

Article

Action Possibilities Enhancing the Spiritual Wellbeing of Young Children: Applying Affordance Theory to the Godly Play Room

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Abstract: Godly Play is an approach to religious education for young children between the ages of three and eight. The Godly Play room, modelled on Montessori's prepared environment, provides opportunities for young children to respond to Sacred stories, Parables and Liturgical actions presented by the Storyteller through art using any of the materials available to them. However, there is a paucity of research into how different spatial affordances may enhance opportunities for spiritual development in the Godly Play room. This article examines the Godly Play room through the lens of affordance theory. It applies elements of the notion of affordances to three documented anecdotes of Godly Play storytellers to show particular action possibilities enhance opportunities for spiritual development and wellbeing. The analysis highlights the importance of the Storyteller's guidance, the readily accessible materials, and the dedicated space in which Godly Play is undertaken.

Keywords: Godly Play; religious education; affordance theory; Montessori; spirituality; spiritual wellbeing; children's agency; Storyteller/mentor; early childhood education



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1. Introduction

Godly Play is an approach to religious education with young children in Christian contexts. Devised by Jerome W. Berryman, it is influenced by the work of Maria Montessori, and extended the project of Sofia Cavalletti and Gianni Gobbi, known as the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. Initially, Berryman sought to devise a program of theological play intended for terminally ill young children in hospital settings to help them creatively address ultimate human limits, such as aloneness, death and the need to create meaning (Berryman 1985). However, during his time at Pines Presbyterian church, and as the Canon Educator at Christ Church Cathedral in Houston, Berryman further adapted his approach for use in Sunday school settings. Here, he advocated for a dedicated space, modelled on Montessori's prepared environment, in which children would learn to use the Christian language system by being surrounded with two- and three- dimensional materials, which they would manipulate under the guidance of a mentor, the Storyteller. The approach became known as Godly Play, and the dedicated space in which Godly Play occurs is known as the Godly Play room. It is a carefully prepared environment, equipped with all of the materials necessary to present the key Sacred stories, Parables and Liturgical actions of the Christian tradition (Berryman 2009).

The Godly Play room, modelled on Montessori's prepared environment, is the focus of this article. The Godly Play method has been well documented as a process that supports the spiritual wellbeing of children (Berryman 2009, 2013a; Hyde 2010; Minor and Campbell 2016). However, understandings about how the Godly Play room supports children's learning and engagement are limited, with little research having been conducted into how different spatial affordances may enhance opportunities for spiritual development and wellbeing.

As an initial exploration, this article examines the Godly Play room through the lens of affordance theory. It applies elements of the taxonomy of affordances developed by Young et al. (2020) to three documented anecdotes of Godly Play storytellers to show the particular

action possibilities enhance opportunities for spiritual development and wellbeing. Based on this initial application, some important points for the pedagogical practice of the Godly Play method are briefly noted and discussed.

2. Conceptual Framing

2.1. Spirituality and Spiritual Wellbeing

The concepts of spirituality and spiritual wellbeing have received much attention in research and scholarly writing. Spirituality is described in terms of attributes and characteristics, rather than being neatly defined. For instance, [Rossiter \(2010\)](#) understands spirituality as involving moral sensitivity, human values and a personal search for meaning. [Eaude \(2014\)](#) argues that spirituality involves an appreciation of the wonder and beauty in nature, while [Pargement \(2007\)](#) maintains that spirituality involves a relationship with the Sacred. [Adams \(2009\)](#) and [Sagberg \(2008\)](#) assert that spirituality involves a sense of mystery and transcendence.

Much of the contemporary literature understands spirituality to be concerned with a person's sense of connectedness, or relationship with Self, Others, the World, and God ([Adams et al. 2008](#); [de Souza 2016](#); [Hyde 2008](#)). [Hay and Nye \(2006\)](#) refer to this as 'relational consciousness', whereby spirituality is recognized by a distinctive property of cognitive activity complex enough to be termed as consciousness, and confined to a broadly relational inter- and intra-personal domain. Out of such relational consciousness can arise meaningful aesthetic experience, individual and traditional responses to mystery and being, as well as mystical and moral perception.

