

Building the Circle on the Same Eye Level

Inclusive Playfulness in Godly Play

Zusammenfassung

In einem Godly-Play-Prozess werden viele Schwellen überschritten – *äußerliche und innerliche an der Tür wie im Sich-Einlassen auf die Geschichte* und die Gruppe. Im Kreisbilden auf gleicher Augenhöhe verwirklicht Godly Play äußerlich und innerlich eine wesentliche Idee der Inklusion: Jede und jeder ist unabhängig von besonderen Bedürfnissen und Fähigkeiten im Kreis willkommen. Mit einer ethnographischen Studie im Religionsunterricht einer deutschen Grundschulklasse werden Teilhabebedingungen am Beispiel von zwei Kindern mit körperlichen und psycho-sozialen Beeinträchtigungen in allen Phasen der Godly-Play-Einheit *zum Gleichnis der kostbaren Perle* beschrieben und analysiert. Die Ergebnisse bestätigen die Unterstützungs- und Anpassungsbedarfe von Godly Play im inklusiven Setting: Für die besonderen Bedarfe dieser Kinder waren eine Assistentkraft, Hilfsmittel für das kreative Arbeiten und unterstützende Formen zur Ermöglichung von Teilhabe erforderlich. Es konnte auch gezeigt werden, dass die beobachteten Kinder den Godly-Play-Prozess bereichert haben. Für Lehrende und Lernende ist daraus zu folgern, dass sie nicht nur die individuellen Bedürfnisse, sondern auch die besonderen Begabungen und existenziellen Erfahrungen von Kindern wahrnehmen und unterstützen sollten.

“A Godly Play community begins right here, by building a circle where each and every participant is warmly welcomed. When everyone is welcomed, the circle is complete” (Berryman, 2002, p. 13). In Godly Play, the idea of inclusion is essential: each and every one is welcomed. No one is excluded from Godly Play by virtue of his or her special needs. The aim of the warm welcome at the door and careful formation of the circle is to help each and every participant experience this feeling of inclusion. “At the threshold to the Godly Play Room, people stop and get themselves ready to go inside” (Berryman, 2002, p. 12). The threshold is both a setting apart and a gateway to community. It is a step into a physical room and into the various specific phases during a Godly Play session as a whole. In this metaphoric sense, the threshold in Godly Play should not be set too high, so that everyone can enter into the play. The members of the group need to be at eye level with one another in the circle, and be able to follow the story and its religious language. The threshold should be crossed easily by people of all abilities.

1 Question and Current State of Discussion

This empirical study is interested in building the circle and crossing the threshold also in a metaphoric sense: How is it possible for children with special needs to participate in the circle on the same eye level? How can physical or mental barriers be crossed on behalf of children with special needs, and what does this mean for Godly Play?

In this paper, chapter 1 reviews the current state of research; chapter 2 describes the explorative study, chapter 3 explains the findings, and finally chapter 4 presents findings of adaptation and further developments.

The questions explored in this study are not entirely new. Over its many decades in practice, Godly Play has already gained experiences on a large scale with children and adults with special needs. Looking at the literature, and on the internet, it becomes clear that there are numerous experiences of inclusion in Godly Play around the world. Furthermore, several theoretical explorations have been conducted into the relations between Godly Play and special education on the one hand, and Godly Play and inclusion on the other.

Sarah Elizabeth Davis (2010) explored the connections between Godly Play and Special Education. Her results show seven key principles of Godly Play which showcase and support the religious education of children with special needs: “(1) Adaption, (2) Community and Inclusion, (3) Discovery Learning and Rate of Learning, (4) Silence and Communication Concerns, (5) Sense, (6) Routine and Structure, and (7) Difficult and Existential Questions” (Davis, 2010, p. 17). Davis’ assumptions confirm and reinforce Wolfhard Schweiker’s connecting of aspects between Godly Play and inclusion (cf. Schweiker, 2014), presented at the Godly Play Conference in Berkeley, CA, in July 2008, where he argued that the pedagogical and theological dimensions of Godly Play converge on the inclusion concept. Godly Play offers potential both for special education and for inclusive education. The following study focuses on an *inclusive school setting*, giving particular attention to the principles of special education.

