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Reflections on the development and implementation of the Camp Iodiseca Biblical day camp

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REFLECTIONS ON THE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

OF THE CAMP IODISECA BIBLICAL DAY CAMP

A Project

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Designation

University Honors

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This Study by: Sara Busch

Entitled: Reflections on the development and implementation of the Camp Iodiseca Biblical day camp

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Purpose

Majoring in elementary education, I have spent time in classrooms through field experiences, volunteer activities, and tutoring opportunities. I have learned about and seen teachers implement lessons and curriculum, and I even had the opportunity to lead a few of my own lessons. In classes, I have written collections of lessons that made up thematic units. Yet I never had the opportunity to develop and implement a curriculum unit. I did not know if my plans would actually work with a group of students, nor did I know if the students would meet the lesson goals. The purpose of this project was to give me the opportunity to engage in a reflective study of the curriculum that I designed and implemented for a traveling day camp program through Camp Iodiseca's, a Christian summer camp for children ages three through eighteen. I was particularly interested in identifying instructional practices that lead to students' understanding and application of specific Biblical principles.

Review of Literature

Just as with any curriculum design, before designing goals and activities in a Christian curriculum, important questions must be answered such as, "What is Christian education, and what is the goal of Christian education?" Most Christian scholars agree that Christian education consists of more than just teaching scripture and stories, but also includes a life application component. Israel Galindo (1998), Christian education author and professor, draws many parallels between traditional schooling and Christian education. In addition, he describes differences found in the context of a faith community, content about the person of Jesus Christ, a relational approach, outcome of a relationship, and relational methods. Christian education is

1

similar to any educational program, except that it has the specific goal of helping students increase their faith in Jesus Christ (Peters, 1997; Schultz & Schultz, 2004).

Theorists differ with their ideas about how faith develops in young children. Like secular education, Christian educators study development theories by Piaget, Erikson, and Kohlberg, but they also study the faith development models by Fowler, Westerhoff, and Gillespie (Peters, 1997). Dr. James Fowler (1981, 1991), a researcher who examined the concept of faith, defined faith as the way one gives meaning to life. Influenced by Erikson and Piaget, Fowler identified stages of faith development. He emphasized teaching about Jesus and Bible characters as examples of how God interacts with people. Typically, young children between ages two and seven are in his first stage of intuitive-projective faith during which children connect God to primary caregivers and should be provided with a rich background of Bible stories. Fowler's six stages of faith are frequently criticized for being too cognitive and ignoring trust as being part of faith (Peters, 1997).

John H. Westerhoff III (1976) studied Christian education for children and concluded that Bible content is overemphasized, while ignoring the experienced faith. He defined faith as behaviors: knowing, being, and willing; he strongly emphasized the importance of the community of believers. According to Westerhoff, young children are in a stage termed "experienced faith," during which children need to feel loved and cared for so they experience what it means to be Christians from the Christians around them. Just as Westerhoff viewed faith as experience, V. Bailey Gillespie (1988) identified seven faith experiences that correspond with stages of life. Young children are in the "borrowed faith" situation because they "borrow" attitudes from those around them. As a result, Christian education should focus on feelings

2

rather than content. These different faith developmental theories provide the background for Christian education goals and methods.

Christian educators support many of the same teaching methods promoted by secular educators. Scholars do not support rote memorization; rather, they promote active learning, interactive learning, critical thinking questions, storytelling, and small groups (Galindo, 1998; Schultz & Schultz, 2004). Much of the research supporting these methods has actually been conducted in secular settings.

Research questions

To carry out this project, I identified goals, selected themes, developed lesson plans, implemented the plans, assessed students' performance, and reflected on my findings. In the process, I answered the following questions:

- ❑ Could students recall important details from the stories we read?
- ❑ Were students able to infer main ideas from Biblical stories?
- ❑ Could students connect the Biblical principles to their own lives?
- ❑ How did specific activities and instructional strategies aid student comprehension?

