"Intervention on a String": What is the Impact of Puppetry as an Intervention Tool on the Communication Skills and Self-Esteem of Children, Including Children with Disabilities and Additional Challenges?

Leanne Guihot-Balcombe
University of Newcastle, Australia

Abstract

"Intervention on a String" sought to examine puppets and puppetry in the education domain. This research project sought to examine puppets in the classroom to see if their inclusion helped raise levels of student engagement, socialisation, and participation. Moreover, this project sought to understand how and why puppets, as pedagogical tools, might foster communication and social skills that help build relationships and potentially increase self-esteem in young people.

Puppets have been used throughout the ages for entertainment as well as for the transmission of cultural stories, histories, and traditions, and have been described as

an effective means of communicating with children (Bernier & O'Hare, 2005; Blumenthal, 2005; Sposito et al., 2016). However, an extensive examination of the literature surrounding puppets and puppetry in education showed that there is little research-based evidence surrounding their educational impact and benefits (Krögera & Nupponen, 2019).

Introduction

Puppets have long been recognised as a powerful way to excite, engage, and communicate with children (Fisch & Truglio, 2000; Gardner, 2009; Truglio & Fisch, 2014). There is much anecdotal evidence to endorse the use of puppets in the early childhood setting as well as in the therapeutic domain. They are used as a tool to educate, counsel, nurture, and promote trust with young people (Bernier & O'Hare, 2005; Blumenthal, 2005; Sposito et al., 2016). However, examination of literature surrounding puppets and puppetry in the education setting has revealed that there is little research-based evidence surrounding their educational impact and benefits (Krögera & Nupponen, 2019).

The research project, 'Intervention on a String' sought to examine the benefits that puppets bring to the education domain, seeking to illuminate their capacity to foster communication and social skills, build relationships and increase self-esteem in young people. The project consisted of a 10-week intervention that explored puppets as both creative and pedagogical tools. Puppet play-building sessions ran for 1 hour, once a week for 10 weeks.

Using a mixed method, embedded research design, this project was implemented with 75 participants drawn from 3 composite classes (grades 3-4, ages 8-10). Qualitative data included observational field notes recorded reflectively by the researcher, student logbooks that were scaffolded to include space for puppet designs, short stories and reflections, and the 10-week puppet play-building intervention that integrated puppetry, puppet design, story-writing, and play-building, leading to a performance in week 10. Quantitative data were gathered via two surveys —the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and Measuring Elementary School Students' Social and Emotional Skills Questionnaire (MESSSES) (Child Trends, 2014; Rosenberg, 1965)—that bookended the project.

Observational field notes gathered throughout this project offer experiential and emotional reflections that reinforce and validate the positive benefits of puppets and puppetry in the primary classroom setting. This qualitative data provides a window into the experiential impact of the puppet play-building intervention, including influences and changes observed, and nuances of growth in students' communication skills, social skills, engagement, participation, and self-esteem.

The impact and growth in these areas of holistic development are examined here. Specifically, this article will discuss pedagogical approaches including quality creative arts practices (QCAPs), the impact of key elements and themes that emerged as a result of the intervention, the impact of the researcher's puppet named Revae, the puppets designed and created by the participants and used throughout the intervention, puppetry, and finally, a summary to discuss project findings.

Pedagogy

The pedagogical approach used throughout the puppet play-building intervention was the constructivist approach. This pedagogical style is an approach that is well-suited to the drama classroom, is student-centred, and collaborative in nature (Ewing, 2010).

Participating students were open and relaxed while the puppet play-building programme was in session, and this relaxed atmosphere grew as the project continued. Most, if not all, students were observed to be happy to engage in the whole-class discussions and comfortable to participate in the physical/practical activities. Overall, there was observable growth in the confidence, spontaneity, and communication levels of all students in the sessions.

