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PUPPETS AS A PEDAGOGY FOR INCLUSION

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Abstract

As a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) all educational settings and early childhood centres in Australia must legally “ensure an inclusive education system at all levels (Article 1, United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with a Disability). Yet despite this legal obligation and national priority, inclusion for all children has remained out of reach (Graham et al., 2020). In this paper, I will explore the artform of puppetry and its possibilities to bring about genuine inclusive practice. The findings emerged from a larger research story that included three preschools that enrol children with disabilities in their program. Together with the researcher, the children and staff engaged a range of drama strategies, including puppetry and found they significantly increased the participation and contribution of all children in their learning experiences, creating a more inclusive learning environment. This paper focuses on the potential of puppets as a pathway, if not a shining light towards a pedagogy that is inclusive for all. Despite the international impetus, policy and extensive research, the move towards inclusive education has been difficult to translate into practice and complicated by systematic and attitudinal barriers (Graham 2020; Schuelka et al., 2020). It is argued that many of these barriers can be attributed to an absence of a shared understanding of the terminology or a clearly defined notion of “inclusive education” (Graham, 2020). To avoid such misunderstanding, in this paper, inclusive education is aligned with the interpretation in the CRPD and *General Comment No. 4* (GC4; United Nations: 2016), that is, a way of thinking about education that recognizes individual difference as natural and includes a range of approaches, individual preferences and strategies to engage all students in their learning. The focus strategy in this article is puppetry and in the following sections I will outline how educators can utilize this magical object for authentic inclusion.

Keywords: early childhood, inclusive education, puppetry.

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What is a puppet?

The word puppet originated from the Latin word ‘pupa’ meaning doll, and like a special toy, the puppet, in the eyes of children assumes a life of its own. There is an element of magic that takes place when using a puppet; the puppet comes to life through the puppeteer; it is an “object with a soul” (Majaron, 2002, p.65). An incredibly helpful soul in implementing inclusive education. I would like to begin, by providing you with an example of this ‘helpfulness’ through a vignette, a snapshot from this study and the lived-experience of the young children and of course, a duck hand puppet, her name is Mabel.



Vignette 1

Figure 1. Mabel

My research story begins on a cold morning in April, my first day as a guest teacher/researcher at a preschool in Sydney. I had taught in many schools and early childhood centres throughout my career and had a very clear learning intention for this first day and that is to build a relationship with the children.

It is group time, and the children are making their way from free play outside into the classroom and on to the rug. The line behind their teacher has fallen apart, with some boys tumbling to the floor near a bookshelf and others grouped drinking from their water bottles by the drink cart. Hats are taken to cubbies and shoes are being put on, some children only finding they have one and rushing outside to retrieve the other. It is happy chaos as one teacher, smiling on the couch, is gently reminding some children to put the books away, reassuring others they do not need a band-aid and directing others to another educator that is supervising in the bathroom.

Gradually the group on the floor takes shape for the Acknowledgement to Country (an opportunity to then the traditional owners of the land) sung to begin the day. The song is missing some enthusiasm, and this continues to diminish as another teacher joins the group with two boys in hand. One young boy, Joel, is crying very loudly and the other is directed to sit in a small chair, next to the teacher at the back of the group. This boy, Jack, is kicking his feet loudly on the floor as Joel's crying becomes a series of screams. Belinda, the room leader runs over. She too looks like crying and takes Joel in her arms as he continues to fall apart. She looks at me and says, "It is like this every day and getting worse..." The other children, now completely silent, have turned their eyes away from the next song about Five Little Monkeys and are all looking at Joel.

In an attempt at distraction, I ask the children to make a circle. This takes us quite a bit of time, with teachers pointing to help the children find a space. I am worried that the change in seating arrangements may confuse or unsettle Joel further but take the risk. I gently tap him on the knee and smile, motioning for him to sit next to me on my right-hand side. He and Belinda move to the floor, he stops crying and smiles. I also suggest that Jack may like to sit on the floor in front of 'his' Miss Penny and not in a seat separate from the rest of the group. I then ask her to sit next to me with Joel on the floor. I then tell the children, with a whisper that I have my friend Mabel in my basket, and she is asleep, and I have to wake her up, but I can't.

Olivia: Can you help me?

The children all look to my basket, and some say, Yes.

Olivia: What should I do? I want to wake her gently...

