

## Teaching the Parables in the Early Years

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Parables provide us with a rich entry not only into the life and times of Jesus, but also into the nature of the Kingdom of God. They are essential to the classroom religion program and it is important that all students are exposed to them and come to understand their distinct place within the Gospels. The following is a suggested outline of three steps early years teachers might follow when considering the teaching and learning of parables to young students.



### 1. Teacher background:

As in all areas of teaching, the teachers' own depth of knowledge and understanding of the content and background regarding the topics they teach are essential to students' effective and successful learning. This is as true for early years teachers as for all teachers. We need to know much more about a subject than only those aspects of the topic we actually impart.

So let us first focus on some of the rich background of the parables. We know that Jesus told many parables to assist his listeners to understand more about the Kingdom of God. Some scholars have suggested that there are three types of parables: those that tell us about the arrival of the Kingdom; those that tell us about the growth of the Kingdom; and those that tell us about the values of the Kingdom (Goosen & Tomlinson, 1999). This knowledge would be of great assistance when sharing the parables with young children as we assist them to come to deeper understandings about what the Kingdom of God might be like: what values in this story suggest what heaven might be like? Jesus used ordinary everyday settings and circumstances to make quite extraordinary and profound insights regarding the nature of the Kingdom. At times, such insights were quite challenging to his listeners and presented them with alternative viewpoints that they had not been expecting. That is the power of these parables. They can cause sudden discomfort and demand close reflection.

In the first instance then, teachers need to be familiar with the context of the parable: who are these people? How is a shepherd in these times different from contemporary shepherds? How are the homes and daily lives of the people different? Why was it so extraordinary for the father to accept the son back? And what's with the sandals, the ring and the robe? After all, he was only gone awhile and so what if he worked with pigs? As it turns out, the gifts of the sandals, ring and robe are most significant as they are tangible and profound symbols of the depth of forgiveness and unconditional love of the father. Further, for Jews to have worked with pigs breaks the purity laws associated with the covenant between God and God's people. Such action renders the Jewish son unclean, not in the sense that he was dirty and smelly, but in the sense that he was no longer pure, not holy enough to come before God. These are critical points in the parable and if a teacher should miss or play down that significance much of the parable's richness will be lost.

It is important that we are aware of all such insights to ensure that we do not misinform, and hence mislead, young students. We must bear in mind Barbara Stead's (1996) indelible words concerning the teaching of Scripture: nothing that is taught should ever need to be untaught. Researching the rich background of Scripture passages in biblical commentaries is therefore crucial and pivotal to successful teaching and learning.

## 2. Pedagogical Content Knowledge:

Once we have the essential background, we then need to consider the ways we intend to present the subject matter. This is where we call on our Pedagogical Content Knowledge to design and implement the most effective teaching and learning strategies and activities that make the subject matter accessible for all students. Which one of the repertoire of many strategies we have available to us is going to be most suitable in opening up this content, making it accessible for all? For example, to emphasise the significance of the sandals, ring and robe perhaps we could incorporate them into a story bag and pay particular attention to them as we draw them out of the bag during the story telling. We could pass them around for students to touch and examine more closely. They are tangible and concrete and invite deeper investigation. What particular questions or prompts can we use during this time to activate students' engagement, interest and intrigue? Teacher-talk plays a central part in the unfolding of any teaching and learning event.

Our Pedagogical Content Knowledge deserves close consideration and constant reflection. What works with this particular subject matter in the classroom teaching of religion, will not work for a very different subject matter such as in the teaching of numeracy.

## 3. Pedagogical Learner Knowledge:

And finally, we can never isolate the students themselves from our planning. Pedagogical Learner Knowledge is that knowledge and understanding we have of our students both as a groups and as individuals that enable us to further tweak our teaching and learning strategies to be most appropriate for this specific class. We know that young children are concrete learners, who like to make use all of their senses to assist in their meaning-making. We know of the value of social constructivism and explicit scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1967) in supporting and extending their engagement with the topic at hand. We also know from Fowler's (1981) stages of faith development that young children listen literally and images that are presented to them take on literal significance.

Therefore, we need to present these stories thoughtfully in ways that do not invite only literal interpretations. We must choose our words carefully so as to convey correct meaning and employ strategies that are concrete. In our telling of the Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother, we can use this knowledge to refine our teaching and learning strategies such as not only including the concrete articles of the sandals, ring and robe in our story bag, but then to pass them around to students to touch them, hold them, and feel them, as we carefully construct words to describe them and their significance in the story. Such explicit and intentional teaching provides young students with the specific language to then be able to communicate their own insights.

The act of teaching demands our closest attention to detail and involves many key steps that are to be balanced and implemented creatively and intentionally. There is much to consider both in the initial planning, as well as in the event itself. Even then, we are not finished as the part reflection plays is equally as important. We can never know how a lesson once in action might proceed, as it is just as important to be open to the unexpected twists and turns that might arise, but if we have carefully attended to the content matter, our Pedagogical Content Knowledge and Pedagogical Learner Knowledge, we can be quite confident of a successful lesson. Parables offer distinct insights that we as teachers of young children must make available to them.

## References

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