Chapter 3

Deconstructing Bible Storytelling with Three-to-Five Year Olds

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THREE-TO-FIVE-YEAR-OLD CHILDREN'S SPIRITUAL AWARENESS, biblical knowledge, faith, and values formation is grounded in the process of meaning making as they listen to and reflect on Bible stories. As Christian early childhood teachers research, pray, prepare props, tell, and reflect on the Bible-story time, they consciously and unconsciously apply theoretical, and pedagogical constructs to the process of intentionally nurturing young children's spiritual awareness, biblical knowledge, faith, and values formation. This paper unpacks auto-ethnographically the lived experience of the teacher researcher's application of early childhood theoretical, and pedagogical constructs to the telling of Bible stories through the lenses of attention to detail, context, and experience, together with four metaphors for children's lives, theories of child development, and their associated pedagogical strategies. It reflects upon and teases out the storyteller's metacognition before, during, and after storytelling, and pays attention to the reciprocity of the relationship between the storyteller and listener as a catalyst for scaffolding children's spiritual awareness, biblical knowledge, faith, and values formation.

Theoretical Constructs Informing the Research

Bible storytelling is a process that actively connects the teller with the listener, through language, imagination, and shared understanding (Morgenthaler, Keiser, & Larson 2014). When used effectively, it is uniquely placed to be a powerful medium for communicating meaning, faith, spiritual

awareness, biblical knowledge, and values to young children aged three to five years. It invites the listeners to use their head, heart, and hands in the development of their spiritual awareness and faith formation. Storytelling is a process that is enabled and enriched by the presence and work of the Holy Spirit at all stages of the storytelling process. Storytellers need to be aware of their role in this process, bathing the session in prayer, thorough preparation, and active metacognition.

Bible storytelling has the potential to become a passive experience for the young listener; one that may, in fact, lead to disinterest, and misunderstanding (McNaughton & Williams 2009). In order to avoid this pitfall and to maximize the possibility of nurturing faith and spiritual awareness, Christian early childhood teachers need to combine good storytelling techniques and active self-reflection with a deep understanding of contemporary early childhood pedagogies and theories. The reflective practices of auto-ethnography are useful as a means of maximizing the full potential of the Bible storytelling session. This research began by reviewing contemporary theoretical and pedagogical understandings, and used the findings of the literature review to inform practice.

Preschool children's spiritual awareness, biblical knowledge, and faith formation occur through an overarching framework of four interwoven metaphors for children's lives: belonging, being, becoming, and believing. "Belonging is integral to human existence," (Grajczonek 2009, 7). Children belong to a family, culture, and to groups within communities. Bible storytelling sessions, through shared attention, scaffold children's sense of connectedness and belonging to the family of God. These sessions enable children to share ideas and practices with the Christian community, and to experience a sense of the rights and responsibilities of group membership within this community. Through engaging with, and thinking about the plot, and characters of many Bible stories, children begin to develop an understanding of the "security, love, protection, and mystery of God," (Stewart 1989b, as cited in Jonkers 2015, 308). This further supports the development of their sense of belonging.

"Being recognizes, and respects the importance of the here and now in children's lives" (Grajczonek 2009, 7). It recognizes the necessity for the storyteller and the children to take the time to ask questions, express and explore ideas, and tease out understandings together, right now, in the middle of the storytelling process (Government of South Australia, Department Education & Children's Services 2008; Millikan & Giamminuti 2014). It recognizes, celebrates, and intentionally nurtures each other's experiences, alternative perspectives, felt senses, and expressions of wonder, awe, and joy (Grajczonek 2012). The experiences children have during repeated Bible

storytelling sessions build on each other to help children "see patterns, and connection," (Government of South Australia Department Education & Children's Services 2008), which shape their continually evolving spiritual awareness, biblical knowledge, and faith in God and Jesus.

