

THE PUPPET - WHAT A MIRACLE !

PUPPETS IN THE CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT

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Summary

The paper wants to underline the importance of the puppets in child's development on different levels, one of them is improvement in narration.

The puppet proves the child a kind of cover, hiding himself behind it. So also timid child find motivation to speak, to express his own emotions and to open his secrets to his puppet and through it to his audience. So puppet helps the child to communicate much more spontaneously, avoiding stressed relations, especially to adults. The puppet is an authority, selected by himself.

Contemporary efforts to put narration as method of rediscovering and stabilisation of the child's personality are supported by using puppets . Regarding the fact that a child is not able to express exactly all his feelings directly by words, puppet heroes help him finding words and more: another point of view. Additionally children, costumed to use puppets in their everyday conversations, have richer vocabulary, they are able to understand semiotic-symbolic value of visual signs and the language of non-verbal communication, which is may be more important to recognise their real abilities and progress in the most important areas - cognition, sensation, motorical co-ordination, social collaboration...and least but not last - language expression.

Through my rather long experiences working with puppets I'm believing in the magical power of the puppets in all kinds of communication with children, enlightening their talents and different forms of their creativity.

Introduction

Some words on the art of puppets are for the beginning very essential. This very art derived from ancient rites. All rites and rituals are a kind of communication between people and free-flowing energy through stylised movement, voice and visual appearance. And these three elements are determining the signification of every puppet. Contemporary puppeteer ensures us that we are watching a parabolic and symbolic life situation through stylised objects with unusual movements, strange voices and simplified appearance. Objects, formed by human determination, receive new meaning, becoming new subjects - metaphors - by the transference of the puppeteer's energy to the objects manipulated in his hands. In this act his belief in miraculous transformation is the most important, the belief in the power of the language of objects.

Puppet and Child

This belief can be compared with the child's relationship to his/her toys. In the child's fantasy each object has its own life and soul. Objects and toys take over the function of imaginative world in which the child dictate rules and search possible solutions for his unsolved problems. In accordance with Vigotsky this kind of games improve all steps in the child's development. Surprisingly, puppetry integrates nearly all disciplines important for this development: perception, comprehension, movement, co-ordination, interaction with the environment, speech, narration. It's difficult to explain the fact that puppets usually find better contact with the child than pre-school teacher or even parents. It seems to be already mentioned three-levelled stylisation which helps the child

to feel, to accept and understand symbolic situation. Through the simplified situation of metaphorically used objects is possible to find out the richness of parabolic games, provoking child's imagination and creativity as the most important elements for further development.

Communication by Puppets

One of the most important steps in the child's progress is finding out the ways of communication. The most normal - of course - by feelings, but also dangerous and sometimes stressed. Children are able to react on the environment, generally on the level of sensations. But communication is not always adequate, provoking unpleasant emotions. Reasons can be very different, e.g. misunderstanding or misused word, the result should stop spontaneous communication.* The authority of important person (Vigotsky) can provoke or simple imitation or disobedient protest, both reactions are not liked in educational process. To avoid such stressed situation in quotidian relations we can introduce puppet in search for more elaborate communication between children and their "important persons" in two directions: primarily from an adult person through a puppet in his hand to the child and vice versa - from the child with a puppet addressing an adult. Here is opened another important phase of the child's "egocentric speech" (Vigotsky) between both mentioned variant - the child is playing with different objects - puppets a kind of "one person show", satisfying his/her own need. Very soon this "one mouth dialogues" will to catch attention of some other person (a child or adult) transforming the game to a play with certain idea, message. In this moment we can speak about a parallel communication between the child and adult. The point of view of the puppet is not necessary the same as the will of an adult. These "exchange of opinions" are the source of immense possibilities in suggesting the experiences and knowledge about the world and society to the child. The puppet's opinion will be accepted more enthusiastically than ours, while the puppet is an authority by the child's choice, not an appointed one. So a puppet can be a confidant agent in correlation between the child and his surroundings.