Methods

Serving as Program Coordinator of a traveling day camp at Camp Iodiseca for children ages three through twelve, I worked with the Program Director in Spring 2004 to select Biblical day camp themes. First, I identified daily program goals and objectives. Then, I planned the schedule, assessment procedure, and activities that corresponded with the theme for one five-day week. In May 2004, I completed my unit plans, met with other program staff, and prepared day

3

camp information packets for the staff members. Along with the program staff, I conducted staff training for two weeks, during which I led sessions on how to implement the curriculum for the traveling day camp.

Several staff members and I traveled throughout eastern Iowa leading day camp in a different town each week. Every site received the same curriculum unit, but the staff members working with me were different. Each staff member led a group consisting of eight to twenty children who were approximately the same age. We led songs, games, stories, arts projects, and other small and large group activities revolving around our program goals.

To evaluate the program, I reflected on the program each week and asked staff and community members to complete evaluations of the program. To examine the effectiveness of the curriculum, I collected data during my small group sessions each day. I examined my students' daily pictures and writings, their contributions during group discussion, a comprehension survey conducted at the end of the week, and other work samples.

By the end of the summer, I had collected data from six weeks (or trials) of the curriculum. I randomly chose one week to be the case study of my curriculum evaluation. I reviewed drawings and daily journals, taped group discussions, made anecdotal notes, and rated students' comprehension on a rating scale. When I returned to the University of Northern Iowa, I sorted through the artifacts and listened to the taped discussions. Using Likert scales, I rated five students' overall comprehension based on the evidence found in the tapes and artifacts. Use of these scales enabled me to make qualitative comparisons between students. A rating of five indicated that the student "highly" met the goal, and a rating of one indicated that the student had "strongly not" met the goal. Specifically, I rated students' ability to recall important story details, identify Biblical principles from the story, and connect the story to their own life. Each

day a new story was taught that emphasized a new Biblical theme, so I evaluated each day separately. I selected the five students because they were the only five-year-olds in my group of twelve four- through seven-year-olds.

I am aware of the limitations of my small sample size. I also recognize the subjective nature of Likert scales, but this met the needs of the purpose of my project. These scales gave me a broad idea of the strengths and weaknesses of my students' comprehension levels and of my teaching methods.

Results

Demographics

My group of twelve students ranged from ages four to seven with seven girls and five boys (Table 1). They all lived in or near the very small rural community where the day camp was held. The day camp was held in the middle of the summer from 9 a.m. until 3 p.m. Parents brought their children to and from the day camp, so they were involved in the process. Two sets of brothers and sisters were in my group, and most of the students already knew each other.

I specifically examined the comprehension of the five-year-olds. There were three boys and two girls in the five-year-old group. The prior Biblical background of these five students varied. Three students had a high degree of previous exposure to Biblical teachings through experiences at home and church. This suggests that these students may have had prior knowledge of the stories we discussed. One student had a medium degree Biblical background; he attended church sporadically and had not heard many of the stories. One student with little Biblical background had low church attendance and knew little about the stories. Regardless of

their different background knowledge, they all participated in similar activities involving Biblical stories, principles, and application.

To answer the project research questions, I rated students' achievement in three areas: recall, main point inference, and application. When trying to determine the depth of story details students could recall, I listened to taped conversations containing recall questions and retellings. I also examined their beginning, middle, and end drawings. Using their comments, drawings, and retellings, I rated their recall of important details based on a Likert scale with the rating five being "strongly agree" and one being "strongly disagree." Next, I examined students' ability to infer the main Biblical point from the story. I listened to tapes of high-level thinking discussions and examined student drawings of "the most important thing the Bible story is telling us." Using the Likert scale, I gave students with high understanding of the main idea a five rating and students with little understanding a one rating. Finally, I analyzed student comments during literature discussions, responses during perspective-taking exercises, and drawings about people or situations in their lives that exemplified the theme. Using the Likert scale, I rated students' applications based on their responses, comments, and drawings.