Further, spirituality is understood to be ontological, innate to all human beings ([Hart 2003](#); [Hyde 2008](#)). [Groome \(1998\)](#) maintains that, rather than understanding people as human beings who have spiritual experiences, it is more helpful and accurate to think of people as spiritual beings who have human experiences. Adding weight to this, and from a neurological perspective, studies confirm that the architecture of the human brain has evolved over time with features that specifically address spiritual aspects of life. [Ramachandran and Blakeslee \(1998\)](#) argue that the temporal lobes have evolved to contain neural machinery explicitly concerned with the spiritual. [Zohar and Marshall \(2000\)](#) coined this the 'God spot' or 'God module'. [Newberg et al. \(2001\)](#) describe four association areas of the brain that have evolved, collectively contributing to a person's ability to address spiritual aspects of life.

There is agreement among scholars that spirituality, as a fundamental component of all human beings, emerges in childhood ([Adams et al. 2008](#); [Bryant et al. 2020](#); [Champagne 2003](#); [Mata-McMahon et al. 2020](#); [McCreery 1996](#)). Further, [Hay and Nye \(2006\)](#) argue that it is possible to identify a child's personal 'signature', dependent upon the uniquely different contours of each child's personal psychology. Therefore, there is a need to listen carefully to children—to discern their personal signatures—in order to understand their spirituality.

In terms of spiritual development and wellbeing, an important element of Berryman's Godly Play process concerns existential issues, or limits. For [Berryman \(2009\)](#), children need to learn the art of using religious language to enable them to play at the edges of their knowing and being to creatively address the existential issues in their lives. Such existential issues emanate from psychotherapy, and in particular from [Yalom \(1980\)](#). They comprise death, freedom, isolation and the need to create meaning. Berryman argues that although children encounter them in ways different to adults, these issues remain real for children. Hence, there is a need for children to be able to confront and address these issues. The addressing of existential issues is important in terms of spiritual wellbeing. Writers including [Adams \(2009\)](#) and [Eaude \(2022\)](#) highlight that spiritual wellbeing is more than simply being concerned with children feeling happy and good about themselves. Children experience sadness, loss, and aloneness in life. This is a part of their reality. The role of the adult is not to protect children from these issues, in which, albeit unintentionally, spiritual wellbeing is hindered. Adults who rather enable children to approach sadness and

difficulty in life, as well as allowing them to explore and ask about difficult and complex issues, are in fact encouraging children to attend to their spiritual wellbeing.

One way in which children address these issues is through play with the various materials in the Godly Play room that comprise Sacred stories, Parables, and Liturgical actions. Berryman refers to these materials as the game pieces. Through manipulating these game pieces under the guidance of the adult mentor, children learn to use the religious language associated with the materials, and can thus draw on this language to confront and address existential limits, and thus attend to their spiritual development and wellbeing.

2.2. Montessori's Prepared Environment

The Godly Play room is modelled on Montessori's prepared environment for child-centered learning in which motivated action develops as the result of such an environment for learning (Montessori [1946] 1989). The prepared environment includes accessible furniture for children, a variety of workspaces, materials supporting the growth of the senses and the foundations of the language of mathematics, as well as other materials that are displayed for children's free choice of activity. These materials, or objects, must be user (child) friendly. The materials must be suitable for, and easily handled by, the child (Nuti and Filippa 2020). For Montessori, motor action is central to the learning process, and the prepared environment must encourage such motor action. For, "when objects are made for children, in proportion to their height, and they can use them just as adults would, children's characters seem to change, they become calm and content" (Montessori [1948] 2013b, p. 95).

A number of key elements underpin Montessori's prepared environment. Firstly, it enables children to develop independence and make choices for themselves (Morrison 2008). There is an emphasis on repetition and deep exploration through the structure of the classroom. The learner is able to "make assumptions and rationalizations, [determining] the truth and value of these things by navigating a structured environment" (Kingsley Montessori School 2018). There is an emphasis on functionality—real objects are used in preference to replications wherever possible. There are times for individualized and social based exploration, where work is introduced according to readiness rather than chronological age, and where mixed age groups provide opportunities for meaningful interactions (Morrison 2008). Encounters with the natural world outside of the classroom are also important since learners are encouraged to experience and interpret natural phenomena (Kingsley Montessori School 2018). The role of the teacher is to guide the children, but not to be the obstacle that comes between the child and the child's experience (Montessori [1949] 2013a). The teacher encourages, observes, prepares and introduces materials based on observation, and respects the child and their work (Morrison 2008). The culmination of these principles results in an intellectual environment in which learners develop their own intellect and personalities.

