

How children aged 9–10 understand Bible stories: a study of children at a church-aided and a state primary school in the Midlands

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This article details the Bible Story Project's (BSP) initial work in examining how children understand stories. It draws on the insights of both developmental thinking and experiential learning, with awareness of the growing need to release the authentic 'voice of the child'. The context is found in Year 5 children in two contrasting inner city schools. The data is reduced by means of quantitative (mathematical statistics) and qualitative (case study) methods. It is summarized with a description of the fresh insights offered by the research, noting how imaginative world views influence the personal hermeneutic of children as they respond to either religious or secular stories. The children in the research sample are British and multi-ethnic working with a predominantly Judaeo-Christian world view.

Keywords: *Bible; Godly play; Faith development*

The Bible and children

The extent to which the Bible should be used with children has been the source of considerable reflection. In the 1960s, the research of Ronald Goldman (1964) took the view that 'the mystics, who claim to have direct sensations of the divine, are exceptions' and these were people who were 'extremely rare cases, rarer in adolescence and practically unknown in childhood'. He developed this a year later (Goldman, 1965) by suggesting that the Bible should be generally used by children over the age of 12.

This developmental perspective has continued to have widespread influence in

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religious educational circles and in church Sunday schools, even though there has also been a steadily critical response to Goldman. Hyde (1968) immediately retorted with a critique. Then Francis (1976) and Murphy (1980) responded with doctoral researches offering contrary viewpoints, before McGrady (1994) added the growing conviction that Goldman's research had not sufficiently engaged with the metaphorical and operational aspects of religious thinking. Hay and Nye (1998) decided that Goldman's mistake was,

To assume that spiritual awareness was always something extraordinary, equated with mystical ecstasy, instead of holding open the possibility that it might be a very ordinary aspect of young children's everyday experience. (p. 41)

Hay has focused his research on the spirituality of the child, particularly following in the footsteps of those who make room for a reflection of religious experience (Hardy, 1966; Robinson, 1983; Coles, 1992).

The current research wishes to examine how children understand Bible stories by drawing together the advantages of earlier developmental thinking, alongside the benefits of a later qualifying experiential thinking.

A means for doing this can be found in the work of Jerome Berryman (1995), whose innovative approach to religious education is called 'Godly play'. This practical method of engagement encourages adults to become childish in their work with children. Berryman consciously draws on the work of Montessori (1965) and Calvalletti (1983) by teaching adults to tell Bible stories to children by means of awe and wonder. Having outlined his method in his book he concludes by saying,

Godly play is a way to keep open the opportunity for the true self to emerge in childhood and the possibility that adults may return to where they began and begin to grow again. (p. 158)

This reflects his thoughts from earlier in the book,

Become like a child if you want to mature as an adult. To play the ultimate game, don't rely on will, belief, denial or reason alone. Play. Play in a Godly way. Play with the Creator. (p. 17)

Berryman has made room for the Bible to be used with pre-adolescent children. In using his storytelling style in a class context, the current research project [henceforth called the Bible Study Project (BSP)] has endeavored to allow different Bible stories to be heard and their meaning to be explored. At a later stage, the same group of children have been visited in order for them to tell a story to the research team.

The second part of the BSP entails a means of listening to children. This aspect of the research has been strongly influenced by other current research projects that have set out to hear children's voices (see Morgan *et al.*, 2002). Such wider research consciously draws on the insights of Banardo's, the largest children's charity in the UK, that offers guidance into appropriate means of setting up semi-structured interviews with children and in learning to listen to what they are saying directly and non-directly (Alderson, 1995). This process is part of a larger move concerned with amplifying an emergent 'children's voice' and to apply this to social policy and organizational structures (Hallett, 2003).

The context of the BSP

Two schools were chosen in an urban priority area of Nottingham in the British Midlands. One school was Church aided from a Roman Catholic foundation and the other was a county primary school.

Both schools drew entirely from the local ethnically mixed area that included established Moslem, Sikh and Hindu communities. Although the Voluntary Aided (VA) school had distinctive admission criteria, it was not over-subscribed and endeavored to provide a faith environment conducive for a religiously motivated spirituality within the religious background. The county school drew from a virtually identical catchment area and was in a similar situation to its VA neighbour, also maintaining its target intake numbers.