Research Question 1: Could students recall important details from the stories we read?

Before students could find themes and connections to the stories, they had to know basic details of the story. As a result, a key goal for students was the ability to recall details. Overall, students were able to recall stories very well. Although the students' mean recall rating was 4.7, the student with the highest recall Likert rating received a 4.9 weekly average while the lowest recall weekly average rating was 4.0. As indicated in Table 2, not only did the ratings vary among students, but they also varied each day. The easiest stories for students to comprehend

were Monday's creation story and Thursday's empty tomb story. Interpretation of Table 3 indicates that there was little difference in detail recall by males and females. Students' recall abilities also did not seem to differ much by church background (Table 4). The student with medium church background had the lowest recall rating with a 4.0 weekly recall average, and the student with the least church background had one of the highest recall rating with a 4.8 weekly recall average.

Research Question 2: Were students able to infer main ideas from Biblical stories?

By participating in a number of comprehension activities, students were able to infer each story's main theme. Most students identified the Biblical principles successfully. As shown in Table 2, their weekly averages ranged from 2.5 to 4.0 with a mean of 3.5. The students' identification of the principles varied according to the day of the week. Each day contained a different story, and students identified Thursday's principle less well than Monday's principle. Female students scored slightly higher in Biblical principle identification ratings (See Appendix, Table 3). Surprisingly, the student with low church background better identified the principles than the students with high background knowledge. In general, the students met this goal.

Research Question 3: Could students connect the Biblical principles to their own lives?

After listening to and participating in Bible stories, recalling the main points of the story, and inferring the Biblical principle in the story, students were asked to connect the message or story to their own lives. Their connections, which frequently dealt with the families, community, or friends, were usually simple connections between themselves and the story, sometimes more complex connections between the theme and themselves. However, connections were usually

present although students did not rate as high as their ability to identify principles or recall details. Table 2 provides students' ratings. The ratings ranged between 2.3 and 4.0 with a mean of 3.2. Thursday's connections scored particularly low. Male students scored slightly better than the females with 3.3 compared to 3.0, respectively. The student with medium church background scored lower than the students with high or low church backgrounds.

Research Question 4: How did specific activity and instructional strategies aid student comprehension?

The activities were integrated across curricular areas. Literature was most commonly used to help students identify principles and connections. After we had discussed the Bible story and theme of the day, I read secular stories aloud, and students identified connections between the character's actions and our Biblical theme. For example, after reading *No, David* (Shannon, 1998), students connected a loving, forgiving parent with Jesus' role in the Zacchaeus story. Visual arts were especially useful in emphasizing story details, making connections, and assessing growth. The students daily drew pictures that reinforced the story details or main idea. After learning about Jesus' death and resurrection, students created "beginning, middle, end" drawings to show the sequence of the story. After learning how Jesus took care of the disciples, students drew pictures of people who take care of them. Because these pictures were independently drawn, they served as an assessment tool. Movement activities worked towards a variety of team building, recall, principle identification, and connection goals. Students played a variety of movement games that helped them dramatize or sequence the stories. Students also participated in scavenger hunts and other active learning activities that emphasized connections between their lives and the stories. Drama focused on story detail recall, as did music activities.

After reading the Bible story each day, students dramatized the story, which helped them sequence the details. Similarly, students learned songs that described important details from the stories. Both drama and music helped students pick out important story details.

