

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY  
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ENTITLED

Children's Ministry: A Practical and Contemporary Guide  
Through the Lens of Elementary Education

BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
DEPARTMENTAL HONORS IN MINISTRY

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**Children's Ministry:  
A Practical and Contemporary Guide  
Through the Lens  
of Elementary Education**

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A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty

of

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Kimberly Lynn French

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## **Abstract**

*Children's Ministry: A Practical and Contemporary Guide Through the Lens of Elementary Education* seeks to apply strategies for classroom management and teaching methods taught in a typical Elementary Education major curriculum to a children's ministry setting consisting of five and six-year-olds. This is achieved by examining the developmental theories of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, with supplementary research from Albert Bandura, B.F. Skinner, and Edward Thorndike. This thesis then applies the main points of these theories to practical classroom management strategies and teaching methods. For each teaching method addressed (play, collaborative learning, and object lessons), research supporting these methods is also provided. Practical application of classroom management and teaching methods is then given via an example scenario of a children's ministry service.

**Key Words:** Children's Ministry, Cognitive Development, Classroom Management, Teaching Methods, Play, Collaborative Learning, Object Lessons, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Like many theses and other types of research projects, mine was inspired by personal experience. As the Children's Ministry Director (soon to be Children's Pastor) at my church, and a senior Ministry major at Greenville University, children's ministry has been a primary part of my life for the past four years. I have learned many things through my experience as Children's Ministry Director and many things through my studies at Greenville University; however, I have noticed a disconnect between the two. My Ministry studies have taught me a great deal about how to read, understand, and preach the Bible. I have learned how to compare passages with the original Hebrew and Greek, as well as how to carefully research the interpretations of many great theologians. I have been taught how to write a sermon and preach it to a congregation of adults. Yet, I have not been taught how to go about doing the job I currently hold: children's ministry. Interpreting the Bible and determining how to teach it to young children, particularly ages five and six (approximately kindergarten and first grade) is an entirely different skill set from writing a sermon directed toward adults. Children learn and understand in vastly different ways than those of adults. Furthermore, teaching children is almost entirely impossible until one learns how to manage a large group of hyperactive and curious children. It is from this disconnect that I begin my thesis, *Children's Ministry: A Practical and Contemporary Guide Through the Lens of Elementary Education*.

In seeking a better understanding of how to approach ministry to children ages five and six, I have determined that the best way to learn how to teach children is to learn from those who teach children for a living: elementary school teachers. With Elementary Education involving an in-depth four-year degree with studies of numerous behavioral

and developmental theorists, surely this information is applicable to children's ministry. After all, it is the same children sitting in a children's ministry classroom on Sunday as in a first-grade classroom Monday through Friday. This thought process has led to my primary research being that of child development theories commonly studied in an elementary education degree curriculum. Particularly, I will be utilizing the theories of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky in my thesis, with supplemental research from Albert Bandura, B.F. Skinner, and Edward Thorndike. Though I believe their contribution to understanding how children think, develop, and learn can be appropriately applied to a children's ministry context, there seems to be little writing on the subject. There is a great deal of writings on developmental theories, especially those by Piaget and Vygotsky, and there is a great deal of writings on children's ministry, but hardly any combining the two. After searching various databases and books, I found only one book that appeared to apply developmental theories to children's ministry, and it was only just published in April 2020. This shows a lack of relevant research and writing on approaching children's ministry through an elementary education lens. The purpose of my thesis is to change that.

I plan to accomplish this purpose building each chapter off of the other, as certain things need to be established and understood before moving on to the next step, especially when working with children. In chapter two, titled "Classroom Management", I will first explore behavioral theories taught in a typical Elementary Education department. These theories will provide the basis for where the children are located developmentally. Specifically, I will begin with Jean Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development and Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theories, followed by B.F.

Skinner's Operant Conditioning theory and Edward Thorndike's studies on the effectiveness of reward vs. punishment. From there, I will propose methods of controlling a classroom of children within the given stage of behavioral development of five and six-year-olds utilizing the methods of reinforcement/reward, punishment, extinction, and imitation. Issues such as discipline and getting/ keeping attention will be explored within the context of the four theorists discussed in this chapter.

This will lead into chapter three, titled "Teaching Methods," which will build on the classroom management chapter to discuss how to teach in ways appropriate to five and six-year-old children's developmental stages. The Sociocultural Development Theory of Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development will be explored from a cognitive standpoint rather than a behavioral one. Then, "Teaching Methods" will provide research-based support for the use of various resources within the classroom. This includes studies on the use of play, collaborative learning, and object lessons as applicable to Piaget and Vygotsky's writings. How each teaching resource or method supports the way in which children learn and process new information to grow in their knowledge as defined by both Piaget and Vygotsky will be addressed. For example, Piaget theorized that children best learn and develop through independent discovery, whereas Vygotsky argued that social interaction was the most effective way. Because these two propositions are opposing, how different resources and teaching methods -- such as group projects -- are viewed will differ according to each theory.

Finally, chapter four, "Practical Application", will take the knowledge gained from the previous two chapters to discuss methods of planning lessons on specific Biblical topics. Because of the complicated nature of Scripture and its meaning, it is vital

to know how to set up a lesson in a way that is understandable and age-appropriate to young children while also remaining truthful. How does one explain to young children the story of David and Bathsheba? I will seek to answer this question and more using both educational and theological research. In this chapter, the thesis reaches its culmination with an example of a children's church service applying everything discussed in the previous two chapters. Finally, I will conclude this thesis by looking deeper into the theological support for how to minister to children, and explore how these coincide with the methods discussed throughout the entirety of the thesis, or simply put, I will explain why this thesis matters. As part of this explanation, I will discuss how the material in this thesis connects to what I believe is the purpose of children's ministry: teaching kids to know God and to love God.

Ultimately, the goal of this thesis is to provide a practical "how-to" guide for people who find themselves in a leadership position within the scope of children's ministry. Too often, those in this category of ministry must learn solely from trial and error, rather than having a starting point to avoid so much error. This thesis will serve as that starting point.

## **Chapter Two: Classroom Management**

Before any lesson plan can be made, a method of classroom management must be established. A well put together lesson plan with a variety of activities and teaching methods will prove itself to be entirely useless if the twenty or more five and six-year-old students are running around, misbehaving, and distracting each other. In order to establish an effective method of classroom management, one must first understand the way in which the five and six-year-old understands behavior, right and wrong, and punishment, along with which of these are most effective. For this, we turn to the theories of Jean Piaget, Albert Bandura, B.F. Skinner, and Edward Thorndike.

First, though, it is important to clarify that this chapter aligns more closely with the behaviorist approach, even though the majority of this thesis presents constructivism as the superior method for instruction. This is because there is a difference in how one manages behavior and teaches lessons. When communicating and enforcing class rules, young students require more adult guidance than when teaching learning objectives due to their understanding of rules and morals, which will be explained in this chapter. Furthermore, the nature of children's ministry is different from that of elementary education. Elementary school teachers typically have their students five days a week, for approximately seven hours each day, giving them 35 hours a week to communicate and enforce class rules. Children's pastors, however, typically only have their students one day a week for less than two hours. Therefore, students will naturally need more guidance in remembering and following the rules in a children's ministry setting than an elementary school setting, because they are likely to forget the church rules between

Sundays. Such a focus on leadership-heavy classroom management is a behaviorist approach, as are most of the theorists used in this chapter.

### ***Theories of Jean Piaget and Albert Bandura***

Jean Piaget, born in Switzerland in 1896, committed his life to studying developmental psychology and genetic epistemology in order to discover how knowledge grows beginning at birth and developing throughout one's lifetime. Five and six-year-old children are in what Piaget calls the preoperational stage of development (discussed more in-depth in the next chapter). During this stage, children have a form of reasoning called intuitive thought in which conclusions are based not on actual cause and effect, but on what events happen to occur around the same time.<sup>1</sup> Because of this, punishing a child for a wrong action long after they committed it will not result in them associating the punishment with the previous wrong action.

Building on this point, Piaget also asserted that children's moral abilities are quite limited during the preoperational stage. According to Piaget, young children only have a basic moral knowledge, and possess almost no moral judgment, or the ability to make a moral decision by using moral reasoning. Piaget called the moral development of children in the preoperational stage "heteronomous morality."<sup>2</sup> During the stage of heteronomous morality, almost all moral judgement is based on the authority of an adult (parent, teacher, etc.) and how that adult would respond if they did this action vs. that action. This limited understanding of moral judgment means that children often behave inconsistently (i.e. sometimes following the rules and sometimes breaking them) because

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<sup>1</sup> Levine, Laura E., and Joyce Munsch. *Child Development: An Active Learning Approach* (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2017), 232.

<sup>2</sup> Levine, Laura E., and Joyce Munsch, 436.

they do not actually understand the moral rules and why it is important to follow them.<sup>3</sup> All children understand about rules at this stage is that they are set by an authority figure (adults, God, etc.) and should be followed simply because they are set, meaning students require high levels of clear guidance from said authority figure. While Piaget is a constructivist, his assertions on the way in which young children understand rules and morality provide a strong foundation for understanding why the methods of behaviorist theories on classroom management approach prove useful.

Falling somewhere between behaviorism and constructivism, Albert Bandura also studied how children learn best. Born in 1925 in Alberta, Canada, Bandura grew up with limited access to educational resources, attending the only school in the rural area within which he lived. Despite this, Bandura studied psychology at the University of British Columbia and went on to receive a Ph.D. and study social learning and aggression in young people, specifically boys from affluent families.<sup>4</sup> These studies eventually led to Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory.