In each school, the chosen target group for the BSP was Year 5, containing children aged between 9 and 10. This age group was chosen because of its openness to spirituality, expressed through their general willingness to engage in wonder, awe and imagination. Fowler (1981) has described this period as being the second stage in the development of faith (the mythic–literal stage) when children are ordering their concepts of belief by a more sustained means of reality testing. This stage comes after the earlier intuitive–projective period, in which perception, feelings and imagination make up the ways of knowing, and before the third period, named the synthetic–conventional stage.

These early stages of faith are biologically and educationally normative in developmental terms. In other words, Fowler would presume that unless children in Year 5 had learning difficulties or a precociously derived faith formation, they would almost invariably be at stage two. Fowler writes,

If we picture the flow of our life as being like a river, stage two tells stories that describe the flow from the midst of the stream. The stage two person – child or adult – does not step out on the bank beside the river and reflect on the stories of the flow and their composite meanings. For stage two, meanings are conserved and expressed in stories. There is also a sense in which the meanings are trapped in the narrative, there not being yet the readiness to draw from them conclusions about a general order of meaning in life. (p. 137)

It is this pre-pubescent period that has been commonly regarded as being a more spiritual period in the lifespan. This perception could be the sense that infancy is the spawning ground for natural priestliness, articulated by the romantic poets of the 18th century

But trailing clouds of glory do we come from God who is our home:

Heaven lies about us in our infancy.

(Wordsworth, *Ode on intimations of immortality from recollections of early childhood*)

This notion of primal spirituality is taken up by theologians who focus on original blessing (as opposed to original sin). It allows for a greater attention being given to biblical pictures of the child leading the new ideal community after the period of exile (Isaiah 11, v6).

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
 and the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
 and the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
 and a little child shall lead them.

Alternatively, this perception could be that the following period of adolescence is the time when young people are given their first serious induction to the scientific tradition of the Enlightenment with its associated religious scepticism.

Fowler notes that children at this stage find their faith articulated in stories. Their family, cultural and religious values are locked into stories which, as yet, cannot be adequately expressed. As a result a child in stage two will draw meaning from a story but not be able to articulate it. Any moral an adult might draw is likely to be meaningless.

Procedure for the BSP

The BSP wrote to the headteachers of each school outlining its interest in exploring how a child construes meaning from Bible stories. In particular, the letter specified five possible areas for exploration, namely the influence of the home environment (religious nurture), the influence of the school environment (religious ethos), the innate aptitude of a child, the influence of a child's personal faith and the influence of the cognitive stages. This letter requested that a team of two or four researchers could come in for two lessons. In each instance the headteacher agreed to the request and delegated further communication to the class teacher. Prior to the lessons the project facilitator met with the appropriate class teacher.

The first lesson was aimed at telling stories and testing comprehension. It was devised in four parts. Initially the team was introduced. Secondly, two stories were told to the class using the Godly play method. Thirdly, the class was given the task of retelling the story and, finally, the lesson was concluded by means of a puppet which detailed that he would be back for a later lesson. The two stories told were from the Old and New Testaments, specifically Rahab and the spies (Joshua 2) and a parable of Jesus [either the man who built his house upon sand or the Good Shepherd who looks after his sheep (John 10)]. The selection of two very different types of Bible stories was to allow engagement from the two testaments and also to offer the alternative genres of an adventure story and an imaginative parable. To the adult mind, more meaning might be attributed to the parabolic story, but the intention was to see if an Old Testament adventure held more interest for a child than a parable or had a more apparent meaning. After the stories had been told, concept questions were asked to ensure that the narrative outlines were followed.

In the third stage of the lesson, when the class was invited to work on one of the stories, the class was given the opportunity to work artistically, dramatically or verbally. In whatever medium they chose, the children were asked to depict one of the stories. In each case, a member of the research team facilitated the activities. The

lesson was concluded when the puppet was introduced, to whom the class fed back their work. After this, the puppet asked the children for the meaning of the stories.

The second lesson was aimed at hearing stories from the children and at hearing their understandings of these stories. It was held 2 weeks after the first lesson and was devised in four parts. Initially the team (and puppet) were welcomed back and the previous lesson was recalled with the class reminding the puppet of the stories and their outlines. Secondly, the class was shown how to retell stories using a four-box cartoon. They were then asked to identify a favourite Bible story (or story that meant a lot to them from their own religious tradition or from their memories). Their task was to depict that story using a four-box cartoon. The third stage was the most critical one for the BSP in that it was the occasion for each child to bring their completed work to one of the research team and to offer an explanation as to its meaning.