The Montessori prepared environment is constructed according to the development needs of the child. The period of developmental of most significance here is from birth to six years of age. It is known as 'the absorbent mind', so called because during this period the child absorbs unconsciously from the environment simply by living it. The child "makes its own 'mental flesh' by using the things that are in his environment . . . Whatever is in his environment comes to be part of his mind: habits, customs, religion" (Montessori [1949] 2013a, pp. 35–36). During the absorbent mind there are times in which children display intense interest in a particular activity or aspect of the environment. These are known as 'sensitive periods' for learning (Montessori [1917] 2010). Of relevance for this article is that the sensitive period for religion occurs during the absorbent mind (Montessori [1965] 2017a). It is therefore essential that the environment is prepared in accordance with the "Laws of Sensitive Periods and the Absorbent Mind" (p. 80) and that those teaching children adapt their whole approaches to the child in accordance with these.

Within Montessori's prepared environment the child learns through motor action. Montessori [1949] (Montessori [1949] 2013a) maintains that "the likelihood of keeping a

child's attention and interest does not depend so much on the 'quality' contained in things as it does on the *action possibilities* that these things offer" (p. 181). It is not the object itself (its quality) that results in the child's learning. Rather, it is the actions that the object encourages, or the action that it affords which results in learning (Nutti and Filippa 2020).

Montessori's prepared environment is an essential feature of Montessori schools, but perhaps what is not quite so well known is that Montessori applied her philosophy to the spiritual and religious development of children. She advocated for a prepared environment—an "atrium" or "Children's Church" (Montessori [1965] 2017a, p. 45) directed towards "initiating children into the true life of the Church" (p. 46). Similar to Montessori's prepared environment, these spaces would be equipped with miniature models of furniture and items found in the Church. Children would then handle these objects, name them and action them appropriately, and "with a special dignity" (Montessori [1965] 2017b, p. 216). When asked why there needed to be a specially prepared place, and why not simply take children into the Church, Montessori answered by saying:

... in the *church* the children would not be able to carry out all these actions so slowly, so patiently, so exactly, so often and with such attention, as they would in a room set apart, and so furnished that they could carry out these actions with great deliberation. (Montessori [1965] 2017b, p. 208)

This response reflects a number of key elements discussed above—freedom, repetition and deep exploration.

In compiling Montessori's biography, Kramer (1977) notes that Montessori's school in Barcelona had established an atrium, also referred to as the children's chapel, and that religious education in the Montessori method was included as a part of the training course offered in Milan in 1926 (p. 284). In her book *The Mass Explained to Children*, Montessori [1933] (Montessori [1933] 2015) notes that in the Barcelona school, children also harvested the wheat and "took part in making the hosts and wine ... [for] those who are imbued with faith show a great delicacy of love in all their actions" (p. 33). In *The Child in the Church* (edited by her close friend and assistant, E.M. Standing), Montessori [1965] (Montessori [1965] 2017a, Montessori [1965] 2017b) outlines further the way in which she applies her method to the spiritual and religious development of children.

The Godly Play Room

Modelled on Montessori's prepared environment, the Godly Play room is equipped with materials representing key elements of the Christian tradition—Sacred stories, Parables, and Liturgical actions. These objects are purposefully positioned so that children can easily access them. The various shelves, tables, chairs and so forth, are in proportion to the children's height. For if children are to act on objects, and if objects are to move children to action, they must be proportionate to the children's hands and placed at a child-friendly height. Objects that "are too large in size do not encourage grasping and so will not be grasped" (Nutti and Filippa 2020, p. 247).

Having entered the Godly Play room, children form a circle where the adult Storyteller (the mentor) presents the lesson using two- and three- dimensional materials (objects). The lesson could comprise a Sacred story (such as the Noah and the Flood), a Parable (such as the Mustard Seed) or a Liturgical action (such as Holy Communion). Together the Storyteller and children then wonder about the story's meaning. There follows an opportunity for children to respond through artwork, or they may choose to work with any of the other sets of story material. The aim is to address and work through their existential issues. When working with these materials, it is the actions these objects encourage—the action possibilities that these things offer—that result in meaning being made by the child. While neither Montessori or Berryman used the term 'affordances', the idea that a child's attention and interest depends not so much on the 'quality' contained in materials themselves but on the action possibilities that various objects present, reflects closely the concept of affordances that has been attributed to James Gibson.