Freedom of expression in the sessions was observed via social interactions and exchanging of ideas by participating students, documented by the researcher. The confidence of the participating students notably increased, as they were observed sharing ideas and experiences throughout the puppet play-building intervention, particularly during the story writing sessions. During whole-class discussions, which were integral to the story writing sessions, a positive shift in the freedom of communication, socialisation, and self-expression was observed in the participating students. An example of this was highlighted in case study 1, where a student who had often been marginalised in the classroom setting became emboldened enough to engage in whole-class discussions, share ideas, and was generally more accepted by his peers.

The story writing sessions were met with a positive response, with most students expressing enthusiasm and passion when writing their puppet superhero short stories. Only a few students (around 3–4 in each group) struggled with this aspect of the programme, and this was successfully navigated using literacy scaffolds, modelling structure, and with additional individual guidance from the researcher, teachers, and School Learning Support Officer (SLSO). This resulted in a puppet superhero short story written or drawn by each participating student. This was an important component of the intervention, as the stories written by the students fed directly into the characterisation and design of their puppets. This ensured that when the students began using their puppets during play-building and improvisational sessions, they had a solid understanding of their unique puppet, its character, and its abilities.

The story writing sessions helped to build the puppet characters and also gave space for participating students to share ideas and socialise. The researcher and the classroom teacher often observed students interacting with each other with puppet on hand, engaging their superpowers and displaying unique traits different to their own personas, which all came out of the writing sessions. In addition, the whole-class discussions that often proceeded the exploration of the storybooks that were used in early weeks of the intervention helped to deepen understanding and relationships as students shared stories and personal experiences.

Observations of students with disabilities or additional challenges reflected growth in areas of self-confidence and self-expression during whole-class discussions and drama activities throughout the intervention. This correlated with the increased presence of the students' puppets used extensively during the drama sessions. Two or three students were happy to puppeteer but were reticent to speak dialogue during the early rehearsals for the whole-class plays. However, by week 9, this had changed completely with all participating students willing and eager to have lines to deliver in the class plays, including Sophie, who had grown in confidence (see Case Study 3). She had become more forthcoming with her ideas and happily interjected during class discussions, which her teacher noted and remarked on privately to the researcher. Sophie, although a bubbly student, was usually quiet during class discussions, being seen as "childish" by her peers.

All participating students exhibited growth in confidence and self-expression during the improvisational activities and drama sessions, which was markedly evident among quieter students and those with additional needs and challenges. As the intervention progressed, there was observable growth in the students who became more confident and eager to participate, arguably attributable to the use of their puppets.

Puppets and Puppet Creation

Observational field notes were recorded by the author, reflectively for each group, after each session. The observational field notes revealed that the storytelling and story writing sessions were engaging and effective learning sessions. The fact that every single participating student was able to complete a puppet superhero short story in their logbook was a testament to the success of the storytelling and story writing sessions. Together, the storytelling and story writing components helped students to develop a deep understanding of the main theme and sub-themes that ran through the project, creating layers of understanding that informed the whole-class plays. The storybooks, in conjunction with the storytelling and story writing sessions, provided students with a creative and safe environment to explore moral dilemmas and courage and promoted discussions and ideas around tolerance and the dangers of judgemental assumptions. This was effective when the students came to write their stories and

particularly helpful when creating dialogue for play-scripts, adding relevance and ownership of the whole-class puppet performance.

The writing of the puppet stories was an important process within the overall puppet play-building intervention. The puppet superhero stories informed the students as puppeteers, helping them understand the nature of their puppet's personality and physicality. This meant that when it came time to improvise dialogue, share ideas, and create scenes together for the creation of the whole-class puppet plays, the students had a deep understanding of their puppet's character and their puppet's place within their play. Throughout the puppet play-building project, participating students contributed to the dialogue, plotline, and movement within each of the whole-class plays. Observations and logbooks recorded ideas, reflections, and interactions between students that were filled with pride and confidence surrounding the amazing puppets they had designed and created. Pride was also evident in their puppet superhero short stories, shared with their peers.

The puppet design and making process allowed participating students to have full artistic and creative freedom. This freedom of expression helped to foster confidence, social skills, and artistic expression. The designing and making of their own unique puppets for use in the improvisational activities and ultimately for performance in the whole-class plays also contributed to an increase in self-esteem. Observational field data illustrated holistic growth in students, including some students who were formerly quiet becoming more vocal and engaged during the puppet design/making and puppet performance process. The classroom teachers also observed and commented on this aspect.

