

Puppets for Autistic Teenagers

Subjects: Others

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The benefits of puppetry for children in therapeutic and educational contexts are well established, with puppets shown to have improved children's learning, their relationships with adults and other children, and their self-confidence and communication. Adding to this research is an emerging body of evidence that shows the many benefits of puppets for autistic children both as a form of early intervention and as a teaching strategy in the early years of schooling.

Keywords: autism ; puppets ; teenagers ; education ; therapy ; inclusive education

1. What Is a Puppet?

A puppet can be simply described as a children's toy, like a doll that can be moved by a string or a human hand. Astles and Tsaplina ^[1] expand on this definition to present puppets as an illusion of life, an object that, through the movement and vocalisations of the puppeteer, invites the audience or observers to join in the creative/imaginative act and regard the puppet as real. The authors define this version of "real" with a puppet as its "liminal; status, between life and non-life" ^[1] (p. 297), a connection to the inner/imaginative world and reality. Historically, puppets have adopted this position in rituals and ceremonies, including those that involve an important rite of passage and are considered a transitional object ^[2] one that, like a special blanket or babies' pacifiers, is able to support and comfort individuals as they approach or undergo periods of uncertainty and change. Applied theatre practitioner Dr Melissa Trimmingham ^[3] describes such an example in her account of her son and the companionship and security that a puppet called Roland provided him as a child and a young adult. In her research story and later studies, puppets communicate and convey feelings and can act as a bridge or a mediating tool ^[3] between one person's experience of the world and the experience of others.

The role of puppets as a mediating tool in education is illustrated in numerous studies, and most frequently in the early years of schooling. Puppets have been used to enhance communication in early education for children with and without disabilities ^{[4][5]}; to support inclusion ^[6]; and as a pedagogical approach to address the communicative, social and behavioural preferences of autistic primary school students ^[7]. In secondary education, puppets have been used for a variety of learning intentions, including the use of puppets to build student confidence ^{[8][9]} when learning English as an additional language. Mayes ^[10] also found that puppets provided students with confidence and a safer space to share their "voice" as part of an ethnographic research project. As one student said, "You got to express yourself and the previous situations through puppets, so you didn't really care how you looked or how you sounded, because you couldn't really see your face. [...] It could be coming from the student that never gets in trouble or a student that always gets in trouble. You wouldn't know" (p. 111). The capacity of puppets to provide protection to the speaker contributes to a supportive and collaborative learning environment, reported in other curriculum areas, such as Science, Drama, Design and Technology ^{[11][12]}.

The protective quality of the puppet, which allows an individual to speak "through" the puppet ^{[4][5][6]}, has led to their application in therapeutic contexts as they provide individuals with an alternative way to express their feelings and experiences. Therapists have engaged in puppetry for a wide range of purposes that include supporting patients in medical situations, play therapy, family therapy, survivors of child abuse and domestic violence, and individual art and group therapy ^[13]. Diane Chiles' ^[14] work with puppetry in hospitals is the subject of a documentary about Bernard, a puppet patient who helps to take away children's fears by giving them a place to discuss their feelings and ask questions about their health and medical procedures. Puppets have been used to address other uncomfortable or traumatic events in Play Back theatre, with the puppet used as an object to act out stories or personal experiences by both the therapists and the participants ^[13]. Theatre companies such as Puppets in Transit have used puppets to heal intergenerational trauma brought about by a period of dictatorship in Chile ^[15]. In these contexts, the puppet, because of its sensory and expressive qualities, enabled people to communicate their feelings safely. Puppeteer Mathew Bernier explains how "protect what is expressed can be denied and blamed on the puppet, so that inner emotional worlds are revealed in non-threatening ways" ^[13].