2.3. Affordance Theory

Emanating from Gibson's (2015) ecological approach to perception, affordances refer to what the environment presents to an individual. A person's perceptual experiences include the awareness of the structure of objects and events in the environment, as well as their functional significance. The affordances present in a given environment are "its *functionally significant* properties considered in relation to an individual" (Heft 1988, p. 29). An object such as a table has a particular structure that enables it to be used for sitting at, placing object on, and so forth. This is its form. However, its functional significance for a child might render it to be "climb-on-able", "hide-behind-able", or perhaps "shelter-able". The table, can thus be described in this functional manner by referring to the type of activities—action possibilities—it permits or affords the child. Affordances within the environment exist irrespective of whether or not they are perceived by individuals, although may remain latent until actualized by individuals (Gibson 2015).

Affordance theory has commonly been applied to outdoor spaces (e.g., Carpenter and Burridge 2013; Lee-Hammond 2017). Heft's seminal work in this area (1988) reviewed several studies of children's outdoor activities from the perspective of affordances to highlight sets of functional properties of those environments. In doing so, he offered a means by which to think about children's environments that are more psychologically meaningful than the more commonly form-based classification of environmental features. More recently, Warden (2018) applied affordance theory to children's outdoor play, showing that, as highly complex environments, nature spaces provide limitless affordances, and that the potential of the outdoor space is matched only by the inventiveness of the playing child.

The concept of affordances provides a useful framework that bridges understandings of 'space' and 'action' towards an appreciation of spatial environments (Young et al. 2020). Thus, there is a growing body of literature researching affordances of built learning environments, indoor spaces and classrooms in both early childhood and school settings (e.g., Blackmore et al. 2011; Matthews and Lippman 2020).

Young et al. (2020) define affordances in the context of education spaces, stating that "learning environment affordances are qualities of the environment (space, objects and people) which enable perceived teaching and learning activities and behaviors" (p. 697). This definition takes into account the spatio-pedagogical entanglements (Ingold 2008), that is, the interconnected relationships between people, space, and objects that constitute learning environments.

Young et al. (2020) identified three major themes associated with learning environments—spaces, objects, and people. 'Spaces' referred to spatial qualities—discernible areas, such as small distinct spaces, large group areas, teacher work spaces, and so on. Fixtures, such as writable wall surfaces, retractable walls, and different types of floor surfaces (carpet and timber), were also included. 'Objects' encompassed more discrete elements, including furniture for sitting, working or storing things, and digital technologies, such as computers and projection screens. 'People' referred to other teachers and students, identified as affording a range of teaching and learning opportunities. These themes were then utilized to construct a taxonomy of affordances perceived by the participants in Young et al.'s (2020) study in terms of teaching and learning approaches, including student deep learning, collaborative learning, and interdisciplinary learning.

In the following section, elements of the taxonomy of affordances structured around the themes of 'spaces', 'objects' and 'people' as developed by Young et al. (2020) are applied to three documented anecdotes of Godly Play Storytellers. The aim is to show how the particular action possibilities enhance opportunities for spiritual development and wellbeing. Three anecdotes are included: two from the author's own previous studies, and one from Berryman's own account of two boys in his Godly Play room

3. Applying the Taxonomy of Affordances to the Anecdotes of Three Godly Play Storytellers

3.1. Daniel and the Parable of the Good Shepherd

Hyde (2010) used phenomenology to analyze the way in which three-and-a-half-year-old Daniel uses the Parable of the Good Shepherd materials to nurture his spirituality in the Godly Play room. The Parable of the Good Shepherd relates to Psalm 23, in which the LORD leads the psalmist to the green grass and the waters of repose—both of which feature in the Godly Play version of this parable. As a regular attendee, the analysis focused on what Daniel actually did in working with this set of materials. Daniel worked by himself, placing each one of the wooden sheep onto the shoulders of the carved figure of the Good Shepherd, with the Good Shepherd then taking each sheep individually into the sheepfold. Focusing on the action possibilities that are afforded by the environment with which Daniel interacted provides a unique perspective on how the Godly Play room enhances opportunities for nurturing his spiritual development and wellbeing.

To begin, it is helpful to list the instances of Daniel's transactions with the environmental features in the Godly Play room from Hyde's (2010) account. Specifically, he:

- Chooses his work from the shelves
- Sits on the floor
- Unpacks the contents of the parable box
- Manipulates the pieces contained in the parable box
- Places the sheep on the shoulders of the Good Shepherd
- Manoeuvres the pieces so that the Good Shepherd places each one of the sheep on his shoulders and then takes each individually into the sheepfold.