Social Cognitive Theory holds that children learn not only through operant conditioning, but imitation as well. Children observe the actions of another – a social interaction – and then form an understanding of it through independently thinking about it – a cognitive function.<sup>5</sup> Likely the most famous experiment centering on this concept of observation and imitation is Bandura's Bobo Doll experiment. In this experiment, a sample of young children would first watch a video of an adult abusing a Bobo clown doll; the adult hit, kicked, and even struck the doll with a hammer. Then, this sample of children, as well as a group who had not seen the video were put in a room with a Bobo

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Pajares, Frank. "Albert Bandura: Biographical Sketch."

<sup>5</sup> Levine, Laura E., and Joyce Munsch, 44.

doll and other various toys. Bandura found that the children who had seen the video of an adult hurting the Bobo doll were more likely to interact with the doll in a similar violent fashion, whereas those who did not see the video did not demonstrate such actions.<sup>6</sup>

These findings are by no means surprising for anyone who has ever seen a young child copying a character from a movie, another child, or an adult. As with Piaget, Bandura's understanding of how children learn provide a strong basis for the need of clear guidance from the teacher when managing a classroom. Behaviorist approaches to child development provide studies on a few of the forms this guidance can take: reward, reinforcement, punishment, and extinction.

### ***Theories of B.F. Skinner and Edward Thorndike***

The first behaviorist studied in this thesis, B.F. Skinner, was born in 1904 in Pennsylvania and grew up building and inventing various contraptions. Though he initially became a writer, his love of science and learning how things worked were rekindled when he read the works of Ivan Pavlov and John B. Watson. Following this spark in interest, Skinner studied psychology at Harvard University and began experimenting on rats to study their behavior. Through these experiments, Skinner discovered that what occurred directly after an action had more effect on future behavior than what occurred directly before the action, as once suggested by Pavlov and Watson.<sup>7</sup> This discovery eventually led to Skinner's theory of operant conditioning.

In operant conditioning, the leader responds to a desired action in order increase the occurrence of that behavior.<sup>8</sup> In operant conditioning, a reinforcer is used to accomplish this. There are two kinds of reinforcers: positive and negative. Positive

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<sup>6</sup> Levine, Laura E., and Joyce Munsch, 45.

<sup>7</sup> Vargas, Julie. "Biographical Information -- B.F. Skinner Foundation."

<sup>8</sup> Levine, Laura E., and Joyce Munsch, 40.

reinforcement rewards a desired behavior by giving a positive thing to the student, such as a sticker for behaving during class. Negative reinforcement rewards a desired behavior by removing a negative thing from the student.<sup>9</sup> An example of negative reinforcement would be a teacher cancelling that night's homework after students participate well in class.

Skinner's theory of operant conditioning also contains a few methods in order to eliminate an undesired behavior: punishment and extinction. Punishment adds an unwanted consequence following an undesired behavior, an example of which is giving students a "strike" on her behavior chart. Extinction, however, works by completely ignoring the unwanted behavior.<sup>10</sup> Whereas the other three methods in operant conditioning require the teacher to do something, extinction requires the teacher to do nothing. According to Skinner, extinction works by denying stimuli of any form, often making it more effective than punishment.<sup>11</sup>

Edward Thorndike, a behaviorist like Skinner, also held that rewards are far more effective than punishments. Born in Massachusetts in 1874,<sup>12</sup> Thorndike grew up as a gifted learner. Like Skinner, Thorndike also began his career in the field of literature but switched to psychology while a student at Harvard. Through experiments on animals, Thorndike studied the effect of reward and punishment when teaching an animal to do a task.<sup>13</sup> This research led to studying the same effects of reward and punishment on how children learn.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Levine, Laura E., and Joyce Munsch, 42.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Woodworth, Robert S. "Edward Lee Thorndike: A Biographical Memoir" (Washington D.C.: National Academy of Sciences, 1952), 221.

<sup>13</sup> Woodworth, Robert S, 210.

Most of these studies were conducted by presenting students with some form of quiz, followed by the leader announcing aloud “right” or “wrong” after each question.<sup>14</sup> Examples of these quizzes included translating a word from Spanish to English,<sup>15</sup> defining an uncommon English word by matching it with a synonym,<sup>16</sup> and matching an action with a representative symbol.<sup>17</sup> Through these studies, Thorndike concluded that the reward of announcing “right” was more effective than the punishment of announcing “wrong.”<sup>18</sup> This is because when a student is told he or she is right, that student knows exactly what action or knowledge is correct, and therefore exactly what to keep doing. Alternatively, telling a student that action was wrong does not guide the student to the exact right option, but instead leaves the student guessing and having to continue trial and error to find what the right action is. Expanding on this, Thorndike concluded from the data collected in his experiments that, “... the chances are over 99 to 1 that the rewards had a greater influence in strengthening than the punishment had in weakening the connection.”<sup>19</sup> -

### ***Applying Theories to Classroom Management***

The question remains of how to apply the information gained through studying Piaget, Bandura, Skinner, and Thorndike to classroom management, particularly in a church setting. First and foremost, it is important to remember that both Piaget and

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<sup>14</sup> Thorndike, Edward L. *The Fundamentals of Learning* (New York, New York: Bureau of Publications: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1932), 278.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Thorndike, Edward L., 280.

<sup>17</sup> Thorndike, Edward L., 284.

<sup>18</sup> Thorndike, Edward L., 290.

<sup>19</sup> Thorndike, Edward L., 299.

Bandura recognized that children think much differently than adults. Because of this, successful methods for managing a congregation of adults will most likely be vastly different from successful methods for managing a children's ministry classroom of kindergarten and first graders. Next, classroom rules and expectations need to be clearly defined, as we know from Piaget that children are unable to use moral reasoning to make moral conclusions, but instead rely on the authority figure to define right from wrong. Therefore, vague rules such as "treat others with respect" or "be nice to everyone" will likely be unsuccessful in teaching children what is expected from them in the classroom. It may seem redundant to present multiple rules that can be summed up by the two aforementioned examples, but it is necessary in order to help children understand rules and behavioral expectations at their current level of development.

In addition to providing children with easy to understand, age appropriate behavioral limits, patience when these limits are broken is key. Instead of responding harshly with punishment and punishment alone, it is crucial to both the child's development and successful classroom management to also patiently help that child learn to develop an awareness of others' opinions and wishes. Though punishment can be helpful in discouraging negative behavior in children, both Skinner and Thorndike held that punishment is often less successful than reinforcement. Regardless of if employing punishment or reinforcement, five and six-year-old children fall within Piaget's preoperational stage during which they associate immediate consequences with the behavior. Therefore, any response given must be immediately after the action, otherwise the child will not be able to associate it with the action committed but will instead associate it with whatever they are doing at the time of reward or punishment. Because

Thorndike viewed punishment as useful in stopping an undesired behavior, but ineffective in teaching the desired one, it may prove helpful to have the punishment assist in teaching the ability to understand another's point of view. For example, if a child takes a toy from another child, that toy could be taken back and given to the child who originally had it. Then, the teacher can discuss with the child how they felt when the toy was taken away from them, and use it to help them realize that the other child would have felt the same way (sad, angry, etc.) when it was taken from the other child in the first place. With this, the student may begin to understand that the desired behavior is to respect others' feelings and share instead of steal. Obviously, this approach has limits in how it can be carried out (a child cannot hit another child back in a Hammurabi-like "eye for an eye" approach), but implementing ways of helping children learn what is the correct behavior along with what is the incorrect is a valid form of classroom management. Essentially, punishment should always be coupled with guidance and discussion in helping the child learn what behavior is expected.

Another approach to classroom management is to remember Bandura's teaching on the value of observation and imitation. Children learn through watching others, so it is crucial that the children's ministry leader model the behavior they wish to see students have. For example, a leader cannot give students a rule of speaking with an "inside" voice and then proceed to yell at the class. If yelling is the behavior they observe within the classroom, yelling is the behavior they will engage in within the classroom.

Withholding social interaction altogether is another classroom management method that can assist in discouraging negative behaviors. Because children tend to do better during social interaction, in fact, they crave it -- not to mention all humans are

social beings and therefore crave attention and social interaction -- by completely ignoring the negative behavior, the child will associate the immediate negative consequence of being ignored with the action, and refrain from doing it in the future. Practically speaking, the management approach of ignoring negative behavior can prove useful in the classroom setting as it keeps the teacher from interrupting class time to deal with misbehavior, and therefore distract the rest of the class. The classroom management method of ignoring an undesired behavior follows Skinner's value of extinction over punishment. He recognized children's desire for social interaction, as well as the problems punishment can present, and found that paying zero attention to an undesired behavior can be more effective than punishment in eliminating it. Extinction will also be observed by students, leading them to imitate the children's pastor in ignoring disruptive or negative behavior.