Prioritizing inclusive learning complies with both the human right of inclusion (UN, 2006, Art. 3c) and the international definition of the inclusive concept:

Inclusion is seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children. (UNESCO, 2005, p. 13)

The main idea of inclusion is reducing exclusion and discrimination on the one hand and nurturing participation and self-determination on the other.

The following study builds on these definitions to explore the relations between Godly Play, Inclusion and Special Education. The starting point is Jerome W. Berryman’s point that Godly Play, in the Montessori special education tradition, is an essentially inclusive approach. Similarly, in pursuit of the Human Rights on inclusion, Davis suggests: “The Godly Play approach should be further examined as an excellent model for teaching children with special needs in Christian settings” (Davis, 2010, p. 23).

2 Explorative Study

The needs of adaptation in an inclusive school setting will be explored by focusing on the special needs of two children. The authors of this paper implemented a 90-minute session of Godly Play in the second grade (aged 7–8 years) of a German primary school in Ludwigsburg. It is located in a calm housing area on the outskirts of town. The school is currently in the process of implementing an inclusive-school project. The 2nd-grade RE Class includes 14 pupils, four of whom have special needs (physical, motor and mental). Additionally there are three pupils from a migration background.

In RE we are convinced that there is no fundamental difference concerning the spiritual needs of children with and without special needs. In the lesson the RE teacher, Elke Theurer-Vogt, welcomed the children at the door, and the Godly Play trainer Wolfhard Schweiker told the story.

The chosen setting was far from the “Ideal Godly Play” situation as envisaged by its creator Jerome Berryman (2013, pp. 173–178). It took place neither in a dedicated Godly Play Room nor in Sunday School, but in the educational context of a confessional Religious Education (RE) lesson at a public school. RE in Germany is legally protected by the German Constitution (Art. 7:3), as in several other European countries. In schools, therefore, Godly Play is not taught in its own spiral curriculum, and both the selection of stories and the creative response have to be adapted to the primary school’s educational norms (cf. Schweiker, 2008).

The session was carried out in a big classroom, where the pupils had enough space to sit on mats in front of the blackboard. It was the first time for these pupils to get to know Godly Play. This specific situation of introduction is a regular recurring Godly Play situation at schools in Germany, and it therefore makes sense to take an empirical look at this.

The phases of the sessions were documented and transcribed. Film sequences and pictures of the creativity phase are available. Furthermore, both teachers drew up a report of their memories and thoughts about the session, which provide another method of analysis within this study.¹ Several lessons have been observed previously. For the present case-study, we needed to limit the amount of data material. We therefore focussed on Nadine and Luis,² two children with special needs, during one single lesson.

Nadine uses a wheelchair because of a cerebral movement disorder. All four extremities of her body are motor restrained. In the circle, she sometimes sits on a chair or on the floor. With her left hand, Nadine is able to write, draw and cut, but she needs more time and assistance, and she is therefore supported by a personal school assistant. Her classmates take care of Nadine, and know how to support her. The aim is to promote Nadine’s independence as effectively as possible.

Luis’ special needs include socio-emotional and motor disabilities, which are due among other factors to family situations. He shows a dilapidate appearance and is not able totally to control his increased salivation. The priority is to promote his motor and fine motor skills, and his learning, working and social behaviour. When interacting with individual classmates, particularly those with special needs, Luis is caring and dedicated. On the other hand, he faces difficulties working with partners and groups, and in his class he is often excluded. An important educational goal is for him to learn to rely on structures and rules which would support his social interaction with his classmates and his acceptance within the class.

1 Essential arrangements and informed consent for this study were agreed with the principal, parents and pupils. The storyteller and doorman wrote minutes, which also were used for the ethnographical analysis.