Throughout the puppet play-building programme, growth in students' communication and social competence was natural and flowed easily. This was observed when participating students shared ideas and materials, and when they negotiated and exchanged ideas in whole-class discussions; and it was particularly evident when using their puppets in drama sessions, rehearsals, or whole-class performances. Growth in holistic areas such as empathy, resilience, tolerance, patience, and compassion, as well as the enhancement of creative expression was observed throughout the puppet play-building intervention.

When interacting, playing with, and performing with their puppets, all students, including students with disabilities and additional challenges, comfortably slotted into activities and discussions with their peers, displaying excitement, enthusiasm, and confidence. As the intervention progressed and the students interacted with each other through their puppets, the shyer students began to exhibit exuberant and playful behaviour that at times surprised their peers. This was often the catalyst for the more confident students to relax and become more playful. It was almost as though the playfulness and new-found confidence of the shyer

students helped to unlock the inhibitions of the rest of the participating students. The ability to let go and immerse in play was contagious; this phenomenon was observed across all three classes. This behaviour also encouraged some of the other more egocentric students to totally immerse themselves in the drama exercises and puppeteering activities (refer to Case Study 4).

The students loved to discuss their puppets and puppet stories, and this sometimes developed into personal conversations about their day or fun things they were planning for the weekend. This showed the broadening of their communication and relationship building skills. The puppets designed and made by the students had become the ultimate icebreaker and protective shield; during rehearsals, they were instrumental in giving students the confidence needed for performance. The students' enthusiasm for both their puppets and the whole-class puppet play grew with each passing week. In fact, by week 10, the excitement surrounding the final performance was palpable. All three whole-class puppet performances were successful, with observational field notes from week 10 revealing the students' displayed joy, pride, and a sense of achievement.

The students embraced puppetry and the puppet making process. They also embraced Revae, the puppet that was brought into the project by the researcher. This puppet was accepted as another member of the class, and this sentiment was repeated across all three class groups. Revae was a powerful and inspiring inclusion to the project, with all participating students wanting to converse with her to ask her about her likes and dislikes, and even wanting to hug her and be her friend. The more she was involved in drama activities and rehearsal sessions for the whole-class plays, the more relaxed the students were with her and the process. Often, at the beginning of a session (after having met Revae), the students would ask after her, wanting to see and talk to her and always eager for her inclusion.

The initial meeting of Revae saw almost identical responses across all three classes. Students were observed making remarks such as "she's creepy," "she's ugly," and "oh, she's weird, strange looking." However, this changed almost immediately after one or two students alerted the others to the effects of their insensitive behaviour, which resulted in the students quickly modifying their behaviour to express compassion and kindness. This behavioural adjustment was extraordinary, as they suddenly began to talk warmly with Revae, asking her questions, smiling, and gently stroking her, treating her like any other student in their class. This phenomenon occurred in all three classes.

Through the puppet Revae, the students became familiar with the idiom "you can't judge a book by its cover." They developed a deeper understanding surrounding insensitive and bullying behaviour, and how crushing, harmful, and even dangerous hurtful words can be.

All three classroom teachers were also amazing during this initial meeting with Revae, particularly during the whole-class discussions. During discussions surrounding concepts raised throughout the intervention, the teachers helped to guide the students through the feelings they were navigating, openly praising the wonderful change in their behaviour and empathetic treatment of Revae. Through robust discussions with the students, they linked their experiences with Revae to the students' own personal experiences in the class, schoolyard, and beyond the school environment. The Wattle Primary School (WPS) teacher commented on how this example of judgement and inclusion would be useful for the Indigenous unit she was exploring with her class.

Case Studies

The following 4 case studies present and explore changes in student perceptions, behaviour, and self-expression observed throughout the puppet play-building intervention. As the notes were taken by the researcher in a journal form, they are written in the first person.