Classroom management is more than just eliminating negative behavior. It is also important to foster desired behaviors, as well as finding ways to keep children focused so that they may successfully learn and grow. To encourage positive and desired behavior, it is again important to remember the teachings of Piaget on how a child's brain functions at the age of five or six. Piaget found that children associate events occurring at the time of an action as associated with that action (i.e. a reinforcement or punishment). This is where Thorndike and Skinner's positive reinforcement comes into play, which gives the same conclusion as Piaget's statement: reinforcing a desired behavior with some form of positive response or reward will encourage that behavior to continue. Examples of positive reinforcement applicable to a classroom setting include small, tangible rewards such as candy, prizes, and fun activities as a reward for students following the rules,

treating others nicely, etc. When these positive consequences are in the form of social interaction, they also utilize Bandura's theory of children developing and learning better through observation of others. Such socially interactive positive consequences can be easier to reward immediately without a lot of classroom disruption, and therefore be given more frequently. Examples of socially interactive positive consequences can be as simple as a smile and a nod, ranging all the way to praise like clapping, compliments, high fives, etc. They can be coupled with a statement about what good action was done -- "I'm so proud of you for sitting still, good job!" -- in order to build up their understanding of what good actions are expected from them. When other children observe this behavior, they will imitate it, therefore causing them to encourage desired behavior in one another.

Finally, getting and maintaining students' attention is a necessary aspect of classroom management before being able to successfully teach students. The aforementioned socially interactive positive reinforcement can help with this as well. Whenever students look at the teacher, or show other signs of paying attention, the teacher can present them with a positive social interaction such as a smile, nod, etc. Another crucial aspect in getting and keeping students' attention is ensuring the topic or activity is something they can and want to engage in. How to present lessons in ways that spark this curiosity and keep children engaged will be discussed further in the next chapter, "Teaching Methods," where we transition from behavioral and moral development into the cognitive and logical development of children.

### Chapter Three: Teaching Methods

Having established methods for managing a class' behavior, we now move to a discussion on teaching methods. Just as teaching a lesson cannot be successful until the teacher or pastor knows how to keep the children under control, so too will a lesson be unsuccessful unless it is communicated properly to the students. At such a young age, children do not learn and retain information the same way fully developed adults do. Thus, this chapter will focus on teaching methods that resonate with the children's current level of cognitive development. This is accomplished by first understanding how five and six-year-old children learn, then determining applicable teaching methods and learning resources.

#### *Theories of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky*

Through his studies, Piaget determined that,

... the growth of knowledge is a progressive construction of logically embedded structures superseding one another by a process of inclusion of lower less powerful logical means into higher and more powerful ones up to adulthood. Therefore, children's logic and modes of thinking are initially entirely different from those of adults.<sup>20</sup>

Simply put, Piaget believed that behavioral and cognitive development happened in distinct stages within a person's life, known as Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development, and that each stage has key characteristics, including ways in which a child thinks and behaves. To move from one stage to the next, Piaget believed a child had to rely on their own self-initiated curiosity and exploration of the world.

Five and six year old children (the focus of this thesis) fall under the Preoperational Stage of Cognitive Development, and are in this stage from approximately

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<sup>20</sup> "A Brief Biography of Jean Piaget"

age two to seven.<sup>21</sup> During this stage, children have the ability to use symbols in their thinking, but have yet to develop the ability to think logically. Furthermore, children think egocentrically during the preoperational stage, and will naturally act in a self-centered manner. It is important to note that the egocentric form of thinking is not necessarily selfish thinking. Rather, children have not yet developed the ability to see and understand things from another's point of view, and therefore tend to act in what is perceived as a selfish manner, when it is the only way in which they know how to act. For this reason, it is important to teach the child how to be aware of and sensitive to the thoughts and feelings of others.<sup>22</sup> Doing so will help in changing behavior from what may be perceived as "selfish" to behavior that displays respect and understanding of other people's points of view.

Referring to children as "little scientists," Jean Piaget held that children move through the Stages of Cognitive Development through active learning motivated by their own curiosity. When experiencing something unfamiliar, this curiosity helps children to find a way in which to connect it to their existing knowledge structures. Piaget explained the organization of these knowledge structures as schema: with each general concept having its own categorical schema within the brain.<sup>23</sup> When new information fits easily into a student's existing schema, it is known as assimilation, and is an unstressful, simple process. When new information does not fit the current schema, however, a student experiences disequilibrium, and must create a new schema in which to mentally

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<sup>21</sup> Levine, Laura E., and Joyce Munsch, 227.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Levine, Laura E., and Joyce Munsch, 226.

categorize this new information. This process is understandably more difficult and even stressful to a child.<sup>24</sup>

Depending on the developmental stage of a child, these schemas, and the process of adding information to them look different. As explained in the previous chapter, the ages focused on in this thesis are in Piaget's Preoperational Stage of Cognitive Development. In this stage, children have a general understanding of symbols, but cannot think well in the abstract. They learn through personal experience as guided by their own curiosity, but have difficulty understanding other points of view. Because of these preoperational stage characteristics, children demonstrate and expand their knowledge through activities such as fantasy play, language, and drawing.

In fantasy play, children assign new meaning to objects and people.<sup>25</sup> For example, a child may pretend a stick is a magic wand and she is the fairy godmother from Disney's *Cinderella*. First, fantasy play demonstrates the child's understanding of symbols in that she knows the stick is not actually a magic wand, but merely represents one for the purpose of her game. Second, fantasy play can be useful in expanding a child's knowledge by using an object that already fits within a cognitive schema to represent and explain a new piece of information, thus utilizing the constructive nature of learning within the preoperational stage.

Language also shows grasp of symbols and how to use them, as children learning to read do not mistake the word for an object (ex.: "tree") as the actual object. Rather, they understand a word to stand in place of something not there.<sup>26</sup> Language helps

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<sup>24</sup> Levine, Laura E., and Joyce Munsch, 227.

<sup>25</sup> Levine, Laura E., and Joyce Munsch, 231.

<sup>26</sup> Levine, Laura E., and Joyce Munsch, 232.

children in the preoperational stage learn by having a new way to take in concepts. As toddlers, children can understand spoken language, but gain nothing from a written word, whereas five and six year old children who are beginning to read can learn by seeing a word such as on a label or visual aid in addition to the already mastered auditory learning.

Drawing again proves the understanding of symbols because a student is capable of drawing something without looking directly at it, as well as knowing it is not the actual person or object. For example, a child can draw a picture of his or her mother while nowhere near her. Furthermore, the child recognizes the picture is not actually his or her mother. Drawings can be useful in helping students learn when objects to represent a concept are not reasonable. Within the children's ministry context, an example of this would be when teaching children, the cross represents salvation through Jesus. Rather than having a physical cross to represent and explain salvation (as objects represent other things in fantasy play), a picture of a cross -- representing a real cross -- could be used in its place. Children may also learn a concept better by being able to draw it out since internal thought processes are difficult at this age, as we will discuss later in this chapter.

Just as it is important to research how children learn new information and function cognitively when deciding what teaching methods to use, it is also necessary to research how children do *not* learn at the age of five or six. Piaget gives three major limitations of children in the preoperational stage, which must be taken into account. First, students in this stage have what Piaget calls intuitive thought, meaning they are beginning to reason and explain "why," but this reasoning is limited mostly to what they see rather than having the ability to explain something logically.<sup>27</sup> Because of this,

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<sup>27</sup> Levine, Laura E., and Joyce Munsch, 232.

“magic” tends to be a better understood explanation about what they see than the true logical reason for abstract things such as scientific processes.

Piaget’s second limit of the preoperational stage is egocentrism. This is simply children’s inability to understand other points of view.<sup>28</sup> While this limiter was discussed in-depth in chapter two, it is relevant to cognitive development and learning abilities in that children have difficulty understanding concepts they cannot easily connect to their own lives. Thus, lessons must be somehow related to their own perspective as well as to the existing knowledge base.

Finally, Piaget found preoperational stage children are limited in how they learn in that they lack conservation, or the understanding that quantity is not dependent on appearance. The example provided in *Child Development: An Active Learning Approach* is that a five year old in the preoperational stage would not recognize that the amount of clay stays the same when in a lump and when that lump is flattened into a pancake.<sup>29</sup> Instead of conservation, students only possess centration, or only being able to focus one part of something at a time.<sup>30</sup> A child may be able to determine the difference in height of two or more glasses, but cannot simultaneously interpret the different widths and shapes in order to accurately decipher which glass actually holds the most water. This cognitive limitation means any visual aids, objects, etc. used need to be relevant without the conservation skill.

Despite Piaget’s popularity and prominence in child development textbooks, there are several critiques that call his theories into question. First, Piaget tested his hypotheses through qualitative research -- interviewing and observing children, then making

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Levine, Laura E., and Joyce Munsch, 233.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

conclusions based on what he saw. The problem with this is that he only worked with small sample sizes, and his methods cannot be accurately replicated because they are largely dependent on how the interviewer interprets the answers of the children involved. Second, many think that his Stages of Cognitive Development underestimate the pace at which children develop various behavioral, moral, and cognitive abilities, and that the age brackets of each stage are not an accurate representation of all children. Finally, Piaget's studies focused on the mental processes of the child over the actual behavior, but many psychologists hold that a child's explicit behavioral action is more important than the mental process behind it.<sup>31</sup> Regardless, Piaget's findings offer valuable information when deciding which teaching methods to implement within a children's ministry program.

Lev Vygotsky was born in Belarus (then part of Russia) in 1896, the same year as Jean Piaget. Vygotsky spent most of his life studying psychology, specifically the psychology of education and children with learning disabilities.<sup>32</sup> Unlike Piaget, who proposed rigid stages and emphasized self-initiated learning, Vygotsky placed an emphasis on the role of social and cultural interactions in child development. Vygotsky, in his Sociocultural Theory, believed that children learn by interacting with the world around them -- especially the people around them. In direct contrast to Piaget, Vygotsky held that the role of the teacher was crucial to a child learning to understand behavior, reason, and morality.