The metaphor of becoming recognizes the events and experiences young children encounter, and shapes their identities, knowledge, understandings, capacities, skills, and relationships (Millikan & Giamminuti 2014), as well as their dispositions. The becoming process is rapid, and constantly changing. It gives attention and respect to the notion of development. Participation in any one Bible storytelling session is but one step in the development of these capacities in relation to a child's developing spiritual awareness, biblical knowledge, and faith formation. It is through these three metaphors that the final metaphor begins to occur—believing through faith in God's existence, understanding of His character, and unconditionally trusting in His word. Three to five year old's believing is scaffolded through their interest in the notions of God's love and care, and his superhuman powers (Barratt 2012). Their faith, whether intuitive (Fowler, as cited in Straker, n.d.), borrowed (Gillespie et al. 2001), or experienced (Westerhoff III 1976), has the potential to engender a sense of courage, trust, and a willingness to obey (Habernicht & Burton 2004). Keeping the above four metaphors for children's learning at the forefront of their thinking helps storytellers holistically and skillfully approach the craft of Bible storytelling.

Theories that appear to be highly relevant to the storytelling process are: cognitive–maturational theory, socio-cultural theory, transactional theory, and feminist post-structural theory. Cognitive-maturational theory posits the child as an active constructor of their own understanding, intuitively and reflectively using theory of mind (thoughts, perceptions, wants, and feelings) to sort out what they see and hear during the storytelling process (Barratt 2012). Proponents of this theory tell us that three-to-four-year-old children view God in "anthromorphic terms," (applying the characteristics of people to God) (Boyatzis 2013, 500; Barrett 2012, 79). Maturationally, three-four-year-olds are just beginning to develop an awareness of other people's perspectives and feelings; therefore they need opportunities to label and discuss characters' feelings during Bible stories. Interestingly, Barrett's research uncovered another characteristic of young children's thinking about God. He found that children intuitively develop ideas about "nonhuman agents" who have creative powers and other superhúman properties (2012, 79–80). This has implications for children's spiritual awareness and faith formation in an omnipotent, omnipresent, creative God.

Sociocultural theorists recognize the importance of language and the relationship between the child and adult in scaffolding the child to a higher level of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values. Adults identify and work within the child's zone of proximal development. Using the sociocultural notion of cognition, the storyteller's role is to "guide children to more advanced levels of spiritual connectedness to the sacred" (Boyatzis 2013, 502), through conversations that are truly reciprocal and use visual imagery.

Transactional theorists endorse this notion of reciprocity by focusing on the bi-directional nature of this adult/child relationship within the zone of proximal development; advocating for sustained shared thinking (SST), as a highly important pedagogy. Teachers can sustain a three-five-year-old child's thinking by asking such question as "I wonder what will happen next; why do you think he did that?; do you think that was a good thing to do?" (Fellowes & Oakley 2014, 518). Other behaviors that support SST are listening, pausing, reacting, responding, extending, and provoking alternative perspectives. During SST, teachers should also encourage children to make connections between the plot of the story and their own prior experience and knowledge.

Post-structuralist theorists add to the notion of SST by using discourse, i.e., ways of talking, valuing, and behaving, to problematize, critique, and scaffold children's reflexive competence (Damber 2015). Storytellers need to listen for and elicit the child's comments during the storytelling process, and to use these comments as triggers for discussion during and at the end of the story in order to negotiate, build, and monitor children's construction of meaning intellectually, affectively, and aesthetically (Soundy 2007). Ignoring children's comments during the story and leaving discussion of the story until the end is age-inappropriate for three-to-five-year-olds. Children of this age find it difficult to wait until the end of a story to express their thoughts or to ask questions. The storyteller needs to address questions immediately within the flow of the story. These questions are vital comprehension and metacognition cues. Wise teachers use them to shape the story as it continues to unfold.