2 The pupil’s names have been anonymised. Information has also been derived from the personal school files.

The aim of this study was to observe how these two children participated in the circle and how they managed to cross different thresholds in their class, in order to analyse their adaptation needs. Ethnography was chosen as the appropriate research strategy. Its core interest lies in observation and the precise description of observation, in order to understand the social realities within the social context – here, the classroom (Breidenstein, 2006, p. 20f.) It thus also enables an understanding of the observer’s perspective (cf. Geertz, 1987). The methodology was complemented by several social-scientific methods of qualitative analysis.

3 Description and Analysis

In the following résumé, we will look at Luis’ and Nadine’s active behaviour during all phases of the Godly Play Session, the Parable of the Pearl (Mt 13: 45f.).

3.1 Building the Circle

After having welcomed all the pupils, the teacher asks them to get up from their chairs, take a mat and form a circle on the floor. While the other pupils are leaving their regular table groups one after the other and seating themselves on their mats, Nadine’s assistant helps her to sit on the floor. This takes as much time as the formation of the circle in general. Now she is sitting, bending forward and supporting herself with both arms. She is observing what is happening.

This process is a transition from the regular seating arrangement to building the circle on the same eye level with each other and the storyteller. Berryman (2009, p. 38) emphasizes that “all present in the circle, including the storyteller, come to the lessons equally in need to enter them.”

In this first phase, the special situation of Nadine becomes obvious. Normally, she uses a wheelchair, but now she has chosen to sit on the floor like everybody else, refusing any support and leaving the safety of her chair. She probably recognizes the significance of the circle being on the same eye level. Sitting at eye level is a recurrent theme in the concept of Godly Play (Berryman, 1991, p. 29). Nadine is willing to adapt to the situation, although sitting on the floor is a physical challenge to her.

Now the teacher looks at the circle and says:

Ts: Well great. What do you think of our circle.³

Julian: Really good.

Luis: No. It looks like a potato.

Ts: A potato.

Luis: Yeah.

Ts: You’re right (.) How can we make it better?

Luis: Move back over there.

Ts: If you move back a little bit then ... Because the potato has got a bump.

3 In the transcribed texts, the teacher who is the storyteller is indicated as (Ts), and the teacher who is the door person as (Td). The dots in brackets, e. g. (.), stand for pauses of varying length.

Julian: Or, or, or we move over there like this.

Ts: That's a good idea as well if you move back a little bit like Marlene she has already done it right (..) then we have a round circle (...) the advantage of a circle is that everyone can see everything yeah and that's really good and then everyone can see the story

Luis does not accept what Julian is saying because it is not what he observes. By doing this, he is promoting the important process of perceiving each other and building the circle. It's not by accident that Luis recognizes the potato shape of the circle: often himself excluded by the group, he has a clear view for those who are marginalised. Berryman (2009, p. 38) describes this process in a similar way. "Putting the 'lesson' in the center also shows that we are all the same distance from ultimate truth and that it is no one's exclusive possession – not even the teacher's." Building the physical circle turned out to nurture the inclusive learning process. The German educationalist Annedore Prengel has underlined the central role of the circle within diversity education: the circle implies equal rights for each child. It is a pedagogical form which is "paradigmatic for the Pedagogy of Diversity" (cf. Prengel, 2007, p. 49).

3.2 Storytelling and Wondering

After the group has got ready for the story by singing a song and closing their eyes for a while, the parable of the pearl (Berryman 2002, Vol 2; Mt 13: 45f) is told. Nadine sits up on her lower thighs. Her eyes concentrate on the golden box. The phase of imagination proceeds and Nadine changes her sitting position more frequently by supporting her weight with her elbows. "Or a cemetery," she says the moment a rectangular brown felt cloth is laid out. "A coffin," Luis continues Nadine's ideas. Afterwards, Nadine turns to her assistant. "I have to get up. My legs hurt." The school assistant helps Nadine to get into a cross-legged position. None of the other children are aware of a disturbance, but keep fully concentrated on the figures which are being placed on a white felt cloth. From time to time, Nadine's assistant supportively touches her back. When the merchant is going to look for the one precious pearl, Nadine focuses on the story intensely. She leans far forward without moving. Her hands lie on top of each other. The storyteller tells the parable using a calm, quiet voice and long pauses. All the children are barely moving while watching what is happening in the middle of the circle.