Harry: (from the floor) We can say wake-up... quietly.

Olivia: Would you like to have a try?

(Gently, I take Mabel out of my basket, nursing her in my arms, beak tucked into her chest).

Harry: (softly) Wake –up. [He looks back at his friends.]

A couple of the children giggle as they look at one another and at Mabel, who has a little snore and then falls back to sleep. Out of the corner of my eye I see Jack is watching me. I notice that Joel's eye movements have become very fast and wonder if this is a sign of stress or excitement? I am worried and very unsure how to read his actions. He has stopped crying, perhaps he is excited? Taking a leap of faith, I decide to ask him to wake up the duck. He looks at me for a few seconds, encouraged, I then beckon him with my hands. A big smile appears on his face, and he comes closer to Mabel and touches her. Mabel wakes up. Another big smile appears, and he wiggles his little knees. My heart is beating for him. I wonder if the wiggling could be his way of expressing his excitement or an attempt at sensory regulation. Joel looks to Miss Belinda, is he pleased with himself for waking up Mabel, for getting it right and wanting her recognition? I give him another smile, and a high five. I offer him my hand. He hits it, gently, looking at Miss Belinda.

I look to Miss Belinda too, imploringly. As if on cue, she says, "Great job, Joel" and moves back to the computer desk in the corner. Joel sits back down next to me, leans forward to look at me and smiles again, eyes twinkling. Mabel wakes up and looks at the children.

Olivia: (to Mabel) Good morning, darling

Mabel: Hello...Where am I?

Olivia: (to the children) Who can tell Mabel where she is?

Lyndall: (one of the little girls looking as if she is about to burst, calls out laughing) At preschool.

Mabel: What is preschool?

Pete: (another little boy, coming closer) It's ... here

More laughter! I then attempt to explain to Mabel that preschool is a place for children to come to play. I ask her if she would like to meet the children and learn their names. She nods, a sweet, little nod, flaps her wings and quacks. This causes a huge outburst of laughter from the children, a lot of wiggling closer to me and some of the children are now so enthralled, they are standing up. Jack appears delighted in his new position on the floor, he is looking at the children sitting next to him with his legs stretched out and he is smiling. Miss Penny is just behind him, sitting on a child sized chair. Jack then gets up and makes a run for Mabel, sticking his hand in her beak. Miss Penny jumps up and brings him back to the chair, telling him to sit down. How I wished she hadn't. Mabel squawks, and then I say to the children that Jack was saying hello and ask him if he would like to say hello to Mabel and give her a wave. He does and Mabel waves back with her tiny wing.

Exploring this moment through the GC4

General Comment No. 4 (GC4) includes key vocabulary in its outline of inclusive education (Graham., 2020). Drawing on this language, and in particular the words, *systemic reform*, *barriers*, *preferences*, *participation*, *changes*, *modifications* and *relevant age range*, this section, analyses the vignette above to illustrate how puppets can be part of implementing inclusion. The description of morning circle showed that some children, although present, were not fully *participating* in their learning environment. It is a good example of *integration*, at best or at worst, *micro inclusion* (Cologon, 2014). This was evident from the physical positioning of the children in the space, with the children identified as having disabilities, seated away from the rest of the group under the supervision of a staff member. *Integration* and *micro-inclusion* happen when schools or individuals assume that some children need special assistance or support because they are different. It is a belief that ignores difference as part of our humanity and as a result does not consider allowing for this difference in schools. It is evident in the example above that some changes were needed to the morning group time so that the experience was accessible for all and

not just for *some* children. My choice to change the seating formation and to use Mabel could be described as a *systemic reform* that makes the environment accessible to every child. Seating the two children on the outside of the group, distanced them from the learning experience and created a social and physical *barrier, a barrier that was reinforced by the presence of the teacher*. The space only added to the two children's uncertainties about the situation as it made it harder for them to see and focus on the teacher and teaching materials. The practice also sent a very powerful message *about* the children, they were stigmatized (Cologon, 2014) and assumed to be unable to participate in the activity, at least not without the influence of an adult.