Pedagogical Strategies Informing the Research

Nye's (2011) SPIRIT checklist highlights optimal conditions for scaffolding children's spirituality. It positions the storyteller as an agent in the process of stimulating children's spiritual awareness, and faith formation. The checklist indicates the need for a special intimate, physical, emotional, and auditory space for the story to occur in and leads the researcher to

provide a story mat and storyteller's chair in her classroom. Nye's checklist also highlights the need for the storyteller to form a respectful, reciprocal relationship with the listeners during all storytelling sessions. This relationship helps children view the storytelling session with anticipation and scaffolds their spontaneous participation, comments, and questions during the story; helping them to tease out the meaning of events, characters' feelings, and God's role in each story.

The SPIRIT checklist, together with Fisher's (2010) *Four H Biblical Framework Model*, reminds the researcher of the importance of using rich description, props and action to stimulate imagination and children's comments during the session. The active learning environment scale (Government of South Australia Department. Education & Children's Services 2008), reinforces the importance of environment and props as collaborative scaffolds for meaning-making. It reminds the researcher of the importance of posing open-ended questions and waiting for answers, of finding out what children already know and have experienced, and using this knowledge to scaffold understanding of the plot, story setting, and characters' feelings. When used in conjunction with the *Four H Biblical Framework Model*, children become deeply involved in the story, developed empathy with the characters, and begin to understand the story at a deeper level. The *Four H Biblical Framework Model* draws attention to the need to make explicit historical information during the storytelling as a means of scaffolding children's meaning-making. The fact that Abram, when leaving Ur, would have only been able to take items with him that would fit onto a camel or donkey built awareness of all that Abram his family gave up, and of the slowness of their journey. The fact that Galilean fishermen usually fished at night because fish swim in deeper water during daylight helped the children comprehend the miraculous in the story of Jesus and his breakfast on the beach.

In this manner, combining all of the above strategies, the researcher and the children engage in sustained shared thinking, scaffolded and co-constructed children's personal meaning-making, as well as comprehension of the plot, setting, characters feelings, and of God's role in the story. These strategies act as important precursors to the development of spiritual awareness, biblical knowledge, and faith formation.

The 2016 *Transformational Planning Framework*, (used by Adventist Schools Australia to inform their Early Encounters Bible Curriculum), also informs the researcher's storytelling practices. This framework considers the Bible story through four lenses:

- Hook: what is this story about—engaging the child's curiosity;

- Head: I wonder what the Bible says—scaffolding knowledge and understanding;
- Heart: what does this mean for me—experiencing the love of God, and how He works in our lives;
- Hand: what is God asking me to do—responding to the Bible message.

The children and researcher consider head, heart and hand concepts over time, as they experience, and unpack the story together, (often during multiple revisits).

The hand phase of the transformational planning framework (ASA 2016) occurs during play, prayer, praise, and service, enabling children to use metacognitive reflective analysis, and schema to revisit the Bible story, actively constructing and re-constructing meaning for themselves. While engaged in these types of events children move through the various levels of Bloom's Taxonomy: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating (Anderson & Krathwohl 2001).

Every time a Christian early childhood teacher prepares to tell a Bible story, this transformational planning framework, together with the theory of multiple intelligences, can be used as a scaffold for metacognition about where to begin and what to include in the storytelling session. The theory of multiple intelligences alerts the researcher to the need to incorporate props, actions, and questions across as many intelligences as is practical each time she tells a Bible story. Song, rhyme, role play, and visual, and auditory props became regular features of the storytelling session. Musical instruments are used to create sound effects for the storm, a song becomes a means of concluding and revisiting the story of Jesus and the storm. Magnet experiments are used to explore the power of the Holy Spirit during Elijah's trip to heaven. Role play is incorporated into many Bible stories.

Table 1. Multiple Intelligences Experiences

Bible Story	Head Concept	Multiple Intelligence Experience
Jarius' Daughter	Jesus heals	Thank you Lord—action rhyme
Mustard seed	God's love helps us to grow more like Him	• Seeds—what do seeds need to grow? • Seed match game, set sorting (big little seeds) • Song *Read your Bible pray every day*

Bible Story	Head Concept	Multiple Intelligence Experience
Daniel and his 3 friends	God loves to see us make good choices	• Paper bag food sort • Blindfold—smell food • Mother may I? game—good bad food choices

Incorporating these types of experiences as a part of the storytelling session appears to achieve one of three purposes: either preparing the children to understand the plot or head concept before the storytelling begins, or enabling them to think more deeply about the story during the storytelling, or enabling their revisiting of its concepts at the end of the story.