In the beginning of the "wondering", "one of the hallmarks of Godly Play" (Berryman 2009, p. 45), Nadine's hands are back on the floor. She is actively involved in the conversation.

Ts: What do you think what this precious, unique precious pearl could really be.

Nadine: The sun.

In order also to involve the children with mental disabilities, the teacher poses the question in a more concrete way:

Ts: What's so important to us that we would give away anything? Is there something?

Luis: No.

Other pupils mention objects from the children's world, like a soccer ball;

Nadine: I love my Mummy but I sadly couldn't give everything away because she already has a bed.

Ts: But for your Mum you would give a lot
 Nadine: Yes [smiles, head bent forward]

This sequence shows the children's different points of view. On the one hand, Luis cannot think of anything for which he would give away everything. Nadine connects preciousness with her mother, who plays a central role in her life. Nadine was born prematurely, and due to her handicap she got much more attention from her mother than her twin sister. The close relationship to her mother is important for Nadine to be able to lead a fairly self-determined life. She is Nadine's pearl. On the other hand Nadine realizes that there is no need to give everything for her Mum. Using the pictorial language of the story, she delimits her willingness to give "everything", by commenting that her Mum does already have a bed. This shows that Nadine is conscious of her own identity and self-determination. And it is also interesting that she is not wondering about objects, like her peers, but about relationships. Due to her handicap, her existential experiences deepen the wondering of the group.

Nadine's wondering and Luis "potato perception" of the circle both illustrate the special benefit the group receives from these children with different experiences. These findings extend our research question further: It is not enough to look for the barriers and thresholds; it is also important to ask: What are the enrichments and gifts these children give to the group and to the (Christian) community?

3.3 Response Time

In this phase Nadine draws a picture.



From the creative materials available – water colours, placing pictures with materials, story materials – Nadine chooses drawing with crayons, which because of her motor disability is in fact the most challenging material. In order to manage this, she needs auxiliary means like a nonslip pad, a pencil holder and a canted table.

In her multi-coloured picture, she puts a circle in the centre: pink, purple, orange, yellow, bright red and bright blue. Around the circle she draws lots of small lines, triangles, and two circles, one of them coloured bright blue, the other one yellow. After the session she explains her picture to the doorperson

Nadine: These are stars and around it that's the universe [with her right finger she indicates a circular movement]
 Td: And what's that?
 Nadine: That's the pearl.
 Td: And it's in the middle?
 Nadine: Yes (.) and I put a colourful edging all around it.

Nadine draws her most precious thing – her pearl – in the centre of her picture. All the prismatic colours, the sun and the universe point to the centre and shine on it. Whatever the pearl might mean to Nadine, this central cosmic place of the pearl touches on and reflects her specific relationships and experiences. In this picture, she is expressing her personal wondering, emotions and meaning.

Luis decides to play with the story material. He tries to make a house by using strips of cloth, but because of his limited fine motor skills, he does not succeed. On a second attempt, he handles the materials somewhat roughly.

Td: Try to be very careful Luis otherwise it will be damaged (...) See what pretty houses Leon is building. Why don't you ask him to give you a hand so you can do it together?
 Luis: Leon can you help me?

Leon, still sitting on the cloth, crawls towards Luis and sits beside him. Immediately, Luis lets Leon have the strip of cloth which Leon places around both pearls. The entrance of his house faces the middle of the cloth. In the meantime, Luis has put the purchaser on his bed.

Luis: He has gone to bed, Leon.

Taking the purchaser figure, Luis puts it upright in his house.

Leon: Alright now.

Leon places the silver box next to the figure while Luis is looking for a space to put the pearl.

Leon: At first he [the purchaser] has got to look at the marbles.

Luis takes the figure and moves it towards the merchant's house.

Leon: Here first.