Vygotsky built on his Sociocultural Theory with three ways in which children's ideas are fostered by these aforementioned interactions. Vygotsky asserted that children

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> "Lev Vygotsky"

learn better through guidance and interaction with another person. His first way, the Zone of Proximal Development, measures how much better this learning is.<sup>33</sup> Basically, the Zone of Proximal Development is the difference in how children perform with and without the help of another person. Second, scaffolding is Vygotsky's term for the way in which the person interacting with a child successfully assists him or her in learning. Similar to the scaffolding that supports a building under construction (hence the name), the person interacting with the child must build a cognitive structure upon which the child can learn, grow, and eventually understand a concept/task enough to do it on their own.<sup>34</sup> Finally, Private Speech is how a child remembers and internalizes the new knowledge achieved through the teacher's scaffolding. At the ages of five and six, children often repeat aloud to themselves the lesson or instructions given to them by the teacher. This is why it is not uncommon to hear a child talking to themselves or telling a teddy bear something they are trying to learn. Eventually, this external verbal process becomes an internal thought process, but it is important to allow children to engage in private speech as it helps them learn to understand their environment and how they are expected to fit into it. Private speech is a method of self-regulation, not a disruption to class.

An important clarification of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory is the person teaching and interacting with the child as they learn. He refers to this person as the More Knowledgeable Other, and as the name implies, it can be any person more knowledgeable on a subject than the child learning.<sup>35</sup> This means a child can learn not only through interaction with a teacher or other adult, but may also learn from another student who is ahead of them in developing and understanding any given concept.

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<sup>33</sup> Levine, Laura E., and Joyce Munsch, 245.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> McLeod, Saul A. "Lev Vygotsky"

In addition to the difference in theories, Piaget and Vygotsky also differed in their approach to and opinions on the study of child development. Piaget placed little emphasis on the role of social interaction, but instead emphasized specific stages and the role of cognitive constructivism. In direct contrast, Vygotsky placed a great deal of emphasis on the role of social interaction and social constructivism, but did not place any emphasis on certain, labeled developmental stages. Piaget thought language to be of little use, merely providing a way for children to label their experience and believed the child should be supported in exploring and discovering the world based on their own curiosity in order to learn and develop. Vygotsky, however, believed language was a key factor in development (i.e. Private Speech) and that the child needs to be guided by a teacher or More Knowledgeable Other in learning from different opportunities, rather than leading their own development. Finally, Piaget taught that certain developmental stages must be reached before a child can learn certain concepts, such as moral judgment. Vygotsky taught the opposite: it is through learning that development occurs.<sup>36</sup>

Lev Vygotsky's theories of cognitive development have similarities with Jean Piaget, but also a few key differences. While both theorists found children to take an active, curiosity-fueled role in learning, Piaget believed this was an independent process, while Vygotsky believed it to be a social one. His Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development placed emphasis on a student's social interaction when developing and learning. As in the previous chapter, Vygotsky's More Knowledgeable Other plays a key role in learning because of the guidance they offer that social interaction with an equally knowledgeable person does not.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

Specifically, the More Knowledgeable Other offers help through what Vygotsky calls scaffolding. When scaffolding, the More Knowledgeable Other provides support to the child to help guide them to the right conclusion about whatever the lesson is.<sup>37</sup> Like Piaget, Vygotsky taught that children learn by building on previous knowledge, so the scaffolding must be set up in a way that allows children to reasonably build upon what they already know. If the lesson and guidance by the More Knowledgeable Other tries to push the child far beyond their existing knowledge base, it will be near impossible to the child to understand the new concept. Conversely, teaching and scaffolding for a concept a student has already mastered will not help them to grow in their knowledge, but leave it stagnant. The key is finding the balance that helps the student get to the next level of understanding for a concept with minimal stress, and then slowly decreasing the amount of help -- or decrease the size of the scaffolding -- until the child has a full understanding of the learning objective without any assistance from the More Knowledgeable Other.

Laura Levine and Joyce Munsch explain this balance well in their textbook on child development:

Teaching in this way [via scaffolding] is a sensitive process of helping the child achieve what is just out of reach and then stepping back when the child can do it alone... it is when we get it just right -- in the zone that is just a little beyond the child's current level -- that our instruction is effective and learning occurs.<sup>38</sup>

Following the social interaction with the More Knowledgeable Other, children engage in the second part of the Sociocultural Theory, known as private speech. Just as the name suggests, private speech occurs when a child is speaking alone to oneself. However, Vygotsky believed private speech to be much more than a child talking to him

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<sup>37</sup> Levine, Laura E., and Joyce Munsch, 245.

<sup>38</sup> Levine, Laura E., and Joyce Munsch, 246.

or herself. Instead, it is the way in which a child memorizes a newly learned concept.<sup>39</sup> At age five or six, children have yet to develop the ability to have coherent internal thoughts, so they must speak a process or lesson aloud to themselves when trying to remember it. Furthermore, research has found a direct correlation in the difficulty of a task and the amount of private speech in young children, further supporting Vygotsky's theory.<sup>40</sup>

Unlike Piaget, Vygotsky does not have an extensive list of what stage of cognitive development should be in at what age, nor does he have a set of what children can and cannot do within that developmental stage. Vygotsky's theory focuses on how children learn best: social interaction. Besides that, children learn at their own pace based on how big of a "step" they can take from the scaffolding when learning the next objective. Regardless, his Sociocultural Theory still offers valuable insights to the importance of group work vs. independent work, and other teaching methods.

### ***Teaching Methods: Play***

With the understanding of how five and six-year-old brains function, as well as how they best learn, we may now consider a few teaching methods and their relation to this understanding: play, collaborative learning, and object lessons. Interestingly, Vygotsky himself extensively studied the role of play in young children, and his findings even helped to form his Sociocultural Theory of Development. Vygotsky stated that "... play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form; in play it is as though the child were trying to jump above the level of his normal behavior."<sup>41</sup> In play, children develop the abilities to think internally, understand symbols, and control their impulses.

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<sup>39</sup> Levine, Laura E., and Joyce Munsch, 247.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Bodrova, Elena and Deborah J. Leong. "Vygotskian and Post-Vygotskian Views on Children's Play," 371.

Such a notion of play is foreign to many teachers and children's pastors alike in the present-day United States context, as play is often considered to be merely a time filler. Due to its peculiarity as a teaching method, let us explore how Vygotsky came to his conclusion. The word "play" has specific meaning in Vygotsky's context, as opposed to the colloquial understanding of the term. For Vygotsky, play involved social interaction with other children -- consistent with the emphasis of social interaction in his Sociocultural Theory -- and had three specific elements: an imaginary situation, roles acted out by each participant, and rules for such roles that children followed.<sup>42</sup> Each of these three elements provides a different implication for how play helps children to learn and develop better than common teaching methods such as lecturing.

By creating an imaginary situation, children exhibit the growing ability to have internal thought as the situation is different from reality. Imaginary situations are still dependent on the external surroundings such as what objects and costumes are accessible, what their location looks like, etc. Despite the dependence on the external, however, "... the very emergence of the internal actions signals the beginning of a child's transition from earlier forms of thought processes... to more advanced thought."<sup>43</sup>

Acting out roles designated to each participant also shows the transition into internal thoughts; children know they are not actually princes and princesses, but are able to act out the roles because of the internal thought process putting them in the shoes of princes and princesses. Furthermore, the action of putting themselves in the shoes of whatever role they are assuming, and acting in ways consistent to that role shows the growing ability to see other points of view, a skill Piaget says to be unattained within the

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<sup>42</sup> Bodrova, Elena and Deborah J. Leong, 374.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

preoperational stage. Along with the roles, comes the use of props in this action. Such props need not look anything like the imagined object it becomes, but the functions need to be similar so that the child moves in a similar way when utilizing the object.<sup>44</sup>

Utilization of props in this way again shows the emergence of independent internal thought and external senses, but not the mastery thereof. Use of symbols as previously addressed through Piaget's theory is also evident in the use of props in play. Piaget found in his research that children in the preoperational stage have a basic understanding of symbols -- such as pictures and words being representative of an object not present -- but cannot use them fully to understand more abstract symbols, like a bear and a bull representing the state of the stock market. Likewise, children can use objects as symbols of other objects in play, but only if they are easily connected to the real thing via its use. For example, a child playing "doctor" may use a marker as a thermometer because it can be placed in the mouth or under the arm of the "patient" in a similar manner to a thermometer, but would not accept a book as a "thermometer" for the game.

Vygotsky's third qualifier of play, rules for imaginary roles being followed displays formation of impulse control, part of developing out of Piaget's egocentrism. Children's roles contain a set of rules (a doctor would not make a grilled cheese, and a chef would not give someone a shot), and the child must commit to following them in order to be included in play. Following rules in play also goes along with the growing ability to experience scenarios through the eyes of another. A child must be able to conceptualize what it is like to be a hairdresser in order to pretend to be one.