Most stories begin with a story box or story bag containing props for the story. This box becomes a powerful hook, engaging the children's curiosity and interest before the story begins. There is always one child who asks, "what's in the bag (or box), today?" Sometimes we look at all of the props before we begin and wonder together about what the story could be about, and sometimes we unveil them as the story unfolded.

Stonehouse and May's (2010) reflective engagement approach to Bible storytelling, spiritual awareness and faith formation reminds us to harness the value of time, "to slow down, become quiet, and take the time" (71), to allow children to "meet God in the story" (84). To wonder together and to question so that children are able to celebrate and to unpack the wonder and mystery of God's love and plan for their lives. When Bible storytellers do this, they allow space for the Holy Spirit to speak to the heart of each listening child. All of the above pedagogical strategies, when informed by the listed theories and metaphors of children's learning and development serve to shape the researcher's thinking, and informed her decisions and actions before and during the Bible storytelling sessions.

Discoveries Made During Current Research: The Role of Metacognition and Reciprocity

For three years this teacher-researcher auto-ethnographically reflected on her metacognition, and application of early childhood theoretical and pedagogical constructs before, during, and after Bible storytelling sessions with three to five year olds. This section of the paper gives the reader a glimpse into her metacognitive processes.

When Reflecting on This Transformational Planning Framework, She Wrote the Following in Her Journal...

In my experience, it is the relationship with the storyteller that often provides a powerful initial hook into the story for the children. If they know you, and know that you always have interesting things to do and say, then they will be eager to settle and begin the story.

I often begin with a question e.g. when talking about Naaman when he decided to visit Elisha to say thank you—I asked them "have you ever been ecstatic? The man in our story today was ecstatic! He was jumping for joy, and yelling yahoo," (naturally we talked about what ecstatic meant). Then we pretended to be ecstatic. Lots of children commented about what made them very happy, and so the story began. I think that the term hook should be plural because a storyteller uses many hooks continuously throughout the story. Hooks may be the objects or the questions you bring into the story, as it progresses, or the variations in your tone of voice. Hook, and head should be a rolling, continuous part of the story.

I always try to help the children think about the characters' decisions throughout the story, and to apply it to their lives. For example, when talking about Abraham leaving Ur, we had a discussion about what he should pack and take with him if he was loading a camel or a cart. The children had many practical suggestions. We even managed to talk about the best type of sleeping bags! We also wondered together about how Abram heard God's voice telling him where to go. One child told me that every morning God looked down from heaven, and yelled out "Go that way!" We explored the concept of God putting ideas into our minds. One boy told me that he knew what ideas were. He had many ideas in his mind. Many of the children told me they had never heard God talk to them, and we wondered together about how he might talk to us. I think a number of them, (particularly the four and five year olds), went away wanting to listen for God's ideas in their mind. All of this discussion occurred as the story unfolded.

Hook, head, and heart interwove together throughout this 15-min story. During the action the children were thinking and becoming aware of how God interacts with us. This is the power of talking with *children rather than* at *children. Throughout this story the children, and I discoursed together, employing metacognition and reciprocity, to carefully scaffold spiritual awareness, faith formation, and biblical knowledge,* (Author's Reflective Journal, 21/3/16).

Despite this occurrence of reciprocity; my experience of telling Bible stories to three-to-five year olds has led me to the conclusion that a storyteller has only a brief window of opportunity (probably no more than 2 minutes) in which to engage the child's reflection on the heart, and head concept (the "felt sense,") (Hyde 2008, 84), as they apply to the story, (what does this mean for me/what is God asking me to do). Ideally, the storyteller's statements and eliciting of dialogue during and at the end of the story subtly led the child to consider the head concept. It is important to keep the message simple, just one concept for each story. Build awareness of this message through wondering and action. Explore the concept further during each revisit of the story and in follow-up Godly-play experiences, (Author's Reflective Journal, 25/4/16).