It is now useful to consider each of these transactions in terms of the themes of 'space', 'object' and 'people'. In terms of 'space', Daniel chooses to sit on the floor. The open floor space represents one of a range of general settings within the Godly Play room, which also include seating, tables and makerspaces. It presents the possibility of both groups of children gathering to work together, and of individual children choosing to work by themselves (cf. Morrison 2008). The action possibility afforded here is that Daniel can work with the parable materials independently and uninterrupted by himself. On the floor, he is afforded the opportunity to engage, to reflect and to make meaning from the materials with which he chosen to work. Evidence of his reflection may be found in his silence and in the deliberate and repetitive action of placing the sheep onto the shoulders of the Good Shepherd. Daniel "looked intently at the materials as he maneuvered them, slowly and deliberately" (Hyde 2010, p. 509). As Montessori [1965] (Montessori [1965] 2017a) would say, his actions were carried out "so slowly, so patiently . . . [and] with great deliberation" (p. 208).

Turning to focus on the theme of 'object', there are a number of interesting transactions. The shelves (the furniture) from which Daniel chooses his work are visible and accessible, since they are in proportion to his height. This affords choosing—a key feature of Montessori's prepared environment on which the Godly Play room is modelled. The work that Daniel chooses from these shelves—the Parable of the Good Shepherd—not only comes from a specific set of shelves (the Parable shelves), but is itself comprised of a gold wooden box which contains a number of smaller objects that are used to tell the story of this Parable. The box affords opening—a key notion in Parables, since there are times when the Parable does not 'open' and its meaning remains elusive. The physical opening of the Parable box attempts to convey this notion. In opening up the box, the very objects contained within afford un-packing, grasping, moving, placing, sliding (across the felt underlay), manipulating, the building (of the sheepfold), and packing up again. Importantly, when used by Daniel to tell the story of this Parable, these objects afford meaning making. In manoeuvring the pieces so as to have the Good Shepherd place each one of the sheep on his back and then take each individually into the sheepfold, Daniel is able to make meaning from this parable. In the original case study, Hyde (2010) indicates that in the choosing of his own work from the accessible shelves Daniel was able to use

these materials to address existential issues that he may have been confronting, and that this, ultimately impacted positively on his spiritual wellbeing. Specifically, the existential issues, which Daniel addresses here, would seem to be the need to create meaning from the Parable in relation to his own life, and freedom. People long for freedom, and yet when it is acquired, they tend to retreat to the safety of boundaries. In this Parable, the Good Shepherd shows the sheep how to be free by leading them to ‘the good grass’, to the cool, clear fresh water, through the places of great danger, and safely back to the sheepfold. In using the materials of this Parable, Daniel was potentially realizing that “Jesus—the Good Shepherd—was one who, rather than curtailing his freedom, could lead and guide him safely to it” (Hyde 2010, p. 514). By learning to use the religious language associated with the materials, initially modelled by the Storyteller, Daniel learns that the Good Shepherd shows him how to be free. Daniel’s repeated action of having the Good Shepherd place each of the sheep individually onto his shoulders so that each is taken into the sheepfold was not an isolated act. It develops his sense of connectedness—relational consciousness—in which spirituality is concerned with broadly inter- and intra-personal domains. Through this Daniel discerns the importance of being in relationship with others.

If attention is turned to the theme of ‘people’, an initial suggestion might be that this theme does not appear to apply. Daniel does not interact with anyone. However, as Hyde (2010) makes clear, the Storyteller has observed Daniel choosing these same materials to work with on at least one previous occasion in preceding weeks. The action possibility here is that, through her close observation, and while she has not interacted directly with Daniel on this occasion, the Storyteller is able to support Daniel in both his learning and spiritual development by allowing him to choose to work with these same materials again and again. That is, the environment she has prepared enables repetition and deep exploration (Kingsley Montessori School 2018). She is positioned to give Daniel agency in his choice of work, so that he can “return again and again to images that bear meaning for [him] to enable [him] to confront and cope with [his] existential limits and ultimate concerns” (Hyde 2010, p. 516).

3.2. *The Pictures of Bobby and Jimmy about the Parable of the Mustard Seed*

Berryman (2013b) methodically presents an account of two boys—Bobby aged six and Jimmy aged seven—and their art responses to the Parable of the Mustard seed over an eight-week period in the Godly Play room. Both boys were regular attendees of Berryman’s Godly Play sessions in the Fall of 1981. In total, they made a series of 13 pictures (seven for Bobby and six for Jimmy) after the Storyteller had first presented this Parable. When examining the pictures of the two boys, with both focusing on that part of the Parable in which the mustard seed becomes a tree and the birds come to nest in its branches, it is possible to see how different they are, despite their interaction with each other. Bobby’s pictures begin with an eagle biting and eating the baby birds, with the “eagle flying to get the others . . . coming to get the babies to eat them” (p. 108), and another of his pictures containing the image of a man shooting at the birds, “The bird got shot . . . Man with gun . . . blood dripping down into nest” (p. 110). His trees are more cylindrical than ‘tree-like’ in these pictures.