Play also provides a context for children to act as one another's More Knowledgeable Other. Through the communication and collaboration that comes with

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<sup>44</sup> Bodrova, Elena and Deborah J. Leong, 375.

play, the group is able to fill the role of the More Knowledgeable Other and build the scaffolding to help one another move through the Zone of Proximal Development to the next developmental milestone.<sup>45</sup> Interaction with one another in play triggers questions about the world and about the experiences of other people. Play provides a safe context within which to flesh out the possible answers to these questions using the support of the group acting as More Knowledgeable Other. “Play engages the emotions, and by having emotions engaged, rational learning is strengthened... [it] provides guidance and the scaffolding needed for children to move from a prior understanding to a new meaning.”<sup>46</sup>

Daniel Elkonin, a colleague of Vygotsky echoed and built upon Vygotsky’s teaching on the usefulness of play when learning, identifying four areas of impact play has on the development of children’s mental functions. While the last three areas are mostly the same as Vygotsky’s conclusions of play, Elkonin’s first area of impact is worth discussing: play allows children to establish priorities and have motivation to follow them through.<sup>47</sup> When playing, impulses must be controlled in favor of playing the game as it needs to be. Getting and following an impulse to color a picture halfway through setting up the blanket-fort castle means never getting to play royalty. With the priority decision of playing royalty being more important/more fun than coloring a picture, it is worth the undesirable process of building the castle.

Alexei Leontiev, Alexander Zaporozhets, and Zinaida Manuilenko conducted experiments to prove the unique way in which play allows children to function and

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<sup>45</sup> Bodrova, Elena and Deborah J. Leong, 376.

<sup>46</sup> Larson, Mimi L. and Robert J. Keeley, eds. *Bridging Theory and Practice in Children’s Spirituality: New Directions for Education, Ministry, and Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2020), 231.

<sup>47</sup> Bodrova, Elena and Deborah J. Leong, 379.

develop at higher levels than in daily life. The method and results of one such experiment are as follows:

Children ages three, five, and seven were given a similar task in two conditions -- in the lab, where the task was given out of context, and in a playroom, where the same task became a part of the role the child was assigned... Zinaida Istomina compared the number of words children could remember during a dramatic-play session involving a grocery store with the number of words they could remember in a typical laboratory experiment. In both situations, children were given a list of unrelated words to memorize. In the dramatic-play situation, the words were presented as the items on a “shopping list” to use in a pretend grocery store. In the laboratory experiment, the instructions were simply to memorize the words. Istomina found that preschoolers [the five-year-olds] remembered more items in the dramatic-play condition, functioning at the same level as the older children... neither younger nor older children demonstrated as big a difference between play and nonplay conditions as did the preschoolers [five-year-olds]... In other words, it seems that play provides a unique kind of mediation for the newly emerging mental functions and that there is a window when this mediation may be especially beneficial.<sup>48</sup>

The results of this experiment further support the importance of utilizing play as a teaching method in the classroom. However, knowing to use the teaching method is not enough to create a fruitful children’s ministry classroom. Successful integration of play as a teaching method requires proper knowledge of how to implement it in a way consistent with the type of play that allows children to benefit. Only through guidance by an older child or adult can Vygotsky’s definition of productive play occur.<sup>49</sup> In a sense, we need to teach children how to play well. Guiding children in the skill of play does not mean taking over but setting an example through action and carefully worded comments to spark children’s imagination and initiate cognitive development through play. Our setting of children’s ministry actually provides an advantage to the typical elementary classroom here in that most children’s ministry classes include children of varying ages, and often a higher ratio of adults to children. By an older child or adult demonstrating

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<sup>48</sup> Bodrova, Elena and Deborah J. Leong, 383-384.

<sup>49</sup> Bodrova, Elena and Deborah J. Leong, 383-385.

one way to play out a scenario, it provides the children with a general format of developmental play: imagine a situation, determine roles, follow the rules of the situation and roles.

Once this example is provided, the teacher must then step back and become assistant to the child. As Piaget and Vygotsky both state in their respective theories, learning and development occur through curiosity-fueled active learning, meaning play needs to be primarily student-led once the concept of how to play productively has been taught. Then, the teacher/pastor becomes a fellow player with the child.

Determining the best balance of when to teach children how to play and when to step back and allow the students to lead is difficult because no student will learn to lead productive play at the exact same time as another student. Pastors and teachers need to be aware of when a child's confidence in leading the play increases, and when the play continues to follow Vygotsky's three qualifiers for developmentally beneficial play even after the student takes over the leadership role. Participation and attentiveness to the child's verbal and nonverbal communication is crucial in determining these two things.<sup>50</sup> As an active participant in play, adults should have a balance of open-ended questions, comments pointing to the learning objective, and silence. Again, the balance of these depends on the individual student and his or her grasp of productive play style and confidence in leading it.<sup>51</sup>

Another way in which to implement the teaching method of play practically and fruitfully is to provide children with a few options of activities and physical objects to manipulate in play. Following the reading or teaching of the lesson/Bible story for the

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<sup>50</sup> Larson, Mimi L., and Robert J. Keeley, eds, 238

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

day, the leader should introduce each option as well as possible ways in which to engage in them. *Bridging Theory and Practice in Children's Spirituality: New Direction for Education, Ministry, and Discipleship* provides the example of the David and Goliath story to further illustrate how this may look. Activity options may be laid out in stations. One station may include a few slingshots and soft objects resembling stones, along with a tall figure of Goliath to aim and shoot the "stones" at. The teacher may introduce this station as being where children can discover what it was like for David to kill Goliath. A second station may provide children with a roll of paper, measuring tape, and information of Goliath's height in modern units for children to measure themselves compared to Goliath. Yet another activity station may have simple costumes of armor with toy spears, shield, and a blanket fort for a tent. Children's pastors may introduce this station to children by inviting them to act out the story themselves, giving different children the roles of Saul, David, Goliath, and other soldiers.<sup>52</sup> Providing activity options such as these further assists the teacher in practically balancing guidance and freedom. Children are given the freedom to choose whichever activity they wish to engage in and may interact with the objects in the activity however they see fit, supporting the child-led aspect of productive play. However, by the leader predetermining which stations are available with which objects, as well as giving suggestions for how to engage with them, guidance is provided in leading students to making important conclusions of the lesson for that day.

### ***Teaching Methods: Collaborative Learning***

Important to Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, though in contrast with Piaget's Cognitive Developmental Theory, is our next teaching method: collaborative learning.

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<sup>52</sup> Larson, Mimi L., and Robert J. Keeley, eds, 237.

Also called cooperative learning or group work, collaborative learning is a teaching method in which children work together to complete a task or learning objective, with every group member contributing to the common goal. Social interaction and increased cognitive abilities when working together occur similarly in collaborative learning as they do in productive play. In a sense, collaborative learning can be thought of as a more structured version of productive play, useful when children may need a little more guidance or thoughtful conversation to learn new information than play produces.

Collaborative learning groups, especially when composed of varying levels of development, provide a space for students to help each other learn a concept, and work out any misunderstandings thereof.<sup>53</sup> Steven Zemelman, Harvey Daniels, and Arthur Hyde write about collaborative learning's effectiveness and efficiency in their book, *Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America's Schools*. First, the simple social cooperation causes students to learn and think at higher levels than when working independently,<sup>54</sup> similar to the accelerated development that occurs through play. Secondly, students receive more feedback to their questions, comments, and mistakes when working in groups. Rather than relying on one teacher to provide feedback to all twenty or so children, each child receives feedback from two or more students, and at a more constant rate.<sup>55</sup> In addition to these two reasons, collaborative learning divides the mental effort of difficult learning objectives among multiple brains, taking the stress off of the cognitive stamina of the individual child.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> "Collaborative Learning"

<sup>54</sup> Zemelman, Steven, Harvey Daniels, and Arthur Hyde. *Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America's Schools* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998), 12.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Levine, Laura E., and Joyce Munsch, 294.

Collaborative learning as a teaching method also fosters improvement in students' oral communication, leadership skills, self-management, and lesson retention<sup>57</sup> -- indicative of the superiority of Vygotsky's value of social interaction over Piaget's stress on the individual. Furthermore, students act as the collective More Knowledgeable Other and provide the scaffolding to build up fellow students' cognitive processing abilities. This is particularly true when collaborative learning functions in the context of a mixed-ability group. Students with further developed cognition assist the lower-ability students to encourage and correct them.<sup>58</sup> Mixed-ability collaboration impacts both the more developed, and the less developed students within the groups; lower-ability students receive the help they need with more difficult questions from their higher-ability peers, and the more developed of the group better internalize concepts from lessons when teaching them to other students.<sup>59</sup>

Implementing this teaching method yet again requires some practical knowledge in order to do it well. First and foremost, the pastor/leader must teach students how to properly collaborate in a group setting. Perhaps the best way to do this is to model correct small group function as a whole class. Students need guidance in establishing a productive and relational class community before they can be expected to carry out said group dynamics on their own.<sup>60</sup> To do this, teachers should introduce group dynamics and the concept of collaborative learning early on.<sup>61</sup> For typical elementary schools, this introduction would occur at the beginning of the new school year. Since churches typically function year-round, finding the best starting point may be more difficult.

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<sup>57</sup> "Collaborative Learning"

<sup>58</sup> Levine, Laura E., and Joyce Munsch, 294.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Zemelman, Steven, Harvey Daniels, and Arthur Hyde, 192.

<sup>61</sup> "Collaborative Learning"

Perhaps the best timing is on “Promotion Sunday” when students move to the next class/group according to what grade they will be entering in the new school year. Some churches do this at the end of the school year/beginning of summer, and some wait until the end of summer/beginning of the new school year. Regardless, this is typically the most natural time to introduce collaborative learning since students will be adjusting to new classes anyway. However, each children’s ministry should determine the “beginning of the year” based on the rhythm of the church calendar.