The discussion was recorded and in each case the child was asked to describe the story, to say why they liked it and to say what it meant. The final stage was to draw the lesson together and for the children to be thanked. A week later the class was sent an official certificate thanking them for their work and recording their achievement.

Methods used by the BSP

The procedures for the two lessons deliberately drew on various teaching techniques, five of which are now briefly discussed, namely Godly play story telling, puppetry, a choice of art, drama or verbal feedback, cartoon-style feedback and individual feedback.

Godly play

Godly play (Berryman, 1995) was used as a means of engaging wonder as a mutual exercise between adult and child as a story is told. Given that the research team was previously unknown to the school children, it was also used in order to break the ice and attract mutuality in which both storyteller and hearer were seen to be drawn into the story. The story itself is bigger than the teller.

To do this, in the context of the BSP, a space was made in the class and the storyteller sat on the floor with the listeners looking on. The story was unraveled by objects being drawn from a glittering bag, each piece joggling the storyteller's memory. As the story emerged from the bag, the storyteller would wonder what each bit meant. All this time the storyteller would be looking at the object in the story not at the class. When the whole story had unraveled, the storyteller would ask the classic 'wonder questions' whilst putting the story away. These questions would include wondering what bit the listeners liked and why.

Puppetry

Puppetry was used as a means of deflecting attention from the class onto an imaginative but emotional persona. The puppet in question, Dodo, emerged from a

bin after a practiced introduction. He was identifiably younger and less knowledgeable than the children, therefore attracting a degree of benevolence. Dodo was not able to catch hold of the story outlines nor to understand their meanings and as such echoed that previous faith stage (Fowler's intuitive-projective faith) from which the children had recently come. In this previous stage of 'unorder' the child is unable to separate fantasy from reality and a self-perspective is the only one available to them. In the context of the BSP, Dodo was successful in eliciting the full storyline and possible meanings of the stories from the class, without the class feeling deskilled or fearful of giving the wrong answer. Morgan *et al.* (2002), discussing the use of an alternative personality for interviewing children aged 7–11 wrote,

The dragon's cartoon personality seemed to reassure children that their knowledge was superior to his and thereby worthy of expression. (p. 12)

The BSP noted that it was Dodo who was crucial to the link between the two lessons in that the classes always remembered him with interest, asked after him and wanted more time with him.

Choice of art, drama or verbal feedback

This choice in the first lesson was of value in eliciting the flowing streams of the narrative. Fowler has noted that at this stage children can assemble facts without reflecting on the overall meanings or conclusions of stories. If this is the case, it is important to offer a range of ways in which the story can be retold to and re-inforced for children without causing them to lose confidence or feel unsuccessful. The BSP found that art and drama were more popular options. In fact the only children to choose the verbal option were girls from a religious tradition that did not encourage a visual or dramatic representation of holy stories involving God or holy people. The art and drama options were equally popular, with the dramatic representation invariably choosing the more sequential Old Testament narrative with its action-style plot. The art feedback tended to have a gender bias, with girls tending to depict the parabolic story (90%) and boys depicting the Old Testament action story (95%).

Cartoon-style feedback

Cartoon-style feedback in the second lesson was a useful means of encouraging the children to assemble the essential storyline. By having four boxes in the story it inferred that there was a beginning (the first box) and an ending (the fourth box) with some form of a plot in between (boxes two and three). The BSP found that although this method of feedback required some fairly complex tasks (story identification, story analysis, story reduction and story depiction) it was achievable by all the children in our sample and deemed to be an interesting exercise. Part of this success was presumed to be the comforting familiarity of television cartoon stories to this age group.

Individual feedback

Individual feedback in the second lesson was the means by which the BSP elicited its more precise data, which is described in the results section below. In each instance it was clear that the children enjoyed explaining their individual piece of work and that it was this part of the research that gave the children their greatest sense of being valued. Alongside other researchers, the BSP has noted that,

In response to the individual attention of a sympathetic outsider, layers of meaning and explanation began to be revealed. (Michell, 1999, cited in Morgan *et al.*, 2002)

The potential influence of peer pressure is thereby minimized in that other children could easily disparage the value of a treasured story from a particular cultural background.

Data analysed

The data that the BSP has specifically compiled and analysed is material that came out of the second lesson, namely the stories that children identified from their own cultures and traditions and retold to the research team. If they knew Bible stories they were encouraged to start with those, or those from their own religious tradition. If such stories were not known, they could reflect on any other story. For the purposes of research, the BSP team felt it to be of crucial importance that the atmosphere in the lesson was suitable when the children were invited to identify this story from their own religious or cultural tradition. The lessons were prepared in order to maximize imagination and reflection so that such stories would be instantly accessible. Where children were unable to identify a story, a small group was taken to one side and prompted to reflect on stories they knew. Some of the overall results for the two schools are detailed by means of a summary table in Fig. 1.