In contrast, Jimmy’s pictures show trees as places of nourishment. While Jimmy’s pictures continue to show birds flying towards the tree to nest in its branches, Bobby’s pictures gradually change to show the birds flying away from a tree that begins to look more like a ‘tree’ than a cylinder. Bobby says, “These birds are flying away . . . They are going to get some food for the baby” (p. 113). His pictures now hint at new and other positive things; he points to the lower branches in his picture and says “a new bird . . . (and then again more firmly) a new bird” (p. 113).

While it is not possible to list all of transactions within the environment the two boys had over the eight-week period, some key ones, taken from Berryman (2013a) would include:

- Bobby—uses tempera paints and large paint brushes (p. 108)

- Storyteller (to Bobby)—“Hmm. I like your painting” (p. 108)
- Bobby—chooses his work, selects the Parable of the Mustard seed parable box from the shelves (p. 109)
- Bobby—“its [the painting] like Jimmy’s . . . ” watching Jimmy as he works (p. 110)
- Jimmy—makes four pictures using ink markers, tempera paint, markers and pencils (p. 112)
- Storyteller (to Jimmy)—“Where’s the mustard seed?” Jimmy—“It is the tree” (p. 112)
- Storyteller (to Bobby)—“Where’s the bad bird . . . the one that was hurting the other birds?” Bobby—“He’s gone” (p. 115)
- Storyteller (to Jimmy)—“Are the birds coming or going?” Jimmy—“Coming” (p. 115)

(See [Berryman 2013b](#), pp. 103–20)

In terms of ‘space’, both Bobby and Jimmy choose to sit at the same table on at least one occasion over the eight-week period. This space affords collaboration, although it results in different paintings/drawings and in different interpretations of the Parable, with each child’s artwork representing and addressing existential issues occurring in their respective lives ([Berryman 2013b](#), p. 119). The table space affords both boys the ability to paint, draw, write, and to watch each other as they work.

Turning to the theme of ‘object’, again the shelves (the furniture) from which both boys choose their work are visible and accessible. They are in proportion to each child’s height, affording choosing, a key feature of Montessori’s prepared environment on which the Godly Play room is modelled. Both choose the materials with which they are going to work—tempera paint, large brushes, ink markers, pencils, and paper. Both choose, on different occasions, from the Parable shelves, the Parable of the Mustard Seed gold box, containing objects which themselves afford un-packing, grasping, moving, placing, sliding (across the felt underlay), manipulating, and so forth, in order for them to make meaning.

If attention is turned to the theme of ‘people’, there are two interesting features afforded by the Godly Play room. Both boys engage in a series of interactions around the same image, the mustard seed in the Parable. There is some indication from [Berryman’s \(2013b\)](#) description that both boys may have collaborated to some extent, and at the very least, have watched each other while they worked, which assisted Bobby in particular in his own artwork.

The second interesting feature lies in the role of the Storyteller. In this instance, not only does the Storyteller allow them to choose to work with these same materials, again and again, in their art responses, reflecting the notions of freedom in their choice of activities ([Morrison 2008](#)) and deep exploration ([Kingsley Montessori School 2018](#)), but he interacts verbally with each. He uses statements, such as, “Hmm, I like your painting”, and questions, such as, “Where’s the mustard seed?” and “Where’s the bad bird . . . the one that was hurting the other birds?” He allows time for each of the boys to respond, accepting their responses in a non-judgmental manner. For instance, in response to “Hmm, I like your painting”, Bobby says “It’s like Jimmy’s . . . my tree is bigger” (p. 110). Similarly, in response to “Where’s the mustard seed?” Jimmy says, “It is the tree” (p. 112). Through his close observation of both boys, and through his gentle interaction with them, the Storyteller is able to support Bobby and Jimmy in both their learning and spiritual development. Bobby, through his pictures, learns that new beginnings are possible ([Berryman 2013b](#) indicates that he is confronting the existential issue of the death of a family member) and Jimmy learns that the tree into which the mustard seed grows maybe representative of his own family as a place where nourishment is obtained ([Berryman 2013b](#)). This learning occurs “in a safe place [environment] in which to create new ideas or new frames of reference” ([Berryman 2013b](#), p. 117). The Storyteller has created a safe space, carefully managed, in which he supports and afford the children a sense of agency, but does not interfere with the

boys addressing their existential limits, guiding them, but not becoming the obstacle that comes between each boy and the his experience (cf. [Montessori \[1949\] 2013a](#)).

