelling for postmodern youth ministry* (Nashville: Upper Room, 2007), 65.

⁷ Cote, 48.

⁸ David Hay with Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child* Revised Edition (Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006), 109.

⁹ Cote, 31.

tangible evidence for children that God exists. The objects then become symbols for the children when they engage their imagination and experience “a spiritual power that is released from within” the object or location.¹⁰ The swing no longer remains a piece of wood that a child sits on, but it becomes a tangible reminder of the joy the child felt when she was swinging and how she felt God in and through that everyday experience. The swing is now a symbol that points to the Holy.

Wonder and work offer the tools for children to *respond* to all they experience finding ways to articulate what they are learning, discovering, and the meaning they are making in response to this process. “What the imagination does, and does very well, is make us creatively forge ahead into the future, knowing, as we do, that there is no road or path in front of us, especially in a desert wilderness.”¹¹ Through their wondering and work (which included a response time using a diverse array of tools such as blocks, wipe-off boards, pipe cleaners, beads, clay, water colors, markers, the story itself, and many more options) the children demonstrated how their imagination comes alive as they wonder together and then take time to reflect and process all they are experiencing. “Imagination allows us to “see” beyond what actually meets the eye,” inviting persons to create new possibilities in response to their reality.¹² During several sessions, one of the children described what the world looks like when “God is reaching out and offering everyone a hug.” Through their work the children imagined what it looks like for them to help someone on the side of the road, discovered ways to help their friend raise money to help a church rebuild after a fire, and created ways to support each other when someone was having a hard day. In this space children used their imagination to respond to the world with empathy and care.

Using these eight tools, the 28 children in this study demonstrated how engage, recognize, claim, and respond to God’s active presence in their lives. Imagination moves in and through this entire process. It is the thread that allows children to consider the possibilities, make meaning, and discover faithful ways of participating in the world.

A Faithful Pedagogy Creating a space for children to use their imagination

“Imagination is the essential means, humanly speaking, by which faith becomes possible.”¹³ Through story, liturgy, relationships, objects, locations, wonder, and work, the children in this study imagined and created their own reality and worldview in response to their

¹⁰ Ibid, 39.

¹¹ Ibid, 11.

¹² Ibid, 83.

¹³ Ibid, 92.

own experiences. This is their way of “finding meaning- or faith... through relationships, their own actions and observance of the actions of others, and a strong dash of imagination.”¹⁴ The early years of childhood (roughly ages 3-7) offer the greatest opportunity to model and practice this crucial tool.¹⁵ During this time, children need to observe and practice using their imaginations in a way that helps them develop a healthy understanding of the world around them while imagining what could be created in response to their reality. Imagination “is one of the primary ways we learn... [it is] the doorway to wonder, prompting questions that lead to such things as philosophy, scientific inquiry, and poetry.”¹⁶ It is when imagination is modeled and practiced that children develop the ability to respond to the reality of racism, poverty, and injustice through creative and faithful action. It is through an active and healthy imagination that people learn how to problem solve and discover creative solutions for modern day problems.

Imagination must be cultivated in our children through a faithful pedagogy that listens to the children, respects their stories, and encourages them in their work. Religious educators should not seek to “deposit doctrine” into the minds of children, but instead should seek to explore with the children “God’s unpredictable way of loving us in today’s world.”¹⁷ The work becomes less of memorizing and moves more towards experiencing, wondering, feeling, sharing, learning, and knowing. Effective religious pedagogical models must model and promote empathy and creativity through the following actions:

- Create a safe space where children are respected, invited to wonder, and supported as they share their thoughts. “To step across the threshold of the classroom is to enter a ‘place of imagining.’”¹⁸ In this space leaders must not seek to provide the “right” answer but instead work to nurture the child’s ability to problem solve, think critically and imagine. “A different language is spoken here. Relationships are attended to in a careful and caring way to promote both the learning and use of that language to know God.”¹⁹ This might mean providing the child with more information, or inviting the child to consider a different possibility. Imaginative and creative work should be modeled and practiced without judgement or shame.

¹⁴ Dorothy Jean Furnish, "Rethinking Children's Ministry" in *Rethinking Christian Education: Explorations in Theory and Practice*, edited by David S. Schuller (Missouri: Chalice Press, 1993), 76.

¹⁵ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1981), 133.

¹⁶ Arthur, 47.

¹⁷ Cote, 160.

¹⁸ Berryman, 88.

¹⁹ Ibid.

- Include opportunities to engage the faith through story and liturgy. Religious Educators must ask: how are the stories and the liturgy of our faith being shared and experienced? What liturgy do we use that invites persons of all ages to participate fully?
- Nurture relational awareness: Work to build relationships with the children and with God. Help children see the larger community- their neighborhood, city, state, nation, and the world. Invite them to imagine what living in different places might feel like. Encourage them to consider ways they might connect, disrupt, and transform the world around them.
- Work to help children claim their experiences- identifying locations and objects that help children remember and retell their story. Again, this is done through modeling and practicing as both adult and children share their experiences.
- Invite and encourage children to wonder together as they imagine how they might respond to all they have seen and experienced.

Concluding thoughts

Children will participate in the creative process of connecting, disrupting, and transforming when they are invited, encouraged, supported, guided, and affirmed. With faithful guidance and encouragement children will step into this role and will participate in the work that God calls each of us to do. We must pay attention to God at work in and through people of all ages. Building a religious education model that uses story, liturgy, relational awareness, objects, locations, wonder, and work, opens a space for compassion and understanding and invites children to engage in the world around them with empathy and creativity as they seek to be voices that connect, disrupt, and transform. Religious education must nurture these values, guiding persons as they connect with the world around them, helping them recognize places and ideologies that need to be challenged, and encouraging them as they envision alternatives, disrupt status quo, and work to transform the culture. “Imagination not only builds bridges, it gives us the courage to cross them as well and thus to embrace what we hitherto believed was unthinkable.”²⁰ Faithful pedagogies must nurture the imagination, so that persons will continue to live in faithful relationship with each other and with God- participating together in the creative process of transforming the world.

²⁰ Cote, 101.

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Imagination here is understood as a way of seeing, sensing, thinking, and dreaming that creates the conditions for material interventions in, and political sensibilities of the world. It draws upon literary, filmic, and creative arts practices to argue that imaginative practices from the arts and humanities play a critical role in thinking through our representations of environmental change and offer strategies for developing diverse forms of environmental understanding from scenario building to metaphorical, ethical, and material investigations.Â

(1) Imagination as a relational space that is culture and society. Imagination here is understood informed by the objects and subjects with which it is as a way of seeing, sensing, thinking, and dreaming entangled. Envisioning refers to when you imagine certain events or outcomes like walk-throughs for video games, so that you can effortlessly turn them into reality. How does that differ from visualization? Visualization refers to creating visual aids that can accelerate learning, and in turn, the achievement of your goals. Here is a list of the techniques that relate to visualization in psychology: Creating pictures that represent your goals and placing them in prominent positions around your home or workspace.Â The more vivid your imagination, the more effective your envisioning technique is likely to be. For instance, American football coaches make their teams watch their opponents at play. This can help them visualize strategies to overcome their opponentsâ€™™ gameplay.