*Here it's necessarily underline the difference between an "alive acting a role" as an exposed communication and "playing roles by puppets" as an "covered", indirect communication, much more convenient for shy children.

The Magical Creation

Far in the ancient time was known the magical symbolism of different kinds of puppets, from Javanese shadows to Indian marionettes.

But they can be very simple, the simplest are our **fingers** and **hands**, they may have faces designed directly on the skin, or can be especially made from gloves, socks and paper-bags. Here we need beside manual skill some feeling for form (round, oval, angular, cornered...), colour (nomination and "feeling" of colours, warm and cold) and material (soft, smooth, hard, reflexive...) – the basic visual elements composing each puppet. It is also a challenge for the child to recognise parts of the face in symbolic – semiotic signs (e.g. two points for eyes). Furthermore, parts of the body are used in personification (e.g. a hand as independent subject). We can continue with **elbows**, **knees**, **feet**, etc. These various puppets are very appealing for direct touch – some children are shy away from it. When they try to animate these kinds of "puppets" they must develop sensitivity and control of different movements. And something more: these puppets are watching "from another point of view". So the child easily accept the fact he is not "the only world axis".

Each puppet has its own manner (or possibility) of movement. The child can recognise movement (running boy, dancing girl, limping daddy, creeping fox...) and compare it with his knowledge, enriching his experience and motorical abilities .

The puppet has its own voice – articulated or non-articulated. Through visual elements the child will accept *non-verbal communication* as an important segment of everyday relations, based on sensations and feelings (exchange of energy), supported by narration which will enrich his vocabulary step by step. With the puppet he explore also the meaning of verbal expression.

Simple puppets are also **animated toys** and **everyday objects** with a new metaphoric function. They represent themselves but may also *play "roles"* in different situations. The child will accept this manner of play in his games. Through his "dialogues" and reactions we can resolve certain situations in his microcosm.

Flat puppets are important in improving *visual sensitivity* and *orientation in space* (a translation of a drawing into movement in relation to another animated form).

Similar are **body puppets**, usually used to overcome uncertainty and fear of the group, like half-a-way to the “acting”.

Shadows represent the *poetical*, maybe *unreal (virtual) world*, helping the child to overcome different kinds of *fears*.

Marionettes symbolise manipulation: an important person is always above them, forcing their movement. This relationship also touches a child. He can feel, intuitively, *social models and relativity of data*. He finds himself in the position of “important person” in relation to his puppet (on the place of the child).

So we can continue in describing puppet techniques, each of them communicates with the audience “on another wave”, it is important that we trust their help in forming more open and spontaneous, also witty (humorous) relationships with children.

Of course, children are able to compose their own puppets in different techniques from prepared elements, some of them independently, others with some help of older peers or adults. Again children will profit a lot of new experiences, from manual skills to recognising different materials (paper, cardboard, plastics, wood, packaging..), from responsibility for the environment to the knowledge of how to compose similar elements in their own creative way.

Object with Soul

The new challenge starts here: in moving their new-born puppet. But, is it enough only to move it? Younger children will find out the miracle of animation spontaneously: by watching their puppet, e.g. transferring their eye energy to their puppet / fixing the sight on the puppet, as in their everyday game with toys. The result is fascinating: next to the alive puppet there is no more place for the child’s emphasised ego. And vice versa - shy children will gather more courage for expressing themselves through puppets, presented them like some kind of shield. The principles of this game, where the child’s concentration on the object - toy comes back to the child, transforms into a play, where a message is dedicated to another player or/and audience. (Cultural Mediation, Vigotsky)