When introducing the teaching method of collaborative learning, pastors may want to begin by explaining why it is important for the learning experience.<sup>62</sup> Clearly, this explanation will be much simpler for the five and six-year-olds focused on in this thesis than in a middle school church class, but young children still want to -- and deserve to -- know why they have to do what they have to do. Leaders can explain why they are using collaborative learning in the classroom in an age-appropriate way by explaining that it gives children the opportunity to think for themselves, and to share what they think with their friends. By working together, we can accomplish more than when working alone and it lets us help our friends learn too! Once students understand why they should care about and participate in the learning groups, they will be open to the presentation of how to function in a group setting.

From there, students need to become comfortable with their classmates and form trusting relationships with said classmates. Fun icebreaker and team-building activities are an excellent way to engage five and six year old students and bring down their walls.<sup>63</sup> Asking open-ended questions about what children like to do, what their interests

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid

are, even something as simple as favorite colors helps children to begin identifying peers they resonate with and may feel comfortable talking to. Active icebreakers and team-building exercises are also a great way to establish meaningful relationships among students. Problem solving activities such as “untying” the knot formed by everyone grabbing hands across a circle or getting all members from one side of the room to another without dropping an item -- active games and tasks that require communication.

With a base-level comfort in communicating with one another, children are ready to learn how to appropriately discuss and collaborate in learning groups. Learning by doing is again the best approach here, so the teacher should model attentive listening and kind suggestions with the entire class. Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde suggest doing this by presenting a project to the class and asking them to brainstorm ideas for how to approach the project, and what they want the finished product to look like. After brainstorming, children can take turns providing feedback on which ideas they feel are the best and prioritizing what part of the project to work on when.<sup>64</sup> During this process, teachers demonstrate via action, and kindly remind students verbally when necessary, that when another student is speaking, everyone needs to listen attentively. Teachers also need to model and remind students that when responding to a question or comment, it needs to be done using kind words and a respectful tone. Within a church setting, this project used to model group dynamics and proper communication skills should be something that children see often, such as a piece of artwork to be hung in the children’s ministry space. By choosing a publicly displayed project, students go into collaborative learning groups with a sense of accomplishment associated with working together. Pastors can also point to the project and remind students of how they had to collaborate

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<sup>64</sup> Zemelman, Steven, Harvey Daniels, and Arthur Hyde, 193.

productively with their peers to complete the project. One project then serves three purposes: an example for introducing collaborative learning, a motivator for working in groups, and a reminder for when students are not functioning in groups as they should be.

Following this step, children's pastors may now begin regularly utilizing the teaching method of group work within their children's ministry classes. When doing so, they must plan ahead in order to keep the group work running smoothly. Due to the young age of students in the context of this thesis, it is most likely best for the teacher to predetermine group members based on who will work best together. Older students may be able to choose their own groupmates, but five and six-year-olds have trouble making this decision.

Planning activities and objectives ahead of time is also a key component of utilizing this teaching method; consider how the focus in learning groups point students to the lesson for the day.<sup>65</sup> These activities often look similar to the activities in the teaching method of play, but with a more specific end goal. For example, groups may need to arrange pictures of events in the right order following a Bible story. What is the order of creation in Genesis? Who did Jesus heal first, the blind man or the bleeding woman? This type of activity encourages students to retell the Bible story to each other, and carefully consider the key elements thereof. Other valuable collaborative learning activities include group discussions in which students are free to ask and answer their own questions. Give each group one or two guiding questions to help begin the discussion. *Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America's Schools* suggests asking students to discuss the pros and cons (or the good things and the bad things for the five and six year old vocabulary) of a decision made during the

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<sup>65</sup> "Collaborative Learning"

lesson/story for the day.<sup>66</sup> *Bridging Theory and Practice in Children's Ministry: New Directions for Education, Ministry, and Discipleship* suggests simply asking "I wonder" questions, and encouraging students to do the same, as well as come up with possible answers.<sup>67</sup> Providing students with some manipulatives like figurines or drawing materials to help explain and explore their questions is a good idea as well.

Also important when planning collaborative learning, is considering the physical space in which students will be meeting. Spaces should be practical for the activity students will be engaging in<sup>68</sup>. Stations for writing and drawing naturally need a large desk and containers with all the necessary supplies for writing and drawing: pencils, markers, paper, erasers, pencil sharpeners, etc. Stations for picture books, audiobooks, and interactive apps on an iPad or computer should be in quiet, comfortable spaces where kids can be immersed in the story. Comfy chairs, area rugs, soft lighting, bookshelves, and chargers for the iPads are examples of items that create the appropriate atmosphere in this space. Possibilities for setting up physical meeting spaces are endless, but the important thing to remember is they should be appropriate to the activity, inviting, and well-stocked. Distractions caused by not having a supply or being too close to another group are generally avoidable but have serious effects on the success of the collaborative learning teaching method.

One final suggestion for practically and effectively implementing collaborative learning is setting aside time to come back together as one big class to debrief.<sup>69</sup> Having a student or two from each collaborative learning group share the main ideas discussed or

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<sup>66</sup> Zemelman, Steven, Harvey Daniels, and Arthur Hyde, 193.

<sup>67</sup> Larson, Mimi L., and Robert J. Keeley, eds, 177.

<sup>68</sup> Zemelman, Steven, Harvey Daniels, and Arthur Hyde, 191.

<sup>69</sup> "Collaborative Learning"

determined during small group time allows other students to further engage with the lesson, as a student may share an idea another group never considered. An added benefit of this debriefing session is providing a space for the leader to get a feel for how well each group collaborated, as well as the main “take away” they received from group time. Planning this debriefing for the very end of the church also creates a smooth transition to closing announcements, prayer, and dismissal.

### ***Teaching Methods: Object Lessons***

Mentioned as part of both play and collaborative learning, we now turn to our third and final teaching method discussed in this thesis: object lessons. On the most basic level, objects are a necessary teaching method as neither play nor collaborative learning can be fully applied without the use of physical objects. However, the physical objects themselves serve a crucial role in children’s learning. Through our discussion of Piaget and Vygotsky’s theories of cognitive development, we have established that both theorists understand children to develop best through active learning; that is, interaction with the physical world as opposed to passively being told about new information. We also know from Piaget that children in the preoperational stage of development have trouble differentiating their mental processes from their physical environment, and fantasy play helps them build this ability.<sup>70</sup> Fantasy play, of course, uses objects and it is these objects that help connect the physical world with the imagination (internal thoughts). Furthermore, Vygotsky’s scaffolding process of cognitive development builds on what children are already familiar with to help move them to a new level of understanding.<sup>71</sup> At the ages of five and six, children are most familiar with the toys they

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<sup>70</sup> Levine, Laura E., and Joyce Munsch, 232.

<sup>71</sup> Levine, Laura E., and Joyce Munsch, 246.

play with (i.e. physical objects). Therefore, object lessons are a valuable teaching method with or without being used in combination with play and collaborative learning because they assist children in understanding the difference between the physical world and internal thought.

Object lessons have been recognized as a valuable teaching method in both elementary education and children's ministry. Jerome W. Berryman, creator of perhaps the most hands-on, object-oriented curriculum within the church, *Godly Play*, stresses the importance of the objects used for lessons, and even the importance of how they are stored. He explains how the first thing seen upon entering a typical *Godly Play* classroom is the most important objects: the Holy Family figurines.<sup>72</sup> From there, he explains that the most important objects are on the top shelves to represent the importance of the Bible stories they represent. Second level shelves hold objects of less significant Bible teachings, and bottom shelves hold extra, supplemental material such as maps, time lines, etc.<sup>73</sup> Following this description, Berryman points to Piaget's Cognitive Developmental Theory to support his stance on the teaching method of object lessons:

Working with such a place [one filled with objects representing biblical teachings and stories] allows children to make sensorial links among all of these images and means of Christian communication. Children at the preoperational and concrete-operational stages of cognitive development, as described by Piaget, can "think" theologically in such a place because the tools are at hand in a sensorimotor way. The careful arrangement and concrete embodiment of the communication system of the Christian tradition makes this kind of thinking possible.<sup>74</sup>

Berryman recognizes the need for objects in communication by preoperational stage children, the stage of focus for this thesis. Objects are necessary for communication by

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<sup>72</sup> Berryman, Jerome W. *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1991), 19

<sup>73</sup> Berryman, Jerome W, 22.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

children in this stage because of their lack of language, symbolic thinking, and internal thought development.

If Jerome Berryman is the creator of the most object-oriented children's ministry curriculum, Maria Montessori is the creator of the most object-oriented elementary education curriculum. Her namesake Montessori Method utilizes object lessons to the point that objects are the lesson. Students in Montessori schools learn by interacting with physical objects to engage in "sophisticated cognitive operations."<sup>75</sup> The physical objects give young children something to focus on to help them concentrate, as five and six-year-olds tend to have difficulty concentrating on something without a tactile aspect. Montessori Method objects are specifically called "didactic materials" and they serve the important purpose of "... mediat[ing] learning by uniting hand and mind."<sup>76</sup> Montessori describes how the objects help children learn through educating and exercising the senses.<sup>77</sup> First, didactic materials are used to teach base-level concepts such as color and texture, but as children develop, so do the materials to teach everything from hygiene to scientific method. Not only do the didactic materials help students learn, they help students to teach themselves, or "auto-educate" as Montessori calls the process of self-guided learning.<sup>78</sup> Students progress at their own pace based on when their "auto-education" through trial, error, and observation leads them to mastering a new skill or learning objective, interacting with different objects to learn different concepts.