Each day a variety of activities were used to meet the different goals. Table 5 provides an overview of daily themes and activities. For example, on Tuesday, students heard the story of Jesus calming the storm to support the theme "Jesus takes care of us." To introduce Tuesday's story concepts, students predicted if objects would sink or float in a large container of water and discussed why boats float or sink. To help students make connections to the story, we discussed fears we had and why the disciples may have feared a storm. After reading the story, we discussed why the disciples were afraid and why they had no need to fear. Then, to connect the theme to their lives, students brainstormed a list of people who take care of them and drew pictures of these people on a mural. Students also used visual arts to make paper plate boats, and they sang a song "Peter rowed the boat" that established story details. To better understand the sequence and details of the story, students dramatized the story with one student playing the part of Jesus calming the stormy waters while the others were the scared disciples. I then asked students to draw pictures of the story to assess their understanding of the details. Finally, we read the story *Hungry Harry* (Partis, 2000), and students made connections between Harry's livelihood and gifts God provides for us. They also thought of ways that God provides for them. Through these various activities, students learned story details, inferred the theme, and made personal connections and applications. Each day followed a similar pattern.

Although I tried to provide a variety of active learning experiences to meet the objectives, I found that my activities were not balanced across the objectives. Throughout the week, most of the activities were recall activities. Not surprisingly, the data also shows that, in general,

students' recall ratings were the highest. Following the same pattern, the fewest activities focused on making connections, and students' connection ratings were the lowest. Principle identification activities scored in the middle. Due to the lack of balance between activities and objectives, students did not meet the goals equally. Students met the goals which activities reinforced.

Discussion

When I examined the data, I was not surprised to find that students could recall stories easier than make personal connections. A variety of factors may have contributed to this trend. First, recall, inference, and connection require different amounts of critical thinking. Recall is a lower level thinking skill and falls within the knowledge category of Bloom's (1956) taxonomy. However, making connections and inferring the main idea require higher level thinking and may be more difficult for students, especially if my activities were not guiding students towards critical thinking. When comparing my objectives and activities, I again found that many of my activities worked toward the retelling objective, but few of my activities helped students reach the life connection objective. As a result, story detail recall may have been easier for students.

Not only were students able to meet some goals better than others, but also there were variations in students' overall comprehension level of the different stories. Many factors may have contributed to these differences. For example, some of the stories were easier to understand than others. For example, the creation story is very straightforward: God made everything. On the other hand, the story about Zacchaeus, the dishonest tax collector who Jesus forgave, may have been more difficult because students had to understand many new concepts. First, students needed to understand the taxation system so that they could understand the role of a tax collector

in ancient Jericho. Then, they had to make the distinction between an honest and dishonest tax collector in order to understand the significance of Jesus' forgiveness. The impact of the story choice may also explain the differences in comprehension levels throughout the week. Some students achieved high rankings in all three areas on one day, but they may have received high rankings in only one area the next day.

Individual factors may have impacted student comprehension, although some did not affect comprehension as I predicted they might. Neither gender nor age seemed to influence comprehension. Students' literary levels may have influenced their comprehension and their ability to show their comprehension through pictures or writing. I had thought background experience might have played a significant role in comprehension ability. Nevertheless, the amount of church background did not appear to strongly influence the comprehension levels of students. This could be attributed to the small sample size. It may also be possible that church background simply did not relate strongly to the ability to comprehend stories. In fact, the student with the least amount of church background knowledge had one of the best comprehension scores. If church background does not correlate with Bible story comprehension ability, it brings into question the effectiveness of the curriculum taught in churches. Another possibility may be that students did not retain what they learned through church curriculums.

In summary, due to the different levels of reasoning required and lack of balanced activity alignment to objectives, students recalled story details easier than they made inferences about the theme or life connections. Students not only met goals to different degrees, but also they did not comprehend each of the different stories equally. The story choice, lack of balanced alignment between activities and objectives, and individual student factors may have influenced student comprehension of individual stories.

Conclusions

During this project, I struggled with many aspects of curriculum design and implementation. However, I learned from these struggles and look forward to applying my ideas to future projects. My original intent with this project was to create a curriculum that was fun and interactive but also motivating and engaging so that students would enjoy learning about God's love for them. However, I had difficulty identifying student goals during the initial stages of curriculum writing. I knew I needed to have goals, but I was so overwhelmed with identifying instructional strategies, planning engaging activities, defining assessment strategies, and creating motivational materials that my curriculum had little focus or direction in the initial stages. I learned that there is an organization to curriculum design. First, goals should be set and prioritized. Activities, instructional strategies, and assessment pieces will likely be ineffective if they are not focused on the proper goal.