Case Study 1: Tom

This case study presents a student from group 1 of 2, Snowdrop Primary School (SPS.G1) with developmental delay who will be known as Tom. Tom's teacher advised me that he was "quiet and withdrawn most of the time," but she then predicted that he might enjoy playing with the puppets. When I first met Tom, he was wide-eyed and sat quietly, two rows back in the whole-class group, as I introduced the project. As the session progressed, he drew closer and closer to me, and when we explored hand puppets together, he reveled in the excitement of puppets and puppetry.

The following week, I observed the SPS.G1 students as they bounced up and down in line, waiting to come into the classroom. They rushed through the door and scrambled to sit on the carpet, and Tom sat right at the front, directly in front of me. During the session, we discussed puppet superpowers and designs. Tom was animated and keen to show me his drawings. Later, Mrs. B told me that last week, all the students, especially Tom, wanted to talk about was the puppet session and how much fun it was. She also noted that Tom had been generally more responsive in class.

As I arrived in week 3, Tom approached me eager to introduce me to his mother. His mother told me that her son loved the puppet workshops and that she had never seen him express so much enthusiasm about a school activity before. She said, "I have never seen him get so excited to come to school—he loves puppet days." I replied, "I'm so glad. He is a caring and passionate student and a joy to have in this group."

As the intervention progressed, I observed that Tom was becoming completely at ease in the classroom environment. He was eager to engage, happy to answer and ask questions, and enthusiastically participated in whole-class discussions. During the first two sessions, I noted that his peers sometimes laughed at him and occasionally mocked him. I responded to this behaviour by intently listening to Tom and always valuing his input. By focusing on him in this way, valuing his ideas for his puppet design and puppet superhero story, I observed his confidence beginning to grow. His peers were also observed responding positively to the puppet design and puppet making process and were becoming more tolerant of Tom's excited outbursts. I watched as they became generally kinder and more tolerant of him, which had a two-fold effect (i.e. holistic growth, both socially and intrapersonally for Tom and his peers and enhancement of Tom's self-esteem) as he began to feel more at ease to be himself. This may have been due to the novelty of a newcomer in their classroom. However, I do not believe this was the case, as Tom's behaviour—and the behaviour of his peers—continued to positively grow throughout the intervention. Arguably, this behavioural shift that many of the students were experiencing was attributable to the puppet play-building intervention and to the empowerment that puppets and puppetry provided, fostering confidence and self-expression.

Throughout the puppet play-building intervention, a sense of community had been created. Through the exploration of holistic concepts such as difference, tolerance, and friendship, combined with the design and creation of puppets, social interactions and relationship growth was observed, particularly when the students were using their puppets. This creative, quality learning environment helped to foster a shift in the holistic skills of participating students. The impact on Tom, particularly while working with his puppet, meant he was more comfortable to express himself and forge relationships. This helped him to become more confident, animated, interactive, and proud to share his ideas and designs. Although his peers were also more interactive, they had become more empathetic through their understanding of difference and tolerance, which positively influenced key areas of friendship and support.

Case Study 2: Hope

During a writing session in week 6 of the project, a student from WPS (who will be known as Hope) was alone and looking distressed. I approached her to see what was troubling her. She had systematically crumpled up every page of her logbook. She looked up at me as if to say "Well, what do you want?" I approached the learning support teacher who informed me that she (Hope) had "a difficult lunchtime period." I approached Hope and asked her if I could take her logbook, and she handed me the crumpled ball without any eye contact. After the session, I spoke with the classroom teacher, who informed me that Hope lived with relatives and had a tough life, trouble socializing, and struggled academically.