During the creative phase in Godly Play, the children usually work on their own, without the help of adults; but because of his motoric and social-emotional disability, Luis needs support from the teacher in two ways: on the one hand, to be recognized by his peers and successfully join the group, and on the other, to get motoric assistance. As soon as the teacher (doorperson) realizes that Leon is ready to be Luis' partner in the play, she immediately steps back.

3.4 The Feast

During the feast, all the children are sitting in the circle on their mats again, whereas Nadine is still in her wheelchair.

Ts: Is it okay for you to sit in the wheelchair while we're sitting on the floor? Or shall we all sit on chairs quickly?
 Nadine: If you want to you can. I can't stay on the mat longer ... than one minute.

While building the circle again, Nadine realizes that it is not possible for her to sit on the floor once more. She wants to avoid further strain. The video analysis confirms the fact that Nadine was struggling with the stressful situation sitting on the floor, and is not able to manage it again. So she puts forward the explanation that she cannot stay longer on the mat, and picks up the teacher's suggestion that everybody could use the chairs, saying: "If you want to". Her rhetorical answer is interesting, because it shows that the equal right of being on the same eye level is important to her, and she would in fact like her classmates to adjust to her eye level in the wheelchair. By answering in this way, Nadine enables the class to decide without being responsible for the new situation.

However, the class rejects her option: they are not willing to sit on the chairs. Now the teacher explicitly acknowledges the conflict.

Ts: No. Well, then we have to ask Nadine if she's okay sitting higher (.) Are you okay with this?

Nadine: Yes.

Julian: Now you're the tallest.

Alex: No (..) yes, yes, yes taller

Ts: Well yes it definitely is an exercise because most of the time ... What's it like most of the time?

Alex: She sits

Ts: If Nadine sits in the wheelchair ...

[Julian:] I'm the tallest

Ts: ... and everyone else is standing (.) Alex, if you stand and Nadine sits in her wheelchair (...) Let's try this. Just get up and walk over to Nadine.

Alex walks up to Nadine and stops in front of her wheelchair. At the same time, Sina, Mila and Peter get up. Shortly after that, also Marlene is facing Nadine while measuring her height in comparison to her own.

Ts: What's it now?

Alex: Smaller

Ts: Who is smaller?

Alex: Nadine

Ts: Nadine is smaller. And what happens if you sit down?

Alex: She's taller [...]

Ts: Now Nadine is taller. This is also fine, once in a while.

The teacher tries to nurture the process of building the circle by making the pupils sensitive to the situation of being on the same or on a different eye level.

This sequence shows that the children are aware of Nadine sitting in a wheelchair, but not of her daily situation of being beneath the others' eye level. Julian, for example, realises the difference of height while everyone is sitting, and his explanation is: Nadine is the tallest. In the exercise, the children become aware of how relations such as being higher or lower change when sitting or standing up. They thus experience aspects of Nadine's situation. Furthermore, their awareness of Nadine's incapability of maintaining the same eye level with her classmates is raised. In this process, Nadine has been strengthened. In the end, she is sitting upright in her wheelchair, and seems to be taller and self-assured than usual. She enjoyed being taller than everyone else.

4 Results and Outlook

4.1 Nadine and Luis

How possible was it for Nadine and Luis to participate in the circle and to cross the physical or mental barriers? The results show that it was fairly straightforward for Nadine and Luis to find their place in the circle and in the process as a whole. They were able to cross the threshold of equal participation. On the other hand, it also became obvious that Godly Play in an inclusive setting is not “business as usual”. According to Davis, however, Godly Play and special education are linked through the concept of adaptation. “Godly Play’s ability to be adapted for particular settings is an excellent match to the necessity for adaptation presented by special education” (Davis, 2010, p. 17).

As seen here, in Nadine’s case a third inclusive staff member was needed, who has to become an equal member of the team. The personal assistant is not just in charge of supporting the child with special needs, but also contributes to the building of the circle. Consequently, this process may take more time, in both a physical and a metaphorical sense.