Puppets and Narration

For this play it is important to establish non-verbal and also verbal communication, which is another great aim to the child’s improvement in using words, forming sentences, inventing dialogs, posing different puppets in parabolic conflicts, creating paraphrases on known stories using same personages, or inventing completely new situations. Here we can see the right power of puppets: visual appearance “suggests” inventing corresponding voice. So the need for narrative expression is intensively supported by other creative actions. A puppet can sing, speaks very strange foreign languages, innovates words and expressions for new events, in conversation should prove opportunity to hear each other, can recite stories and poems in literary version or retell them from the point of view of a person appearing in the story or poem. The puppet is often curious, likes to ask questions – usually very provocative ones. It is also prepared to help the child to tidy up his things, to jump when he is afraid, to creep through a tunnel, go to a doctor or brush his teeth. A puppet can speak dialect or children’s slang, so children can suggest corrections in common language. It can happen that the child is not able to understand all words of narration, but will accept the meaning through all other elements of the puppet’s non - verbal languages. Beside there is something very important: puppet needs rather few, essential words, it’s not a chatterbox, loosing words in vain. And if some sentence isn’t right, doesn’t matter! That’s the puppet, making errors, not the child. And a shy child is not struggling for his/her own position but for the position of his/her puppet!

A puppet can also represent personification of ideas, mathematical data, days in the week or letters from the alphabet; all this, and much more in hands of an inventive educator/teacher, who wants to live with children in their own - together invented - wonderland

Thus the child is supported in his imaginative and reproductive creativity, active child in an active environment (Vigotsky).

Creativity and Socialisation

This kind of creative work requires children to collaborate in a team, which means great progress in socialisation, ability to be active and to subordinate sometimes personal ideas to the common goal.

To be creative means to think in an anti-positivistic way: to see things not only for their function but also to find a lot of associations with their form, colour, material, smell, sound etc. All this is necessary for imaginative puppetry – and vice versa: puppetry helps us to search in our surroundings for more than function: the way in which the world can become more picturesque.

Through all these elements a child can recognise his/her abilities in very different disciplines: how skilful is he/she, is able to contribute to, but also to accept peer suggestions, how he/she can express his/her ideas, or control his/her impulse to be important....So work with puppets helps the child build self-esteem, supports finding his/her place in-between peers, encourages his/her activity and feeling for team work. The child likes his own products, but he/she is able to respect strictly also the contribution of his/her peers.

Educator/Teacher and Puppet

An educator/teacher is humanly rich person, proud on the fact that people can admire the growing tree and not the stick supporting it. (Mario Picchi).For him/her it is important to believe in the power of puppets, to use and propose them frequently, but with the right measure. And he/she must know and understand the meaning of puppets, using metaphors in every moment. Sometimes, his/her puppet forces the educator/teacher to be “the second” in the group/class (usually it is welcome for a while!). Through activities with puppets he/she will discover the abilities and special talents of each child. But the most important point is accepting each child as a unique individual - here the puppet can help build a bridge to the heart of everyone.

For such broad field of activities with puppets some knowledge about the essential themes in puppetry is necessary to avoid rediscovering the discovered. Important is the will and belief.

Conclusion

The use of puppets can result in a considerable contribution to a more humane and less stressed educational system in the first years of a child’s integration into a group/class where starts his/her socialisation process. And more: puppets provoke the imagination, creativity, and both are the best dowry to a child for further development.

Post Scripted

Some years ago the International Union of Puppeteers UNIMA formed a Commission with the following aims (a) to support research and investigations in this field and (b) to inform writers of curriculum for pre-school teachers and teachers in primary schools, that students of educational sciences have the right to be informed professionally about possibilities, use and animation of puppets. Members of this Commission, we hope for understanding and support.

References

This paper was supported by the experiences of my students with children in kindergartens and primary schools from 1996 to 2000.. Many of Final Theses at The Faculty of Education (University Ljubljana) / subject Puppetry /, treat these themes, confirmed by practical experiences.

There are results of my research and practical work with puppets in the Theatre and Education.

Video-fragments, taken from taped quotidian activities in kindergartens, where my students are educators/teachers are on disposition on request. Presented materials were systemised by Helena Korošec, assistant. We are continuing the research as important part of curriculum for kindergartens.

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