I took Hope's logbook home and un-crumpled the pages to find a lovely puppet design and the beginnings of Hope's story (the story being unfinished might have contributed to her anxiety). I cut out her design and other sections of the logbook that she had completed and flattened the creases out as best I could (see Figures 1, 2, and 3 below). Taking a brand-new logbook, I glued her work carefully into place and brought it to the next session (week 7). Once I had the class working on their puppet stories, I approached Hope quietly, and handed her the new logbook, and said:

> "I know you were struggling last week."
>
> She replied, "Yes, I was having a really bad day."
>
> I said, "We all have days like that. I've got this for you (she smiled). I really love your puppet design."
>
> She looked at it and said, "Oh, you've glued them in!"
>
> "Yes", I said.
>
> She hugged me.
>
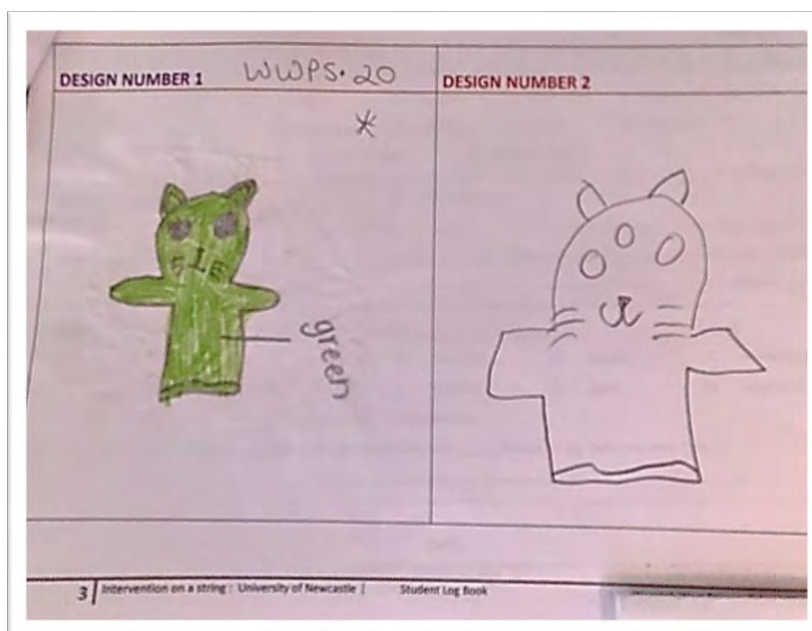> We both smiled, and I moved on to help other students with their stories.

Figure 1. Puppet Design, 'Hope.'
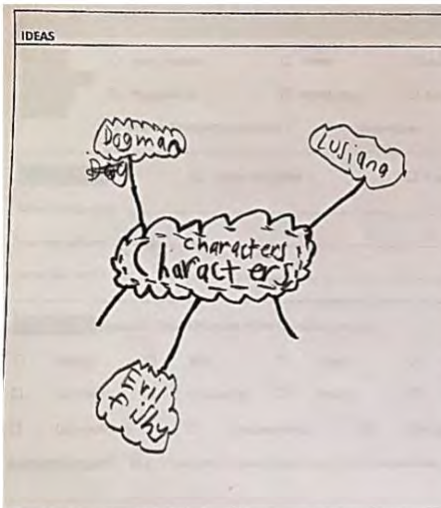
Figure 2. Puppet Superpowers, 'Hope.'

Figure 3. Puppet Story, 'Hope.'

It was interesting to note that among her superpowers were, "read minds, speed, fly and invisibility." This could be interpreted as her need to escape and hide. In her story, I began to wonder if she was "Lusiana, the cat" or "Dogman Dog." Also, her perfect spelling of the word "obnoxious" stood out as unusual, given it would be considered a difficult word for most students in her developmental stage to spell.

Hope joined in with the class activities from then on. She was still often distanced from her peers, but when we gathered on the floor to discuss the activities for the day, she would often sit close to the front to the side of the main group and would sneak me a quick smile. I noticed that she began to participate in the story writing component of the final writing sessions, with help from the SLSO. The SLSO was quick to tell me that "underneath it all, Hope was a delightful child" who was very confused about her world and the expectations surrounding her. They gave me an understanding that this young girl felt lost and scared, and that she tried to "cover this with bad behaviour" and presenting as "not caring" and "mean." It was clear that Hope desired acceptance and a sense of belonging—a community.