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<sup>75</sup> Cossentino, Jacqueline. 2005. "Ritualizing Expertise: A Non-Montessorian View of the Montessori Method," 224.

<sup>76</sup> Cossentino, Jacqueline, 228.

<sup>77</sup> Montessori, Maria. "The Montessori Method: Scientific Pedagogy as Applied to Child Education in 'The Children's Houses,'" 167.

<sup>78</sup> Montessori, Maria, 169.

Montessori summarizes the use of didactic material in her work, “The Montessori Method,”

Our didactic material renders auto-education possible, permits a methodical education of the senses. Not upon the ability of the teacher does such education rest, but upon the didactic system. This presents objects which, first, attract the spontaneous attention of the child, and, second, contain a rational gradation of stimuli.<sup>79</sup>

Even without the employment of the Montessori Method, the relevance of object lessons in the classroom cannot be denied. *Best Practice* explains that learning should be experiential, where students take an active role in their education through hands-on, concrete activities as it is “... the most powerful and natural form of learning.”<sup>80</sup>

Practically, these objects can take the form of pieces directly related to a lesson, for instance, a thermometer and containers of hot and cold water when teaching about temperature. Or, when directly related objects are not possible, representative objects to add a concrete element to a story, like a sand box and two blue pieces of cloth to symbolize the parting of the Red Sea in Exodus. However they relate to the concept or story for the day, the teaching method of object lessons is crucial to children connecting their minds to their hands. Object lessons can even be incorporated into a teaching/story-telling time, as objects can be presented and passed around. Children can retell the story through objects to one another as a way to commit it to memory, or they can interact with objects through the aforementioned teaching methods of play and collaborative learning. The possibilities of object lessons are truly endless and completely adaptable to any children’s ministry environment, as well as to how independent (Piaget) or socially interactive (Vygotsky) the leader wants students to be.

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<sup>79</sup> Montessori, Maria, 174-175.

<sup>80</sup> Zemelman, Steven, Harvey Daniels, and Arthur Hyde, 8.

## Chapter Four: Practical Application

It is at this point we reach the final stage of learning and leading children's ministry: application. How do we put into practice the classroom management and teaching methods determined by researching behavioral and cognitive development theories given to us by Piaget and Vygotsky? Moreover, how do we apply these approaches to the most difficult of biblical topics to teach? To accomplish this, I will take us through a possible scenario for a Sunday morning children's ministry service utilizing the methodology discussed in this thesis:

### *Example Scenario*

At 9:55 AM, I open the door for students to enter my classroom. I have the K-1 students here, so they are all about five or six years old. I tell them good morning, and they smile and say hello back. During the five minutes before church begins, the children greet one another and talk about their weekends. At 10:00, I give a call and response that signals to them to be quiet and listen. "Good morning, everyone!" I say, "Please find a chair or a spot on the floor so we can get started today." I patiently wait for students to find their seats next to their friends and settle back down from the commotion of a transition. There are also three other adult leaders today, and for now, they join the children in finding seats so they can model good listening skills during story time. Knowing students require clearly laid out expectations, and that it has been a week since they have been in my classroom with my expectations, I take time to go through them, giving them an opportunity to recall rules themselves.<sup>81</sup> "Okay kids, let's go over our

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<sup>81</sup> This applies Piaget's teaching that young children's understanding of right and wrong depends on clear expectations laid out by authority, as well as the scaffolding process defined by Vygotsky in assisting children, but still allowing them to reach the final conclusion on their own.

rules for church! Who can remind us about Ms. Kim's rule about our voices?" Liam raises his hand, and when I nod to him proudly announces, "Voices stay off during story time unless Ms. Kim calls on us." "Excellent job, Liam!" I exclaim with a smile and a thumbs up,<sup>82</sup> "What about our rule about our body parts?" This time, no one raises their hand, so I build the scaffolding a little higher saying, "What is Ms. Kim's rule about what not to do with our hands and feet?" Now, several hands go up as they recall my expectations. Upon being called on, Olivia proudly states, "We do not touch others with them." We continue this for the rest of our class expectations: speak with nice words, don't be afraid to ask questions, and ask before taking something from another person. At this point it is about 10:10, time for story time.

As I place my Bible on the table, I ask the class, "Who remembers something about David?" Ben blurts out "He killed Goliath!" "Voices stay off until Ms. Kim calls on you," I say immediately.<sup>83</sup> Students raise their hands to answer, including Ben, so I give him an opportunity to learn and correct his mistake, and call on him. Ben says, "David killed Goliath," and I nod and say, "very good." "Does anyone remember something else?" No response. "It has to do with his job." Harper raises her hand and, when called on, asks, "Was he a king?" "He was a king!" I exclaim with a smile to reward her courage. In this moment, I see Lucas and Ethan poking each other's arms where they are sitting together at the back of the room, but choose to ignore it for now as

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<sup>82</sup> Here, we see immediate positive reinforcement of desired behavior concluded from chapter two's discussion of Skinner and Thorndike on how students respond to punishment and reward.

<sup>83</sup> Immediate negative response tells the student that his action right before my response was undesirable, as Piaget states that children correlate experiences with the action occurring at the same time.

they are not distracting anyone.<sup>84</sup> Instead, I open the Bible on the table to 2 Samuel 11, the location of today's story. Even though I know most students cannot yet read, and I will not be reading the story word-for-word anyway, it is important to me that they see the book from which the story comes.<sup>85</sup>

“Today we are going to talk about a time King David decided to do something very mean,” I say as I place a small figurine of a king on the table.<sup>86</sup> “Usually, kings go to war with the rest of the armies, but this time, King David decided to stay home,” I push the king figurine to the far right of table, and place a few army men toys on the far left; all but one is green, the other is orange. “One day while he was home, King David saw a beautiful woman named Bathsheba and wanted to marry her.”<sup>87</sup> I set a small figurine of a girl near the king on the right of the table. “The problem was, Bathsheba already had a husband! His name was Uriah.” With this, I point to the orange army man toy. “When David found out that he couldn't marry Bathsheba because she was already married, he decided to do something very mean, and very wrong. He decided to have Uriah put at the front of the battle so he would be killed!” As I say this, I pull the orange army man to the front of the group of army man toys and lay it on its side. “With Uriah dead, Bathsheba

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<sup>84</sup> Skinner holds that extinction occurs when a negative behavior is ignored, so the negative action is ignored.

<sup>85</sup> See discussion of objects helping connect abstract and physical in chapter three's discussion of object lessons as well as children's developing understanding of symbols as described by Piaget.

<sup>86</sup> The use of objects helps students focus, as well as understand the words said easier. See the paragraphs on object lessons.

<sup>87</sup> It is important to remember both the age of the children, as well as their current vocabulary when teaching Bible lessons with more mature content. Here, it is not appropriate, nor relevant to the main teaching of the story to explain that Bathsheba was bathing naked, and that David goes on to commit adultery and get Uriah drunk. The nudity and drunkenness are not age-appropriate, and five and six-year-olds do not even know the meaning of the word “adultery,” so it is better to give the simplified version here. However, it is still important that the story be introduced in some capacity and not skipped all together, as children should be aware of what is in the Bible.

didn't have a husband anymore, so David married her." I push the girl and the king figurines closer together.

I look up from the objects at the class and say, "I wonder why David did that." A few children shrug their shoulders in an "I don't know" gesture. "Does anyone else have a question they'd like to ask?"<sup>88</sup> Evelyn raises her hand and asks, "Why was he so mean to Uriah? He didn't have to kill him." "I don't know, Evelyn, I wonder that too," I respond. "There's more to the story, too! Do you want to hear more?" The children nod excitedly, and I continue.

"If you can believe it, David actually didn't know what he did was wrong!" I wait for the looks of surprise from the students. "So, God sent a man named Nathan to tell David a story that would teach him about his wrong choice." I then take every figurine off of the table, except the king. I place a figurine of a man next to the king on the far right of the table. "Here is the story Nathan told David: One time, there was a rich man and a poor man living next to each other." I place a tiny house figure and a larger castle figure on the left of the table. "The rich man had a lot of animals, but the poor man only had one little sheep that he kept as a pet." Next to the castle, I place a few toy sheep, cows, donkeys, and camels. Next to the tiny house, I place one toy sheep. "When the rich man needed some food for a friend coming over, instead of getting one of his animals, he stole the poor man's only sheep!" I take the one toy sheep from the tiny house and place it behind the group of toy animals by castle. "When Nathan finished telling David the story, David was super mad! 'Why would the rich man steal the poor man's sheep? He

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<sup>88</sup> This interaction serves two purposes: one is to model good group discussion for collaborative learning (see about collaborative learning in chapter three), as Bandura concluded children learn through observation and imitation. The other is that I am encouraging children to be curious, as both Vygotsky and Piaget believed children to learn best when motivated by curiosity.

had so many animals of his own!’ yelled David. Nathan said to David, ‘You are the rich man! You stole Uriah’s wife Bathsheba for yourself, and then you killed him!’ Then, David realized that what he had done was wrong. He went to pray and tell God he was sorry.” I take the animals, houses, and man off the table, then move the king next to the Bible in the center of the table.”