The object of the puppet facilitates interactions, communicates, and can represent aspects of life and perspectives, including those whose voices are less confident, such as children or those who have been marginalised because of disability or cultural diversity [2]. Studies speak to the capacity of puppets to cross boundaries between people created by attitudinal barriers and unequal relationships, such as those between student and teacher, doctor and patient, or adult and child. The puppet can remove these barriers and help shape new understandings of people, events and even concepts such as disability [2][6][12]. Included in this research are studies that suggest puppets hold a great deal of promise and effectiveness as a communicative tool for autistic children [5][6][16]. The most recent of these was conducted at the Yale Child Center for Research, in collaboration with the Jim Henson Foundation that found autistic infants preferred to look at the face of a puppet and not the face of a person and recommended further investigations on the effectiveness of puppets as a therapeutic tool for this population [16].

2. Listening to the Puppets in Education

Melissa Trimingham [3] contributes a great deal to our appreciation of the possibilities of puppetry in school settings. The author proposes an alternative approach to education and suggests that schools and teachers consider an “autistic” curriculum (p. 124). This concept is informed by an interdisciplinary project titled *Imagining Autism*, an innovative study that brought together theatre artists, psychologists, educators and students intended to measure the effectiveness of a sensory and theatrical intervention to support the communication and social connectedness of autistic students between the ages of seven and twelve [3][17]. The sensory-rich experience involved the use of a tent or pod, props, materials, digital media, lighting, sound effects, masks and puppets to build five different environments that included an under the sea, arctic, outer space, under the city and a forest theme. These wonder worlds were created to give students an opportunity to have their sensory preferences acknowledged and included in their learning environments [17] and a place to form connections with the adults. Each adult was specifically trained in approaches that recognise the communicative preference associated with autism and was equipped to respond with sensitivity to the verbal and non-verbal expressions of the students involved [17]. Trimingham [3] aligns the intention of this approach with the concept of “Subjectification” and one of the purposes of education defined by educational philosopher Gert Biesta [18]. Subjectification is concerned with the formation of identity, of the manner and individual ways of being and responding to the world that is authentic, autonomous and uniquely our own. *Imagining Autism* provided autistic students with a place for this type of “being” and to have this acknowledged in the presence of others. As part of the sensory environment, the puppet was part of a rich array of communicative tools that added to each student’s sense of agency and autonomy by giving them a way to make and express meaning.

The appeal of the puppets to autistic students [19] may be explained by their liminal status [1]. A puppet, as a less complicated, less “alive” version of a living thing, is more predictable than a complex human being or other creature and can be controlled by the puppeteer. The puppet (or puppeteer) can, therefore, provide a gentle or low-risk introduction to a living thing and provide autistic students the practice or rehearsal for future encounters with people or animals. This capacity of the puppet was outlined in one of the case studies of Mary and her physical interaction with a bird puppet that was seen to inspire her latter interest in the family cat and expand to other animals [20]. The opportunity to care for a bird (puppet) appears to be the impetus or the starting place for her to develop meaning about animals and form a concrete understanding.

Puppets can also be used by teachers as part of their professional learning and preparation for inclusive practice [3]. Trimingham [3] describes puppets as an alternative way to bring about “joint attention”, which is the shared focus on an object that is initiated by one person to another. In young children we often see this with young children pointing to an object to indicate their interest and their desire for an adult to share that interest with them. In the classroom, a puppet can bring about joint attention and be a starting point for interactions between students and their teachers/carers. As found in studies with younger children [5], the puppet reduced anxiety and stress in the learning environment and added to the ease of communication between autistic students and their teachers. Trimingham [3] attributes this phenomenon to the “metaphorical distance” (p. 127) created by the puppet that creates a sense of space and possibly a less intense or demanding interaction that is often present in the discussions between students and teachers. Puppets added to students’ willingness to participate in new or creative experiences and to play [20]. The puppet as a teaching tool also gives teachers the distance to observe students respond with a puppet. From this observation, through or with the puppet teachers in the studies [3][17][19], they gained insight into the world of autistic students that led to a shift in their understanding and perspective of autism, the experiences of their students and changes in pedagogy.