Mabel replaced the need for adult influence as she captured the interest of *all* the children and motivated them to join in the group activity. The puppet removed the *barriers* to their *participation* and provided children with both a tool and a sign (Vygotsky, 1978) to support communication. The physical object of the puppet encouraged the children to attend to and then take part in the group experience and signalled to them that the situation was safe. The selection or the choice of the puppet is important here and I was sure to begin the workshop with a puppet of gentle appearance, of only two colours and soft in texture. I also chose an unthreatening character, a baby duckling. Mabel removed these *barriers* as she reduced the children's anxiety with her appearance. As found in other studies, puppets appeal to young children, delight them with their visual appeal and evoke children's emotions and playfulness (Kröger& Nupponen, 2019; Korošec, 2012). Her visual appearance and physical gestures appeared to ease the tension in the room and created a group learning experience that suited the interests of all children and no longer shaped according to an ableist and deficit-based view of disability (Beneke et al., 2019). She drew the children into the situation and appealed to the children's *preferences*. *Preferences* in this context mean so much more than the children's likes and dislikes (although puppets can serve as a wonderful tool to discover them) and refer to the children's interests or situations that may be of interest.

The puppet play was also designed to suit the children's interests and stimulate their imagination. The children were introduced to the puppet when she was asleep. She was vulnerable. This choice is aligned with practices in therapy, such as the "hidden puppet technique" (Blow, 1993, as cited

in Drewes et al., 2018, p. 127). In this approach, children discover the puppet in hiding, Mable was asleep in my basket, and I needed to gain the children's assistance to wake her up. The task serves to engage the children in the puppet play and gives them time to process the puppet in a position that is not threatening. The children have the power to wake Mabel up and I wait until they communicate this to me through their words or actions.

The actions and the voice also carried and communicated ideas and feelings to the children (Kröger & Nupponen, 2019). In the vignette above, the children were seen reading that Mable was asleep and that I needed their help to help her wake up and then explain her situation. The puppet was able to clearly express her thoughts and emotions through her words and actions. Her response to the children further communicated their safety. I was careful that she accepted their solutions and appreciated their gentle touch to enhance and build their confidence in using the puppet as a mediating tool and help them to *listen* and to *speak* puppet.

An emerging body of research demonstrates the use of puppets as a mediating tool. The puppet (or Mabel in this case) motivated or elicited the children's communication and helped them to contribute to the group learning experience that suited the interests of all children and no longer shaped according to an ableist and deficit-based view of disability (Beneke et al., 2019). She drew the children into the situation and appealed to the children's *preferences*. *Preferences* in this context mean so much more than the children's likes and dislikes (although puppets can serve as a wonderful tool to discover them) and refer to the children's interests, strengths and favoured methods of interaction and communication. For many children who experience disabilities, non-verbal communication may be preferable to spoken language. Puppets use both methods of expression and communicate through movement when manipulated by the puppeteer and they can also be given a voice. These features of the puppets supported the children's ability to make meaning of the situation, language, and ideas as the words were enriched by the puppet's gestures or movements (Karaolis, 2020; Kröger & Nupponen, 2019). This provided the children with an understanding of the situation and an opportunity to *communicate* their ideas.

Mabel encouraged the children to communicate and share their voice as she was a match for their *preferences* in self-expression. Children could speak to the puppet, touch the puppet, copy the puppet and watch the puppet during the experience. The puppet made the experience accessible to everyone and reminds me of Karen Gallas (1991) and her wisdom, “When given the opportunity, listen to the children. They will show you what they know and how they learn best, and that way is not the teacher’s way” (p. 132). Puppets allowed me to listen to the children and to discover the puppet’s way. The practice was inclusive.

The puppet’s way led to a relaxed and playful environment and to relationships between children and between children and adults (Kröger & Nuppenwn, 2019; Korošec, 2012). I used the puppet as a *modification*, to *change* the traditional methods of interactions, and the delivery of the instruction, to motivate the children, and to provide additional visual information. During the dramatic play, the puppet was used to model behaviours (such as greetings) that supported the children’s participation in the experience *on the same basis* (Sharma et al., 2017) as other children. In the vignette, all the children *participated* in the imaginative play with the puppet and did so as a group, each in their own unique way. As with Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2018), the puppet, or in this case Mabel, gave all the children a visual, non-linguistic support, a support that was in a *relevant age range*. Mable ensured that all the children had multiple ways of engaging with the learning and multiple ways to make and express meaning. Using the puppet, I could model appreciation and value of everybody’s ideas and contribution. I see this aspect of the puppet as the most valuable and significant for creating a positive atmosphere in which everyone was motivated to sustain the play. Another example of this collective commitment to the play is provided below:



Vignette 2

Fig. 2: Miss Muffet

Today I have brought with me a very large puppet, Miss Muffet (after her namesake in the nursery rhyme). She is quite a character, with all her curly hair and sweet expression. I am instantly surrounded by children, all in hats (except for Zane). Some of these children are new to me and are much younger than the group of little folks that I come to visit each week. They are also intrigued by Miss Muffet. From the corner of my eye, I see Ben, still next to Miss Belinda. She calls to another staff member, as the other children should be in their classroom. The young offenders are ushered inside as Miss Belinda, Miss Kitty and Miss Penny guide our group to form a circle.

All eyes are on me. Alex bounds over and Jack follows and tries to pull Miss Muffet's hair. I move to her to safety, and we chat for

a few moments about his snazzy new shoes. He looks at me from under the huge brim of his cap. I sense he is not satisfied with the level of my attention. I wish we had the time to talk more. I can't, as I have twenty-two children standing in a circle, looking at a curly haired puppet, ready for something...

Olivia: (as I point to Miss Muffet) I have brought a friend to meet you, this is Miss Muffet. (Miss Muffet has her head down). Can anyone tell me how she might be feeling?

Anabelle: Sad...

Olivia: Yeah, that is what I thought... she does look a little sad. I will ask her (turning to Miss

Muffet) Miss Muffet, do you feel sad? (Miss Muffet shakes her head)

Miss Muffet: (quietly) I feel a bit shy (she puts her hand over her mouth, puppets with hands are very helpful)

Olivia: (nodding, sympathetically) Why don't we all play a game, and you watch and settle in?

Miss Muffet nods, I give her a kiss, and place her very gently back on the bench beside me. The children look at her and then at me. My idea was to have the children act out the nursery rhyme, maybe even have them come up with their own actions for the characters. I did not want them to copy my actions, rather they create their own. In preparation for this activity, we play a few warm-up games. The first one is Animal Walks. I call over to Miss Belinda and ask her to choose her favourite animal. She plays along with me, thinks for a moment and chooses a giraffe. I then stand up and move around like I am a giraffe, not easy as I am 5 feet tall, but I stretch out my neck and reach out my neck and reach out for leaves with my tongue. I invite the children to join me and the backyard is filled with giraffes. I then say "freeze". Miss Belinda now assumes the role of translator for some of the children and says, "This means you stop...stop...don't move". Standing as still as a statue, I then say, "We are going to play Stop/Go moving like a giraffe".

I ask Annabelle, another very enthusiastic little girl who rushes over to me every time I come to the playground, to pick the next animal.

She is delighted with this mission. She is dressed all in blue and white seersucker with a floppy blue hat. After some deliberation, she chooses an elephant, and we bend towards the ground and make a trunk with our hand. As I ask more children, I notice some children will say the name of a different animal and others will repeat the name of the animal just chosen by another child. Joel did this by saying “giraffe”, just as the child before him. I quickly smile and launch into my best impression of a giraffe as one of the teachers look as if they are about to say, “Pick a different animal...”

I can't stand it when teachers do that!

As we play, Joel runs out of the circle and over to the patio, runs up the stairs and back to join us. It was a little ritual he did about three times. To my relief, he was not prompted to return by a teacher and came back all by himself. Was he regulating his sensory system so he could continue with the activities? I thought so and liked that he was doing his thing, his way, just like – so many of the children. Teacher Kitty noticed the same thing:

I loved the afternoon drama session. The use of puppets really gets the children's attention and then asking them to emulate a specific character/animal enables the children to all engage in their own way. I love that you incorporated multiple small activities, changing it up quickly but still allowing children enough time to process their actions. It was amazing to see increased engagement in many of the children and even more amazing to see how each and every one of them reacted/acted differently (Kitty, personal email 4/3)

Puppets recognize that every child is different and as a result will communicate their thinking in a way that is uniquely their own. Spyrou (2016) encourages researchers to find alternative ways of listening to children's voices, methods that rely less of spoken language and ones that allow for diversity and the uniqueness of every individual. The author encourages adults to look more closely at children's communication and in particular the voices that are excluded from the research experience and silenced by the power of the adult. The teacher's suggestion above, could have unintentionally *silenced*, Joel, and guided him to change his idea. This is a form of silencing and one that is too common in conversations with young children. What was important in this moment was that Joel *wanted* to share

his ideas and to *participate* and this was a huge change brought about by the presence of the puppet. I viewed this as much more important than the type of response “because it is not just who speaks and what and how is said that matters but also who hears the voice and what and how they hear it” (Spyrou, 2016, 106).