I once again turn my gaze to the children sitting on the other side of the table. “Do you think God will forgive David?” Milo raises his hand and says, “No, David stole and killed!” I say, “That’s an interesting thought, Milo. Does anyone else want to say something?”<sup>89</sup> Amari raises his hand to respond, “Yes he will, because you taught us that God always forgives us!” “That is so true, Amari. Sometimes, we may worry that what we’ve done wrong is too bad for God to forgive, like Milos said. But we know that God will always forgive us when we ask Him to, no matter what!”

By now, it is about 10:30, and time for stations. This week, I decided to provide the option of play or collaborative learning, and briefly introduce the options to the children.<sup>90</sup> The first play option is to retell the story using the figurines I used during story time, which allows them to better internalize the events of the story. I set the container of the figurines on the table and say, “One option for stations today is to play with the toys I used when telling our story. You and a few friends could take turns telling the story to each other, more maybe all work together to go through it!” I move to a large plastic

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<sup>89</sup> It is important not to discourage children as they process new information. Even if they are wrong, they are trying, so instead thank them for answering and ask if someone else has a different idea. This is part of providing scaffolding to move children through Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development; the social interaction has to be encouraging, not stressful for the child.

<sup>90</sup> Providing options while giving guidance through introduction and suggestion of how to interact with a station gives the balance of independence and guidance necessary to produce productive play, as described by Vygotsky and his colleagues.

storage bin on another wall of the room, and open it up, pulling out a robe, a crown, some swords, a dress, and some stuffed animals of various kinds, including one small lamb plush. “If you don’t want to use the pieces I used during story time, maybe you and some friends want to play dress up and act out our story!” Moving to another area of the room, I stand next to a large table with several chairs around it, and containers of crayons, colorful construction paper, white printer paper, stickers, colored pencils, and other art supplies. “Another station you could choose today is to draw something! You could draw a picture of David praying to God for forgiveness, or maybe you could work with some friends to write a book about our story today.” Finally, I walk to the coziest corner of the room. There are some bean bags on a thick rug, and a bookshelf containing picture books, a couple tablets, and a large piece of paper with two questions on it: “1. Why do you think King David stole Bathsheba from Uriah? 2. What did you like about Nathan’s story to David?” “If you want to do a relaxing station today,” I say, “you and some friends can look at a picture book about our story, or watch the video about King David on the tablet, then talk about it together. Remember, the questions are to get you thinking, but you can ask each other whatever you want!”

I dismiss the kids to find a station. The three other leaders and I each go to one of the stations so each one has an adult to interact with. At the table with the figurines, the leader takes the role of audience, occasionally encouraging students by saying, “Wow, what happened next?” as they try to recall the events of the story. The leader at the dress up station asks students what they want to do with the costumes, and when the kids agree they’d like to act out the story, she joins in, being the rich man, per the students’ instruction, and letting them control the play. I join the art table and ask some students to

tell me about what they are drawing. Occasionally, I prompt them to think deeper about the story, asking them *why* they chose to draw the picture they did, but I do not push them to answer what I think might be the “right” answer. Instead, I support their wondering as they use art to consider the new information presented to them during story time. Finally, another teacher joins in at the cozy bookshelf corner. He helps the children open the tablet to the David and Bathsheba video, a cartoon that acts out the story. When the video is over, he helps children read the two suggestion questions, then listens to what they have to say. Every now and then, he will add, “I wonder that too,” when a student asks a particularly tricky question.

Play and collaborative learning continue at stations for about a half hour until it is just after 11:00 AM. Knowing the adult service usually ends at 11:15, I again do our call and response to gain the attention of the students, and ask them to come back to the big group so we can share what we learned during stations.<sup>91</sup> After a few students share, I ask if someone would like to volunteer to say our closing prayer. Emma raises her hand, and after I call on her, closes her eyes, folds her hands, and prays, “Dear God, please help us not to steal anybody’s lamb. Amen.” I smile and give her a thumbs up. She is clearly trying to understand the meaning of the lesson today, and she was brave to pray aloud. I then tell everyone to have a great week and dismiss them to leave the classroom with their guardians.

This scenario looks at just one of the many ways to apply the classroom management and teaching method strategies discussed in this thesis. In the midst of

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<sup>91</sup> Debriefing is a way to internalize what children discover while engaged in collaborative learning groups, as described by *Best Practice*. It is also a way to transition us out from church less stressfully than if children were to be dismissed directly from the separate groups.

planning lessons and implementing new activities, it is vital that the motivation remains constant: students are the focus and the priority. Children's ministry is designed to serve children and help them to flourish as they learn about and grow to love God.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusion**

Throughout the many pages of this thesis, we have discussed how to approach children's ministry using the developmental theories and best practices taught in a typical Elementary Education program. Primarily, Jean Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development Theory and Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory assisted us in first understanding how children understand morality and punishment at the ages of five and six years old. Then, B.F. Skinner and Edward Thorndike's theories on operant conditioning were discussed in determining classroom methods applicable to where children are in development. Finally, appropriate strategies for presenting rules in ways understandable to these children, as well as how to properly correct and discipline children when those rules are broken within a children's ministry context were explored.

Moving into chapter two, we returned to Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development Theory and added Lev Vygotsky's Theory of Sociocultural Development to discover how children develop cognitively. These theories allowed us to determine what occurs within a child's brain when encountering new information. With this knowledge, we were able to examine three teaching methods: play, collaborative learning, and object lessons. For each teaching method, research was provided about how it is applicable to Piaget and/or Vygotsky's theories of cognitive development, as well as how to practically implement it within an average children's ministry classroom.

Finally, chapter four took these classroom management skills and teaching methods and applied them to an example lesson plan for a Kindergarten and first grade classroom during a church service. Example conversations, corrections, and positive/negative feedback were provided, along with how leaders could provide

scaffolding and guidance to students when engaging in object lessons, collaborative learning groups, and play. Furthermore, a possible object lesson based on a more “mature” or “adult” story in the Bible was presented using age-appropriate language and figurines to teach students the main themes of the story. Collaborative learning and station ideas were also provided as applicable to the example Bible story.

While the information provided in this approach to children’s ministry is valuable, this thesis has yet to explain *why* it is valuable, and why leading an effective children’s ministry is valuable. Why does it matter to understand how children learn? Why should we care about providing them with physical objects with which to communicate and consider new information? I shall seek to answer such questions of “Why?” in the remainder of these pages.

First and foremost, children’s pastors and teachers should value children, how they learn, and teaching them well because Jesus did this. In a culture where children were often expected to stay out of the way, Jesus invited them to sit with him and listen to his preaching. Not only did he invite them to join, but Jesus went on to say that it is only those who come to God as a child who will enter the kingdom of Heaven.<sup>92</sup>

Scripture clearly instructs parents and leaders of the faith community to actively teach God’s Word to children. The family of origin and the faith community are both instrumental in grounding spirituality and faith... [Children] need the help and guidance of invested adults to nurture them.<sup>93</sup>

If it is so important to Jesus that children be included in the Gospel, and Scripture instructs adults to teach children the Word of God, should we not make every effort to

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<sup>92</sup> *The HarperCollins Study Bible*. Student ed (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 1743.

<sup>93</sup> Larson, Mimi L., and Robert J. Keeley, eds, 147-148.

this in the best way possible? Would not the best way possible be to teach children in the way they learn best?

Previously in this thesis, we have established how play and object lessons help children learn new concepts and connect inner thoughts with the physical world but play also engages the imagination. Imagination engages the spirit. In play, children use their imagination to figure out their questions, try out their ideas, and explore new possibilities. These are deeply spiritual activities that can no doubt lead children to God.<sup>94</sup> Play also engages the mirroring behavior, meaning children tend to mimic what they see when playing. When doing this, children are working to understand what it is they observed. Therefore, by mimicking via play what children observe in church, they are able to better understand what occurred. *Bridging Theory and Practice in Children's Ministry* highlights the importance of this process by telling a story of a child who "played church."

One of the author's nephews... would come home from church and get into his bathrobe, grab a children's Bible, and begin to "preach." This preaching usually consisted of various parts of the sermon, church liturgy, and potluck dinner announcements. HE then would grab a Ritz cracker and some juice to serve communion to the family. When that was completed, he would climb up on his toy box to play the "organ" on the windowsill, conducting the choir, nodding when they needed to get louder or softer. While adorable to watch, this child's play was serious business for him. He was working hard to make sense of what he experienced in church, integrating new understandings and information with his current knowledge. Through play, a child's understanding of faith can deepen.<sup>95</sup>

In the end, we should value putting together an effective ministry that honors how children communicate and learn because we should value children's spirituality. An effective ministry is one that teaches children to know God and to love God. Both of these components are necessary to the lifelong faith we hope to instill in the students of

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<sup>94</sup> Larson, Mimi L., and Robert J. Keeley, eds, 228.

<sup>95</sup> Larson, Mimi L., and Robert J. Keeley, eds, 232.

our children's ministries. We teach students to know God by teaching them the stories and teachings of the Bible in ways tailored to how they learn best because we want that knowledge to be engrained in their brains, so they always know the qualities and actions of the God they believe in. We teach students to love God by being an example to them of how God loves. Jesus loved children by including them, listening to them, and encouraging them – we should do the same. Having the patience to help students work through their questions and explore their faith using their imagination instills in them shows that they are valued, not only by children's pastors and leaders, but by God. Ultimately, an effective ministry is vital because children are the future of the church. Children are the present of the church. Children are loved and blessed by God. How can we not give them the best teaching possible?

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