3.3. *A Child's Spontaneous Response to the Story of the Holy Family*

In collecting a series of anecdotes from Godly Play Storytellers, [Hyde \(2021\)](#) recounts Cathy's encounter with a group of three-year-old children when presenting the story of the Holy Family. The children were sitting on the floor in a circle. Cathy moved the storytelling materials, holding the carved figure of the Christ-child in the palm of her hand saying, "This is the Christ child reaching out to give you a hug" (p. 242). Unexpectedly, a child sitting close to Cathy reached out and took the carved figure from her hand. The child took the Christ-child and held it up against his cheek, giving it a hug, and then very gently placed it back in Cathy's hand. Cathy then went around the circle, allowing each child to receive a hug from the Christ-child, to receive "this touch from God very tangibly" (p. 242).

In terms of 'space', the children were sitting in a circle on the floor. This circle is referred to by [Berryman \(2009\)](#) as the "community of children" (p. 37). This floor space affords the ability for the children and Storyteller to gather as a community. The circle is at once an open, and yet physically connected space, as the children sit on cushions within close proximity to each other, forming a tightly knit configuration. This space also affords the presenting of the lesson by the Storyteller, and the opportunity to wonder together about the various elements of it.

The 'objects' that comprise the story of the Holy Family afford grasping, holding, moving, and in this particular instance, 'hugging'. While Cathy is manipulating the materials in presenting this story, the children will have seen the shelves from which the materials came—shelves which are visible, and from which the materials are accessible, since they are in proportion to each child's height, thus affording choosing. If children then wish to work with these materials in their response as a means by which to make meaning, they will know where to locate these materials.

The theme of 'people' presents two interesting features afforded by the Godly Play room. The actions of the Storyteller are significant. Ordinarily, when the Storyteller is presenting the story, she models how the story 'works'. The children gathered do not manipulate the materials at that stage—they have opportunities to use these materials during their responses, after the story has been presented. This is so that children can more authentically and creatively use sets of materials to make meaning. However, when the child unexpectedly reached out and took the Christ-child from Cathy's hands, holding it against his cheek to give it a hug, Cathy had the foresight to react positively and allow this anomaly to occur because she could see that this moment afforded such an opportunity. Like the Storytellers in the previous two examples, Cathy was well positioned to support this child—as well as the others in the circle—in both their learning and spiritual development by allowing a change to the way in which a Godly Play presentation generally operates. She afforded this child in particular a sense of agency in spite of what some might see as a constraint of the Godly Play process.

It is also worth considering the actions of the children gathered in the circle. The child closest to Cathy, who reached out and took the Christ-child, giving it a hug, effectually initiated this action possibility for the other children in the circle. Each child was then afforded the chance of giving the Christ-child a hug, giving this carved figure new functional significance. Not only was it graspable, hold-able and movable within the structure of the story presentation, now, it was also 'huggable'. The 'hugging' is significant because it is a visible expression of spirituality, of this child's developing relationship with God, and may form a part of that child's personal 'signature' ([Hay and Nye 2006](#)). From this, the children learnt that their connectedness with God can be made tangible and visible, although the children would, of course, not have expressed this verbally.

Interestingly, too, it is worth noting that this particular affordance already existed in the Godly play room. However, it remained latent until it was actualised, first by the

child closest to Cathy (who allowed this action possibility to occur), and then by the other children in the circle, who had gathered as a community.

4. Discussion

Examining the Godly room through the lens of affordance theory highlights the action possibilities that enhance opportunities for spiritual development and wellbeing. In particular, the examples in this article emphasize the importance of the adult mentors—the Storytellers—in supporting these children’s spiritual development and wellbeing. Rather than becoming an obstacle to “the child’s enlightenment and spiritual growth,” the Storytellers enabled each child “to do what in fact *can* only be done by the child” (Montessori [1965] 2017c, p. 73). In other words, Storytellers provides children with agency in their choice of response materials and in how they use those very materials to make meaning to attend to their spiritual wellbeing through addressing their existential limits.