My struggle to define clear goals is evident in the lack of alignment between activities and goals. My results show that my activities did not align evenly with my objectives. However, during the summer, I did not notice this. I only realized it when I reexamined the activities and objectives after the session. I learned that the greater number of activities were in the retelling area, while I should have had more activities guiding students to connect the stories to their lives. The higher level thinking skills required by the connection between story and reality required guidance from me, and my activities did not optimally promote those connections. I am not alone in my lack of alignment. According to Thom & Joani Schultz (2004), authors of *Why Nobody Learns Much of Anything at Church*, most Christian curriculums include fill-in-the-blank and word scramble workbook activities that do not encourage

application goals. These activities do not help students apply the truths to their lives. Instead, curriculum should encourage people to ask questions, think, and connect ideas to their lives.

Like many authors or writers, I was not focused on balanced alignment while planning activities, but unlike many, I was concerned with active learning opportunities. A study of churches in the United States found that interactive learning had a significant impact on faith, but less than a quarter of youth reported experiencing this style of learning (Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Andress, 1995). Students, especially young children, learn best from active learning experiences, and hands-on activities are particularly crucial in a day camp setting. As part of the curriculum, I designed many engaging activities for students; however, these activities did not optimally guide students to meet all the goals. If I were to teach this curriculum again, I would include more life connections activities. For example, I would use drama as a way for students to connect with the story. Instead of having students reenact the story (a retelling activity), I would have them finish incomplete scenarios in which they would have to make choices about issues from the story. The arts are a powerful tool for building some of the higher level thinking skills such as connections between a story and self. I used literature most often to help students make real life connections. In the future, I plan to continue to use literature to build critical thinking skills, but I would also like to incorporate more of the other arts as well.

My next struggle in designing curriculum was identifying assessment strategies. Once I decided what I wanted students to know and how I would help them learn it, I found it very difficult to determine if students achieved these goals particularly regarding students' comprehension levels. Eventually, I found that informal teacher assessment of discussions provided the most complete picture of student learning available. I developed a very simple

rubric that I used while teaching to record completion of goals (Figure 1). In the future, I would like to expand such a rubric to indicate students' progress in other behaviors.

Even though I created the rubric, taped discussions, collected student work samples, and made informal observations as assessments, I had limited assessment data at the end of the summer. As a result, I struggled with the uncertainty of not knowing how much students actually understood. Part of this uncertainty was caused by incomplete preassessment data. Because I did not have a detailed idea of students' prior knowledge and literary levels, I had little idea how much they grew during the week. In future classrooms, I would first expand and better record data from preassessments. Then, I would increase what I assess informally. During day camp, I assessed students' discussion contributions and drawings. In the future, I could also examine students' journal writings, think-pair-share contributions, attitudes, and prior knowledge. Expanding the assessment would increase the amount of data available for decisions making.

Along with deciding what to assess, I learned that methods of record keeping were very important. Having information that was useful and easy to understand was crucial, but I also needed the data in an accessible format. I liked using the rubric method to informally assess students' comprehension because it was a simple, quick way to record students' comprehension levels. In the future, I would like to take more anecdotal notes. The writing would take longer, but I would have a better description of the students' behaviors than I would with a checklist. If time allowed, interviewing students would give a more complete picture of what students knew. Analyzing students' work may be a quicker, but effective, alternative.

My summer experiences and reflections taught me other lessons about teaching. First, supportive colleagues have a bigger impact on teaching than I ever imagined. I led six weeks of

day camp with a different staff each week. The differences in my attitude and enthusiasm varied incredibly among the weeks based upon attitudes of the staff members working with me. Likewise, I have always prided myself on being very organized, but I soon learned that when I am responsible for so many people and activities, it is difficult to stay organized. As a teacher, I will have to have organizational systems in place from the start because it is difficult to start those routines once the project begins.