4.2 The Inclusive Group in Large and the Need for Negotiation

Godly Play’s basic rule of being on eye level with each other, both *mentally* and *physically*, turned out to be a challenge for *all* pupils in class. Apparently, not each child has the same opportunity to *mentally* participate and be respected on equal eye level. It is a fact that there are differences in each group and equal eye level is not realized completely. Luis for instance is rejected by his peers once in a while because of his deviant behaviour and appearance. He needed the support of the teacher in the creative phase to get into inclusive playfulness and to cross the threshold of negative attitudes. Although, being excluded or mobbed is not a mere challenge for children with special needs. This is also at risk within this class.

Concerning same eye level *physically* the pupils are not willing to sit on chairs because of the needs of one single child. Facing a classic dilemma of inclusion, the teachers had to deal with the tensions between individuality and collectivity. They had to respect the individual’s needs and, at the same time, ensure common learning. The described compromise respects the special needs of Nadine without disrespecting the common rule of same eye level. The disadvantage of being beneath her classmate’s eye level everyday by sitting in the wheelchair is balanced because Nadine is allowed to be the tallest in class during the short period of the feast. Adapting to the inclusive context, means for Godly Play, that a flexible differentiating solution needs to be found which still remains faithful towards its principles. Frequently, adaptation to special needs has to *deviate from the rules but not from its basic idea*.

The sense of being on the same eye level possibly needs to be negotiated when there is a child who is not able to sit on the floor. It becomes inevitable to give consideration to each and everyone’s requirements in order to avoid strains to the individual. Meeting the individual needs of children in a sensitive and caring way makes differentiations necessary as we have seen. Nadine is sitting in her wheelchair while the others sit on the floor. In an inclusive Godly Play setting a special support is needed to help

the children to participate in communication processes. Luis needed the help of the teacher in the creative phase to be accepted by his playmate. He showed much more trouble to participate outside the safe situation of the circle during storytelling and feast. This seems to be a challenge in general.

4.3 Specially Gifted

Same eye level *mentally* means also that children with special needs are not always viewed as the ones who are disabled but also the ones who are specifically gifted. Every child is limited and gifted as well. Looking at Nadine and Luis this shift of perspective became obvious. Furthermore, they both catalysed the process of building the circle not just in a physical but also in mental sense. Children learned and practiced mutual perception, sensitivity and mindfulness by interacting inclusively. This not only enabled those with special needs to equally participate, but also facilitated a sharing of their existential experiences in a way that enriches the theologizing in the wondering phase.

4.4 Necessary Adaptations

Godly Play does also have to provide special *auxiliary means* and *supports*. Nadine for instance needed a nonslip pad, pencil holder and a canted table to enable her to do her creative work. New tools might be necessary and some supplies in the creative phase have to be adapted to the children's needs.

The inclusive potentials of the Godly-Play-method as such are immense, but not yet sufficient to meet the varieties of special needs. It became clear in the theoretical reflections as well as in the empirical findings that there is a need for development and adaptation "in content, approaches, structures and strategies" (UNESCO, 2015). Godly Play does not have to be changed. However, it does have to be adapted to children with special needs and inclusive settings in order to reach the goal of making the benefits of Godly Play and of children with special experiences accessible to everybody.

5 Summary and Outlook

This session showed that Nadine and Luis could participate in Godly Play with the aid of little but necessary support. It was the first time they got to know Godly Play. The specific process of building the circle in a physical and metaphoric sense and the principle of same eye level helped them to participate equally and to enrich the group as well. So Godly Play turned out as a concept which is nurturing inclusive processes and mutual respect. Looking at Nadine and Luis having physical, motoric and social-emotional needs different adaptive supports are inevitable.

These supports and adaptation needs will change when Godly Play is faced with other challenges. Children with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities (PIMD) for instance will also require story adaptations to their individual cognitive conditions and further basal perceptive elements. Such multi-sensory storytelling for children with PIMD needs further developments. We have already put the story of "Jonah" to

such a test, however, it has not yet been evaluated. The further development of Godly Play in inclusive settings like this is another story.

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