Key themes were observed emerging in Hope, such as "puppet armour," "anonymity," "interactive," "self-expression," and "pride." "Puppet armour," refers to the way she "interacted" and performed with her peers using her puppet, with a degree of "anonymity." Hope discovered her voice, and perhaps her place in her class. This was evident in the way she began to sit with her peers during whole-class activities and discussions, something she rarely did. In addition, she exhibited "pride" in her work that she thought had been destroyed. In the last 4 weeks of the programme, I watched her grow in confidence and saw her happily perform with her puppet in week 10.

Case Study 3: Sophie

This case study presents Sophie, a student from the WPS class, who was a bubbly, enthusiastic girl, full of energy. During week 6, Sophie approached me and asked, "Is it okay if I don't have a line to say in the play? Can I just stand with the others and hold my puppet?" There had been two students (from 79 students) who had similar requests. I said, "Of course. You don't have to speak a single word. Are you happy to be in the group and puppeteer?" She replied, "Oh, yes. Look, my puppet has long hair, and she can fly." She ran off, flying her puppet across the classroom, which drew interesting responses from her peers, including eye-rolling and turning away from her and whispering to each other.

In the second to last week of Term 3 (week 9 of the project), I sat waiting for the students to come in from lunch to start the session. Suddenly, the door opened, and Sophie came running and sat at my feet. I asked:

"Are you sure you're allowed to be here?"

"Oh, yes," she replied.

I smiled and said, "Oh, ok then." She sat smiling and I asked, "Are you looking forward to the holidays?"

She replied, "Oh yes, I'll get to see my mum."

"Oh?" I asked, "Where is she?"

Sophie said, "She's in gaol."

I tried to maintain composure and said, "Oh. That must be hard, not being able to see her. Will you see her Christmas day?"

"No, but we get to visit her on Boxing Day."

I said, "Oh, that will be lovely."

She said, "Yes, I live with another mum and we're going to the pool."

I smiled and said, "That will be fun. Do you like swimming?"

Our conversation was abruptly interrupted by the arrival of the rest of the students into the classroom. But, through this interaction, I realised that this young girl had enormous emotional issues to deal with.

Over the 10-week intervention period I noticed that Sophie's social armour was her high-spirited nature, a wall that she could easily slip behind, while her peers appeared to expect this behaviour from her and tended to give her a wide berth. However, once the participating students in her class began making and using their puppets, their love of play was rekindled, and Sophie no longer stood out as the childish one.

The fact that Sophie was reluctant to deliver dialogue during improvisational sessions and early rehearsals for the whole-class plays did surprise me. However, this also confirmed to me that she was using her exuberance as a coat of armour to hide her true feelings and insecurities. It has been my experience in the drama classroom that it is often the quieter students who shine when given the opportunity to creatively express themselves. But, they

require a nurturing and safe environment for this to evolve, and it generally takes time. So, initially, when Sophie was called on to bring her playfulness into the spotlight of performance in front of her peers, she was anxious. This was uncommon ground for her, but once she realised that many of the other students were experiencing similar feelings of both nervousness and excitement, she blossomed. Through puppet-play, the students came together and laughed and played, and their dialogue flowed. This happened in week 8, and I observed Sophie happily speaking dialogue with her peers using their puppets throughout the whole-class play. I approached her and told her that I was delighted that she now felt confident to speak a line or two in the play. I also told her that if, on the performance day, she changed her mind that would also be fine. She told me that she felt good about having dialogue to deliver in the play, and that she felt fine saying the lines "because she had her puppet and was with her friends."

Key themes were observed emerging in Sophie, such as "power in performance," "puppet armour," "anonymity," "animated," "interactive," "self-expression," "friendship," "pride," "support," "empowerment," "altruism," and a "desire to do good." Sophie was an effervescent girl who had often been mocked for her exuberance and playfulness, which had been read by her peers as "uncool" and babyish. As the intervention progressed and more of the students embraced the notion of "play" through their puppets, they became more accepting of Sophie's high-spirited nature. This had a very positive impact on Sophie, resulting in her actively participating in the whole-class play, puppeteering, delivering dialogue, and interacting with her peers. The "power in performance," using her "puppet armour" and "anonymity," meant that her form of animated self-expression was more widely embraced, empowering her with her amazing superhero puppet with a "desire to do good."