Table 2. Head & Heart Concepts

Bible Story	Head concept	Heart Concept
10 Lepers Healed	Jesus heals	I can ask Jesus God for help if I am sick
Jesus Stills the Storm	Jesus has special powers	Jesus will use His special powers to help me
Naaman	No other Gods are more powerful than God / Jesus	Jesus will use His special powers to help me

Table 3. Sample Notes for Evidence of Children Displaying *Hand* Concepts

Bible Story	Hand concept
Noah's Ark	2 boys building, re-building the ark from junk construction—deciding that God must have thoughtfully placed the heavy animals at the bottom of the boat, and Noah his family at the top of the boat to avoid the smell.
Lost Coin & Lost Sheep	Playing over and over again losing the coins and the sheep. Empathetically helping the *woman*, and the *shepherd* to find the lost, and joyously celebrating the finding of that which was lost.

Bible Story	Hand concept
Jairus' Daughter	Reverently thanking Jesus for his care and blessings while holding the flashing scrunchy ball or engaging in a stepping-stone prayer game
Widow's Mite	Bringing money every week to put in the offering so a child in India can attend school

When Reflecting on the Storyteller's Metacognition during the Storytelling Session for Jesus and the Storm, the Researcher Wrote . . .

> *Keep the action well-paced, and those sound effects coming. I'll need to talk louder over the sound effects so the children can hear me. Connect the action with the children's experience of storms. Don't make it too scary. Listen for the children's comments. That's a good one to bounce off of. Keep rowing, and bailing. Unpack the disciple's feelings even more. I need to prompt Oscar to do his storm calming. Praise the drum player, and the rest of the sound effects team. Praise the bailers and rowers, spur them on.*
>
> *Time to ask—why was Jesus able to stop the storm? Relate it to their power—can you stop a storm? Wow, that girl is a deep thinker! She is right! Jesus is mighty! She's connecting it to the song we sang before (My God is so Big). He does have special power. I need to capitalize on this concept as we bring the story to a close. It is time for the reflective question, and the application to their experience of God and Jesus. Pace this well. Elicit, wonder, elicit again, and praise good thinking.*

Thoughts like this constantly run through a storytellers mind, in parallel to the storytelling activity, and show that good storytellers always remain alert to their audience, using all their senses to weave the threads of the story together so that the listening child can not only hear the story, but can also experience and respond to the story through their emotions, senses, and imagination (Fellowes & Oakley 2014) as the setting comes alive, and the children begin to empathize with the characters.

What these journal reflections show is that fostering spiritual awareness, biblical knowledge, faith, and values formation through storytelling appears is be best described as a process of metacognition and reciprocity on the part of both the children and the storyteller. It is fostered in moments of time (in partnership with the Holy Spirit) with individual children who display behaviors of belonging, being, becoming and believing. Storytellers

catch the teachable moments through the dynamic interaction of metacognition and reciprocity as they scaffold the child's meaning-making. This process is best envisioned as the metaphorical "tossing of a ball," (Rinaldi 2001, 78), backward and forward between the storyteller and the children throughout the story. In this manner children become active participants in the story, actively building their spiritual awareness, biblical knowledge, faith, and values through the metacognitive process of mindful sense-making, deepening their understanding of the setting, plot, characters feelings, and God's and Jesus' role in the story. They also begin to apply the head concept of the story to their own lives.

The Bible storyteller's use of pedagogical strategies (such as those found in the theory of multiple intelligences, the reflective engagement model, the *Four H Biblical Framework Model*, and sustained shared thinking), to initiate metacognitive and reciprocal dialogue with three to five year olds throughout the storytelling appears to be an important catalyst to children's formation of spiritual awareness, biblical knowledge, faith, and values.

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