Hearing with a puppet has much to offer inclusive practice. As outlined in the introduction, inclusion is about *participation* a *participation* that is valued by others and free from judgement (Cologon, 2021). The use of the puppet, adopted in this study served to reduce that judgement and transform the learning experiences by supporting all children to communicate their ideas. Part of my role, through the puppet was to model responses that recognized differences and move away from an ableist perspective or assumptions about some of the children. Through the puppet, I could model acceptance of children and their feelings, such as with Miss Muffet and feelings of shyness. Miss Muffet became the object for the children to project their feelings of hesitancy as well as the motivation to play a game and help her settle down. The interactions also gave me an opportunity to accept the children’s ideas and expand the educators view of their quality. The puppet was my tool to challenge the “myth of the normal” (Cologon, 2021) and celebrate the contributions of all children. Every child has the right to an inclusive education. The preceding vignettes showcase the potential of puppetry to facilitate inclusive practices in early childhood settings and their use as a vehicle to promote the participation and voice of all children. Through the analysis of Mabel and Miss Muffet in a preschool that included children with and without disabilities we can see how puppets are instrumental to enhancing inclusive practice, practice that is aligned with the GC4 and inclusion as a way of “thinking about people, diversity, learning and teaching (Graham, 2020, p. 11). Puppets helped the children, the teachers, and this researcher embrace this way of thinking and celebrate us all.

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LUTKE U INKLUZIVNOJ PEDAGOGIJI

Sažetak

S obzirom na to da je Australija potpisnica Konvencije Ujedinjenih naroda o pravima osoba s invaliditetom (CRPD/KPOI), sve obrazovne ustanove i centri za rano djetinjstvo u Australiji moraju zakonski „osigurati inkluzivni obrazovni sustav na svim razinama“ (čl. 1., Odbor Ujedinjenih naroda za prava osoba s invaliditetom). Unatoč ovoj zakonskoj obvezi i nacionalnom prioritetu, inkluzija za svu djecu ostala je ipak nedostupna (Graham i dr., 2020). U ovom se radu istražuje umjetnička forma lutkarstva i njezine mogućnosti za stvaranje istinske inkluzivne prakse. Rezultati su dobiveni na temelju šireg istraživanja koje je uključivalo tri predškolske ustanove koje u svoje programe upisuju djecu s poteškoćama. Djeca i osoblje su s istraživačem primijenili niz dramskih strategija, uključujući lutkarstvo, i otkrili da su one značajno povećale njihovo sudjelovanje i iskustvima pridonijele učenju kod sve djece, stvarajući inkluzivnije okruženje za učenje. Cilj je ovog rada istražiti potencijal lutaka kao puta i sjajnog putokaza prema ostvarenju inkluzivne pedagogije za sve. Unatoč međunarodnom poticaju, politici i opsežnim istraživanjima, pomak prema inkluzivnom obrazovanju bilo je teško prenijeti u praksu, a sve zbog složenih sustavnih prepreka, kao i prepreka u stavovima (Graham, 2020; Schuelka i dr., 2020). Raspravlja se o tome da se mnoge ove prepreke mogu pripisati nedostatku razumijevanja terminologije ili nepostojanju jasno definiranog pojma „inkluzivnog obrazovanja“ (Graham, 2020). U svrhu jasnijeg prikaza u ovom je radu inkluzivno obrazovanje usklađeno s tumačenjem kakvo nudi CRPD/KPOI i Opći komentar br. 4 (GC4; Ujedinjeni narodi, 2016), odnosno s načinom razmišljanja o obrazovanju koji individualne razlike prepoznaje kao prirodne i uključuje niz pristupa, individualnih preferencija i strategija za uključivanje svih učenika u učenje. Osnovna je strategija u ovom radu lutkarstvo; u nastavku rada opisuje se kako nastavnici mogu iskoristiti ovaj čudesan predmet za istinsko uključivanje djece s poteškoćama u obrazovanje.

Gljučne riječi: rano djetinjstvo, inkluzivno obrazovanje, lutkarstvo