In both schools all the respondents responded affirmatively that they liked the stories they told. However, in both schools there was a pupil who identified the passion narrative as being a favourite story and who was unable to explain why the death of Jesus made their story a good story. In each case this caused some confusion. The researchers presumed that these children came from a religious culture that spoke positively of the death of Jesus, without as yet communicating the reasons to the child. This would point to the cognitive developmental observation that children at this age do not fully grasp meanings in stories but engage with the feeling aroused from the nurturing environment in which they encountered the story. In the VA school six of the stories featured the Easter story, strongly reflecting the ethos of the school. In both schools, ethical guidelines were followed, with permission being obtained by the institutions for the data to be published in such a way that particular individuals were not identifiable.

Three case studies

The accuracy of the retelling of stories in the VA school was slightly higher (94% as

	Number of children in class	Male/Female	Source of the stories	Accuracy of outline*	Meaning of stories
Faith based school (V.A.)	26	12 female 14 male	22 from Bible (3 retold from research team) 1 from Islamic source 1 from Sikh source 2 from secular sources	24 over 50% accuracy 18 over 80% accuracy 7 had 100% accuracy	90% Personal hermeneutic (i.e 90% children offered meaning that was personal and individual) 10% Received hermeneutic (i.e 10% children offered meaning that was orthodox)
State primary school	21	11 female 10 male	6 from Bible 4 from Islamic sources 2 from Buddhist sources 9 from secular sources	19 over 50% accuracy 14 over 80% accuracy 9 had 100% accuracy	As above

Figure 1. Comparison between stories chosen by children at a faith-based and a state school

opposed to 90%), with more pupils being able to articulate the salient features of the plot.

The state primary school had a similar mix of ethnicity as the VA school, alongside a proportionally wide range of religious backgrounds. However, there was a significantly lower percentage of children telling religious stories in the state primary school (57% as opposed to 92%). Of the 57% who told religious stories, half told stories from the Biblical narrative, whereas of the 92% at the VA school, more than 90% told religious stories from the Biblical narrative. In both schools the generally understood meanings of the stories were often absent. In other words, the hermeneutic offered in the telling by the adult religious version was normally not present.

Story teller Rachel: Noah's ark

This story, detailed in Fig. 2, is an example of a child from a Christian background grasping the essential plot outline of Noah's ark with some less accurate secondary details. When questioned about meaning, the girl was uncertain and said she liked the story because of the animals.

Commenting on the story, Rachel¹ said,

The first picture is where Noah is first out in the garden and then God tells him that he's going to do a flood. Noah has to get two of each animal, one female and one male and so



Figure 3. Noah's Ark by James

Prophet says. They do not talk nonsense'. The girl who told this version also mentioned that she would go to the mosque four times a week after school, which was where she had heard the story.

The hermeneutic that candidly referred to the horror of Noah's ark is often edited from a Sunday school version of the narrative. It would be interesting to know whether a child will value the story of Noah's ark for its colourful but comforting drama of animals and boats or for its stark message of justice and judgement in which only a few are saved. Goldman's research in the early 1960s would have considered Noah's ark to be inappropriate for children of this age, because of their inability to understand the cognitive concepts of justice and judgement, which are foundational to the meaning in context. It could also be said that if 10 year olds are unable to infer their own meanings from the story (though they may reflect the adult meaning), a story of judgement and salvation will not be immediately valued. Maybe the reason why the starker version of Noah's ark was offered as a favourite story is that suggested by Bettelheim (1975) in his explanation for the perpetuation of horrific fairy stories, namely that the dark forces introduced in safety by myths are valued by children at an unconscious level. From the safety of the hospitable space in the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1962) the child can safely be introduced to the terrors of the wider and darker world of adulthood.

Reflection on the data

The observable results from looking at the BSP data show the following.

1. The children in our research sample, aged 9–10 years have little personal understanding of the intended meanings of their favourite stories. They do draw meaning from stories but their hermeneutic is highly individual and reflects their own life experience or their received (but unreflected) personal nurturing environment (see Fig. 5).