One such example is seen in a study by Carr [21], who described the many ways her school used puppets with high school students. The article includes how puppets were utilised by the school counsellor to reduce the stress or confusion her three-month absence may bring about for her autistic students. The school counsellor created a puppet called Lucy to

maintain her connection with her students during her time away from school. The puppet accompanied her during her travel overseas, and she sent regular blogs with her students to remain part of their school routine and support their understanding of her and her trip overseas. The puppet was the object that represented the teacher, who was used to share the story of her travels and continue her presence at school. As with young children, puppets were central in forming and sustaining close bonds between autistic teenage students and their educators and contributed to a less stressful and more positive learning environment.

3. Listening to the Puppets in Therapy

Perhaps unsurprisingly, autistic teenagers participating in therapy were also found to reveal more of their abilities and views of the world when a puppet was involved in the process. Malhotra ^[22] describes how the process of puppet creation with a sixteen-year-old autistic girl created a method for her to learn new interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. The case study described the intervention that included twelve thirty-minute sessions over a three-month period. The sessions were intended to support the client named Lisa (not her real name) to manage her emotions and develop her ability to recognise and respond to her own feelings and the feelings of others. The therapist created puppets that could express these feelings prior to their sessions; for example, as Lisa often experienced anxiety or worry, the therapist constructed three types of puppets to depict that emotion. Lisa would then be invited to choose one of the puppets to create herself and then use it in puppet play. Over the twelve sessions, a range of types of puppets was introduced, including finger puppets, hand puppets, sock puppets and paper bag puppets. Once Lisa made the puppets, she was invited to use them and explore different ways to respond to social situations, to practice recognising the feelings of the puppet, to role-play possible solutions or advise the puppet on how to react. In this puppet play, the therapist could see the strengths of her client, her capacity to identify her feelings and the feelings of others, and build her confidence in managing her reactions and ability to self-regulate. The puppet creation also provided a space to externalise her feelings and emotions and depict her feelings in a way that was concrete, such as drawing tears to communicate her awareness of her stress. In this way, the puppet acted as an object to which she could transfer her feelings or, as Trimmingham ^{[10][23]} suggests, a safe object to trust and share their experience of the world. The puppet allowed her to voice her feelings and preferences and to find ways herself to best cope with difficult or distressing situations, such as her loneliness or times of stress.

4. Listening to the Puppet Findings

The use of puppets in educational and therapeutic settings often shares similar goals and seeks to develop the self-expression and social and emotional wellbeing of participants. In the upper levels of schools, the use of puppets with autistic teenagers (and non-autistic peers) seems rare, and yet its application in therapy suggests it has much to offer in the field of education. It is here that the research illustrates the possibilities of the puppets to change relationships and foster the “socialization” ^[18] that is so much a part of learning in schools. As in studies with children in the younger years ^[6], puppets may be used to provide comfort and safety to autistic secondary students in their communication and interactions in class. The process of puppet making may also serve as a process for educators to advance their understanding of the experience of autistic teenagers and young adults. The joint or collaborative act of puppet making may build trust, as shown in therapeutic settings ^{[22][24]} with older students and in work with young children with autism in other studies ^[23].

For autistic adolescents, puppetry was found to be transformative, to bring about the conditions that made the participants feel safe in expressing their inner self and, in doing so, develop their connection to others and grow their social, communicative and creative self ^{[22][23][24][25][26]}. Successful use of puppets with autistic teenagers in therapy has salient points that include the carefully selected choice of puppets, the construction and co-creation of the puppet ^{[4][22][26]}, and the use of puppets to express thoughts and feelings. Educators can select from a vast array of puppets to make with adolescents and should do so with careful consideration of their sensory preferences and the interests of the participants involved. One example of this was seen in Parvathi’s study ^[24], which was built on his client’s preference for drawing with paper and Malhorta’s creation of a variety of puppets to interest Lisa’s involvement in art ^[22]. The process of making puppets seems underused in educational contexts and one that has wide application for inclusive pedagogy.

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