Overall, the summer experiences were insightful and encouraging. I learned a great deal about my teaching, students, and student learning. At the same time, I also felt encouraged to continue in the education program and experience teaching in an actual classroom. The goal of my project was to put my education at the University of Northern Iowa into practice in a safe environment, and I believe my goal was accomplished. I had the opportunity to design curriculum, implement, and evaluate it, and both my students and I learned a great deal.

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Table 1. Demographics

Student	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Biblical background	Number of missed days
G.	4	Female	Caucasian	Medium	0
T.	4	Male	Caucasian	Little	2
* C.	5	Male	Caucasian	High	0
* LV.	5	Male	Caucasian	High	0
* LX.	5	Female	Caucasian	High	0
* P.	5	Female	Caucasian	Little	0
* S.	5	Male	Caucasian	Medium	1
E.	6	Female	Caucasian	Medium	1
H.	6	Female	Caucasian	Little	2
LE.	7	Female	Caucasian	High	0
MS.	7	Male	Caucasian	Little	0
MR.	7	Female	Caucasian	Medium	0

* Case Study Participants

Table 2. Behaviors vs. days

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Weekly average
Recall important story details	5.0	4.6	4.0	5.0	**4.7**
Identify Biblical principle	4.2	4.0	3.2	2.5	**3.5**
Connect story to life	3.2	4.0	3.4	2.0	**3.2**

Table 3. Behaviors vs. gender

	Female	Male
Recall important story details	4.5	4.6
Identify Biblical principle	3.8	3.3
Connect story to life	3.0	3.3

Table 4. Behaviors vs. church background

	High	Medium	Low
Recall important story details	4.7	4.0	7.8
Identify Biblical principle	3.6	2.5	4.0
Connect story to life	3.3	2.2	3.3

Table 5. Activities by objectives per day

	Team building / introductory	Recall	Identify principle	Connection
Monday	Giant board game	Read the Bible story aloud Played "God's party" Played "Duck, duck, creation" Play "Hippo song"	Discussed the Bible story Illustrated creation book	Identified things made by God (preassessment) Participated in a creation scavenger hunt
Tuesday	Played the question game	Predicted objects that sink or float (preassessment) Read story aloud Made paper plate boats and sang "Peter rowed the boat " Dramatized story Played storms and boats	Discussed the Bible story Read and discussed *Hungry Harry* Drew pictures of the main point of the story	Played the question game (described fears) Draw people who take care of tem on a boat mural Read and discussed *Hungry Harry*
Wednesday	Played the penny reenactment	Played the penny reenactment Read Bible story Drew comic strips of the story Played "Zacchaeus Moves" Sang "Zacchaeus song"	Discussed the Bible story theme Read *No, David* and discussed forgiveness and love	Read *No, David* and discussed people who love and forgive
Thursday	Counted crosses in the sanctuary (preassessment)	Read story Dramatized the story Sang "He hung upon a cross" Made beginning, middle, end drawings	Discussed the story theme Counted crosses (preassessment) LIFE cut out Read *Three Trees* and discussed God's plan for our lives	Read *Three Trees* and discussed God's plan for our lives

Figure 1. Daily assessment rubric

The student...

- ❑ Retold at least three major details from the story
- ❑ Identify the theme through discussions or drawings (not as a prompted question such as "What did we learn today?")
- ❑ Made a connection with his or her life

17

To accompany my paper, I also created a portfolio of my project. The portfolio included...

- Overview of project containing details about the traveling day camp program, project purpose, day camp coordinator job description, research questions, and goals
- Timeline describing steps in the project
- Unit and lesson plans
- Examples of assessment pieces
- Excerpts form the reflection journal I kept throughout the project
- Manual that I created for future day camp coordinators at Camp Iodiseca