Case Study 4: Oliver

This case study concerns Oliver, a student from SPS.G2 who was popular with the other male students. He was confident and bold, and often the first to comment or pass judgement on the comments of others. From the first session, I observed that he used assertive body language to present his opinions and enjoyed the attention of his peers. When discussing puppet design ideas during a whole class discussion, he remarked, "My puppet rocks. He is unstoppable!"

As weeks passed, and the confidence of the other students grew, I noticed that Oliver's vocal presence was not as dominant, and he did not have the central focus he had enjoyed earlier in the project. I wondered if this change would make him retract from the process, but in week 6, he approached me to help him with his puppet. Originally, he had not required any assistance from me and was relatively autonomous in both the design and construction of his sock puppet but was now quietly seeking my help. He asked, "Can you help me?" I replied, "Sure, what do you need?" He said, "I wanna start again. Can I get a new sock? I wanna cover it in

that dark blue felt. Can I use Textas too?" I gave him dark blue felt and blue wool, and we discussed ideas around how he might implement his new design ideas and re-hash his original sock puppet to create something new.

As we drew closer to week 10 and performance day, I observed that Oliver was still strongly interacting with his peers, but it was on a more moderate level. He seemed to be happier and more relaxed and less inclined to be demonstrative and aggressive during whole-class activities and rehearsals.

Key themes were observed emerging in Oliver, such as "power in performance," "puppet armour," "anonymity," "animated," "interactive," "self-expression," "friendship," "pride" and "support." The intervention impacted Oliver's confidence in a slightly different way, in that it calmed him, rather than bringing him out of his shell. Already demonstrative, outspoken, and seemingly confident, Oliver became calmer with not having to prove himself or put his stamp on every single moment as he participated in the whole-class discussions. His need to be noticed diminished, and he calmly "interacted," enjoying the "power in performance" through his "puppet armour" and "anonymity," allowing him to express his emotions in a playful and unaffected way. It was interesting to observe him take pride in his work, mingle with his friends, and be more supportive of peers he would normally ignore or, at worst, mock. Unlike Case Studies 1, 2, and 3 where a rise in confident behaviour was observed, Oliver's case study highlights a change whereby dominating behaviour became mild-mannered and relaxed.

Summary

The power of performance was evident, given all participating students were happy to perform in the whole-class plays. Their puppets provided "armour" and a degree of anonymity that helped participating students to not only become more engaged, playful, and animated, but meant they were also more interactive and cooperative with each other.

Students' self-expression was observed in a variety of ways. For example, students demonstrated self-expression through their superhero puppet short stories (both written and shared verbally), participation in the whole-class discussions (often with their puppets on their hands), and engagement in drama activities— including the whole-class puppet performances at the end of the project.

From a holistic perspective, empathy and inclusion were elements that were embraced and examined by the participating students as they explored the central theme "difference" throughout the puppet play-building intervention. Using storytelling and short story-writing, they explored "difference," "friendship," "pride," "support," "empowerment" and a "desire to do good." The holistic skills and benefits that blossomed over the 10-week intervention were

captured in the observational field notes. Puppets provided the catalyst and the means for participating students to express themselves and grow in areas of tolerance and compassion, while fostering social skills, communication skills, and self-esteem.

Puppets were successfully used to encourage creativity, engage students, and help to break through social and scholastic barriers. This was evident in observations of the growth and heightened levels of communication and socialisation of participating students throughout the intervention. The introduction of puppets across all three classes saw a levelling of the playing field, where students who were usually silent became more willing to engage and participate, as illustrated in Case Study 1. This was particularly evident during whole-class discussions and during the segments dedicated to the sharing of puppet superhero short stories. Observations were noted where students with developmental and additional challenges began to thrive alongside higher-achieving students, with all participating students exhibiting observable growth in confidence.