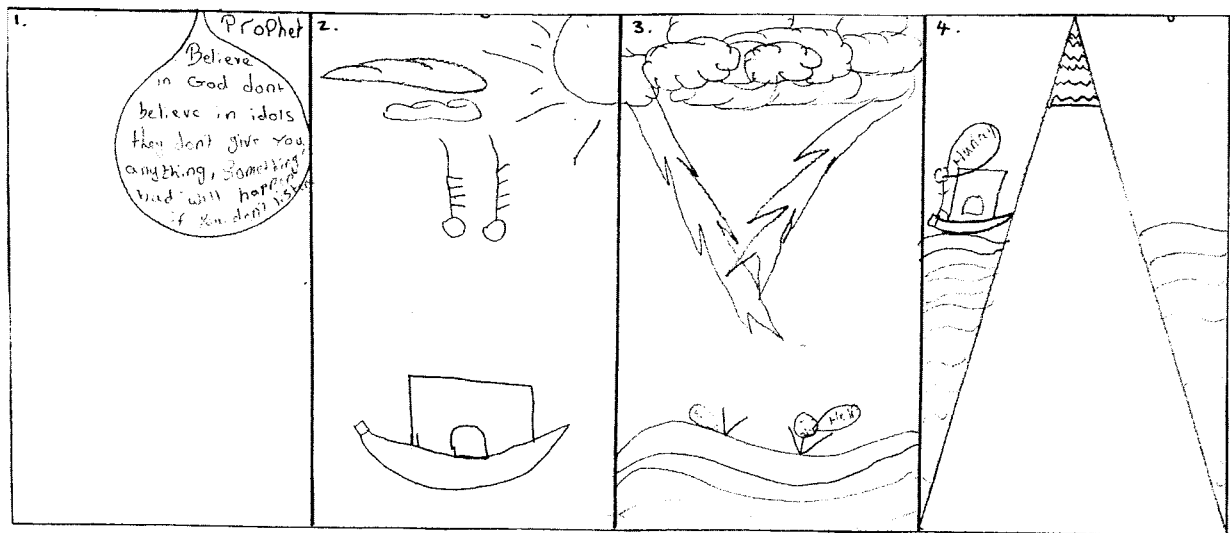


Figure 4. Noah's Ark by Alya

2. Fantasy literature (fairy tales or cartoon stories) will convey meaning as well as religious myths and legends, depending on the faith tradition of the child's home.
3. What seems to be essential for stories to provide personal meaning is the presence of reflective imagination, seen in the ability of the child to engage with another paradigm.

In his similar work entitled *Tomorrow's child*, Ruben Alves (1972) has shown that the practice of imagination is a subversive action, not because it yields concrete acts of defiance (which it may), but because it keeps the present provisional and refuses to absolutize it. Walter Brueggemann (1992) has extended this thought to say that practice of historical imagination maintains the possibilities of a future that is not continuous with the present. He shows, therefore, that the role of Biblical narrative is to evoke newness, 'fresh from the word' (p. 9). Such a thought is far from new and can be traced back as far as 1848 when Bushnell wrote that 'the Bible is a gift to the imagination of a child' (Bushnell, 1848).

It would seem that a child has a greater natural propensity for imagination that can be used to explore new ranges of meaning. This can be applied to religious texts or fantasy literature. For those who work with children, observing their spirituality, this provides both an opportunity and a challenge. It is an opportunity in so far as the child can be seen as a prophet, as the one who leads (Isaiah 11, v6). In these terms, the child might be interpreted to be the one who ushers in a new world and teaches others to look through fresh eyes.

However, it is a challenge if the religious tradition is seen to carry an authority and a meaning that believes it should not be stretched. Clearly the role of prophet is one that is uncomfortable, liminal and challenging, but it is both criticizing and energizing. As Brueggemann says,

The task of prophetic ministry is to hold together criticism and energising, for I should urge that either by itself is not faithful to our best tradition. (p. 14)