There are some important points to note for the pedagogical practice of Godly Play generally, based on the examination of the Godly Play room through the lens of affordance theory. The role of the Storyteller as a spiritual mentor is crucial. While this is emphasized in Godly Play Core Training, Storytellers themselves would probably not regard themselves as ‘affordances’. Yet, and as has been shown, this is precisely what they are. They enable not only learning behaviors and actions, but also spiritual development and wellbeing by allowing children to choose their own work, through gentle and non-judgmental interaction, and by reacting appropriately to opportune and serendipitous moments that may present themselves. These notions reflect clearly Montessori’s understanding of the role of the teacher in the prepared environment in guiding but not becoming the obstacle that comes between the child and the child’s experience (Montessori [1949] 2013a). This needs to be reinforced in Godly Play training.

The objects present in the Godly Play room—the furniture, shelves, and the materials located on those shelves—need to be recognized not only for the action possibilities they afford, but also for the possibilities these might present that remain latent until they are actualized by the ingenuity of the children who use them. Berryman (2013a) draws attention to the creative ways in which many of these materials are, in fact, “loved” into being by children. Herein lie the latent possibilities these materials may hold for those who engage with them. In respect to this more broadly, Ingold (2008) suggests that not only is perception necessary for an affordance to be enabled, but that particular contexts—such as the Godly Play room itself—influence a person’s ability to perceive affordances that might be possible. This was certainly the case in the example of Cathy and her encounter of a child’s spontaneous response to the story of the Holy Family.

The space of the Godly Play room itself needs to reflect as closely as possible the design outlined by Berryman, itself modelled on Montessori’s prepared environment, so that it includes the open floor space for the community of children to gather, as well as seating, tables and makerspaces. Berryman (2009) clearly sets out in diagrammatic form how the Godly Play room should be configured. This can be challenging for contexts in which Godly Play is conducted that do not comprise a separate and dedicated space for this activity, such as when it is conducted in the narthex or apse of a church. Similarly, these challenges would be present when Godly Play is adapted for use in mainstream kindergarten and early years classrooms which are not designed solely for the purpose of Godly Play.

5. Conclusions

Originating from Gibson’s (2015) ecological approach to perception, affordances are what the environment offers and provides a person. Gibson’s theory accounts for the fact that a person’s perceptual experiences include both the awareness of the structure of objects and events in the environment, as well as an awareness of their functional significance. As has been shown, examining the Godly Play room—based on Montessori’s prepared environment—through the lens of affordance theory highlights a number of action

possibilities that may enhance opportunities for young children's spiritual development and wellbeing.

5.1. Limitations

However, this article has presented only a modest and initial investigation into how the affordances of the Godly Play room might enhance opportunities for the spiritual development and wellbeing of young children, and so cannot claim too much. This initial investigation has focused only on a small number of previously documented anecdotes of Godly Play storytellers that were initially collected for different purposes, and this is a clear limitation of this article. As well, these anecdotes have been used to draw tentative rather than definite conclusions, and this is also a limitation of this present investigation. A set of empirical findings from surveys and interviews with Godly Play Storytellers specifically designed to explore the concept of affordances would enable a more conclusive set of findings. Notwithstanding, the analysis of the anecdotes presented above through the lens of affordance theory is innovative, and suggests that this is an area worthy of further investigation.

A second limitation of this article lies in the fact that, in emphasizing the similarities of the affordances found in each of the environments, some of the uniqueness of each of the three anecdotes may be obscured. To describe an event in words, and to limit it to the confines of language, is to have already concealed the primacy of the event itself. However, it is hoped that the importance of the Storyteller's guidance, the accessibility of materials, and the space in which Godly Play is undertaken, highlighted in each of the analyses of the anecdotes, goes some way to signaling the unique and inherent meaning in each anecdote.

5.2. Implications for Research

Further and more robust research with greater numbers of active Godly Play Storytellers is needed to determine how different spatial affordances in the Godly Play room may enhance opportunities for young children's spiritual development and wellbeing. The replication of such research in various social and cultural contexts (e.g., Church settings, early childhood setting adaptations, as well as in diverse cultural contexts—including East, West and Central Asian countries, as well as African and Indigenous contexts) may also yield a more robust set of findings for analysis. With the appropriate sensitivities and cautions surrounding children in research, it may also be possible to involve children themselves in such investigative activity, seeking their voices in articulating how the various elements of the Godly Play room—spaces, objects and people—afford opportunities to nurture their spiritual wellbeing. Ultimately, such research would inform and further enhance the pedagogical practice of Godly Play as an approach for mentoring the spiritual development of young children in Christian contexts.

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