Increased student engagement, motivation, and confidence are central to the creation of an inclusive and quality learning environment, which leads to improved learning outcomes (Killen, 2007; Ladwig & King, 2003). Throughout the puppet play-building intervention, participating students explored complex themes and stimulus materials that were made accessible and engaging because of the use of puppets and puppetry. The themes extracted from the observational field data, including the four case studies, reflected and validated the behavioural and emotional growth in the participating students. Observations revealed that puppets provided a conduit for students to relate to and explore multifaceted concepts and ideas, enabling them to share emotional responses and personal experiences.

The key themes that emerged throughout the puppet play-building intervention can be categorised into three main areas: internal dimensions, socialisation, and holistic impacts. Growth in these areas was present throughout the entire intervention across all three groups of participating students.

Growth in areas of internal dimensions and socialisation, including communication, could arguably be attributed to the positive and empowering impact of puppets and puppetry on participating students' confidence and self-esteem.

Puppets were fundamental in providing engaging, quality, creative, and collaborative learning experiences that fed into the communication and socialisation of the participating students. A major influence of this project was observed in the participating students displaying behaviour modification, changing their views, and growing in empathy. They also grew in confidence, and it was observed that their social and communication skills grew, particularly when using

their puppets, which validated puppets as a versatile and powerful pedagogical tool in the classroom.

Findings from this project revealed the use of puppets in the classroom enriches holistic growth in young people. In fact, almost all participating students grew in confidence, which was an unexpected finding. This small-scale study produced promising results that warrants further investment in longitudinal, larger scale research studies.

References

Bernier, M., & O'Hare, J. (2005). *Puppetry in education and therapy*. Author House.

Blumenthal, E. (2005). *Puppetry: A world history*. Harry N. Abrams.

Child Trends, (2014). *Measuring elementary school students' social and emotional skills, providing educators with tools to measure and monitor social and emotional skills that lead to academic success* (#2014-37). Child Trends Publication.

Ewing, R. (2010). *Australian education review (No. 58): The arts and Australian education: Realising potential.* ACER Press.

Fisch, S. M., & Truglio, R. T. (Eds.). (2000). *G is for growing: Thirty years of research on children and Sesame Street.* Routledge.

Gardner, E. (2009, November 6). Forty years of sunny days: Globally loved 'sesame street' is in a constant state of renewal. *USA Today*.

Killen, R. (2007). *Effective teaching strategies: Lessons from research and practice* (4th ed.). Cengage.

Krögera, T., & Nupponen, A. M. (2019). Puppet as a pedagogical tool: A literature review. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education, 11*(4), 393-401.

Ladwig, J. G., & King, M. B. (2003). *Quality teaching in NSW public schools. An annotated bibliography*. New South Wales Department of Education and Training, Professional Support and Curriculum Directorate.

Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and the adolescent self-image*. Princeton University Press.

Sposito, A. M. P., de Montigny, F., Sparapani, V.C., Garcia de Lima, R. A., Silva-Rodrigues, F. M., Pfeifer, L. l., & Nascimento, L. C. (2016). Puppets as a strategy for communication with Brazilian children with cancer. *Nursing and Health Sciences, 18*(1), 30-37.

Truglio, R. T., & Fisch, S. M. (2014). G is for growing: Thirty years of research on children and sesame street. Taylor and Francis. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410605252

About the Author

Dr Leanne Guihot-Balcombe is a Researcher, Teacher, Actor, Puppeteer, and an award-winning Playwright.

She currently works as a Sessional Tutor at the University of Newcastle, within the School of Education and Creative Arts, in a diverse range of roles including lecturing and face-to-face teaching, and as a day-to-day Casual Classroom Teacher (English/drama secondary).

She completed her PhD in 2022. Her project explored the impact of puppetry on communication, social skills, and self-esteem of children aged 8-10 years, including children with disabilities and additional challenges.

Prior to this, she was employed for 10 years as an actor with Freewheels Theatre-In-Education Company. She also created her own puppet company, *Purple Moon Theatre,* writing 2 plays for the Infants/Primary school setting in the Hunter area, NSW.