A) <i>Voluntary Aided School</i> (26)		B) <i>State Primary School</i> (21)	
22 Bible stories		6 Bible Stories	
1 Moslem story		3 Moslem Stories	
1 Sikh story		3 Sikh Stories	
2 fairy tale/cartoon stories.		9 fairy tale/cartoon stories	
=26		= 21	
Easter story	6	The Three Little Pigs	2
Noah's ark	5	The Buddhists go to War	2
The wise and foolish builder	2	Noah's Ark	2
Adam and Eve	2	Adam and Eve	2
The Kaba	1	A Spider Saves Mohammed	2
Rahab and The Spies.	1	Three Billy Goats Gruff	2
The Birth of the Kaisa	1	The Power Puff Girls	1
Old Testament Battle	1	The Cleaning of Mohammed's Heart	1
Pentecost	1	Little Red Riding Hood	1
Jesus and the Miraculous Catch of fish	1	Joseph and the Multi Coloured Coat	1
The Selfish Girl	1	The Life of Jesus	1
The Good Samaritan	1	Dexter	1
David and Goliath	1	Cinderella	1
Joseph and the Multi-Coloured coat	1	Tom and Jerry	1
Harry Potter goes to Hogwart's	1	The Easter Story	1

Figure 5. Choices of stories by children aged 9–10 in two schools

Applying this within the Christian tradition is clearly complex in that at one level the tradition is called upon to empower the ancient narrative contained in the Bible but on the other hand it must release the prophetic insights of the child to offer new meaning as the child engages with scripture.

In dealing with the former issue (how the tradition is to retell the ancient narrative) the BSP draws on the imaginative insights of Godly play in the way it told stories to children in the first lesson of this research project. This approach can be further complemented by the work of R. and G. Goebbel, who wrote *The Bible: a child's playground* (Goebbel & Goebbel, 1986). Their approach has been to explore why the Bible should be used before asking how it should be used with children. They emphasize the need to help children identify different genres of Bible writing, noting the difference between story, poetry and letters. Such an approach calls for a developmental understanding that identifies when a child is able to make such a classification of genre.

The argument for the Bible to be used more in schools has been made by Kay and Wilkins (1998), who have set out to readjust the inheritance of Goldman, who underestimated pupils' potential for understanding scriptural narrative. They describe the stages through which children pass as they progress to reading fluency and they note the general theories of cognitive development (Piaget, 1929; Vygotsky, 1935; Bruner, 1972) which aid this process. Their argument is

that ‘as a text for children, the Bible offers a wealth of possibilities to teachers of Religious Education’ (p. 68). They recommend the usage of age-appropriate translations of the Bible to facilitate the release of awe and wonder that is more apparent in children. Kay and Wilkins conclude with the provocative suggestion that because of their openness to wonder, ‘children may be better at interpreting the Bible than adults are’ (p. 69). The way in which the Bible can further be used to help children in identifying different genres is discussed by Cox (2001) and Pike (2003). Such work questions the relation between genre recognition and spiritual literacy and seems to suggest that the two are closely connected.

In dealing with the second issue (how the prophetic insights of the child are to be released), it is clear that further work is necessary. Only recently has there been a call for further research that sets out to hear the child’s hermeneutic of scripture. Cox (2000) concludes her work *Using the Bible with children* by saying,

If we give (children) the skills to explore the Bible for themselves, listen respectfully to their insights and encourage them to find personal applications, then we can begin to discover together ... (p. 22)

This process will be resourceful both to the child and to the adult engaging with the child’s perception (Worsley, 2002). In terms of related research, it could confirm the initial findings of the Biblos Project (Copley, 1998), which highlights the significant cultural implications of the Bible for atheistic as well as religious readers.

By releasing the child’s hermeneutic, the BSP hopes to be a means of enabling the Bible to speak for itself rather than being a book with such a high status that it leads to a form of disempowerment for adult readers. Pike (2003) has observed that the high status of the Bible has caused readers to become passive as they abandon their own interpretation in favour of the text’s meaning.

This initial pilot project by the BSP suggests that further research into hearing how children understand the Bible would be a valuable future inquiry. It could identify the classification of children’s texts of terror (Abraham and Issac, Genesis 22), children’s texts of comfort (David in the Lion’s Den, David 6), children’s texts of confusion (Noah’s Ark, Genesis 6–9) and children’s texts of security (David and Goliath, 1 Samuel 17).

Such research could further denote the influence of culture. For example, it could show whether a post-9/11 child in America hearing the story of David and Goliath would identify themselves and their American culture as being David facing the Goliath of international terrorism and so stir up further racial tribalism? Would a British fundamentalist Christian child, hearing the story of David in the Lion’s Den identify themselves as holding the true faith in a postmodern culture of pluralism? If the Bible is to be further used with children (as the author firmly hopes), a new age needs further information if it is to do so with educational integrity and efficiency. Such research will further indicate the value (or otherwise) of the role of the Church-aided school in contributing to the use of scripture in developing the Christian tradition.

Notes on contributor

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Notes

- 1 All children's names have been changed.

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