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Integrating Puppets into Classroom Instruction

A Review of Evidence and Recommendations for Practice





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Puppetry, in many different forms, has long been used as a component in educational and therapeutic practices.^{1,2} Children across ages, from early childhood through adolescence and ability levels can benefit from use of puppetry across domains of development.^{3,4,5,6} In education settings, puppets have been used to engage classroom learning; to help students practice perspective taking and other social skills; and to facilitate communication between adults and students.^{4,5,7,8,9}

In this brief, we explore academic and social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes that have been associated with the use of puppetry in schools. We highlight specific benefits for students with disabilities and close by offering recommendations for how to incorporate puppets into classrooms.

Academic Outcomes

Although the evidence can be described as emerging across literature in early childhood, special education, and art therapy, puppets have been shown to contribute to positive academic outcomes by improving the learning environment, teaching practices, and student learning.

Using puppets can have positive benefits to classroom climate, teaching practices, and student learning!

Benefits to Learning Environment

Puppetry meets students at their developmental levels and helps create a more relaxed and playful learning environment.⁵ Puppets can "lower the stakes" for students by creating a more positive classroom environment, which empowers students to take larger risks when asking questions in front of peers.^{3,5,7} For example, some students may feel uncomfortable when asked a direct question by a teacher:⁸ being asked by a puppet can be both entertaining and help students to feel included in classroom discussions.⁹



Puppets can also be a useful tool for strengthening relationships between students and teachers.⁵ Using puppets as a classroom management tool can help reduce the number of corrections made throughout the day.^{4,5} In addition, when spoken by a puppet, corrective feedback may be perceived as less severe than it would coming from a teacher⁵, which can benefit adult-student relationships and promote a positive climate/learning environment.

Benefits to Teaching Practices

In addition to fostering positive learning environments, puppets can be effective tools for teaching and assessing student understanding of a topic.⁵⁻¹⁰ The affable nature of puppets can help teachers convey information to students in a developmentally appropriate way. An

Puppets can facilitate communication with students in a developmentally appropriate manner.

example outside of school settings includes using puppets to explain aspects of cancer care to child patients.⁹ Puppets can foster student engagement and overall interest in a subject,^{7,11} which can facilitate positive associations with learning and increase rates of content retention.¹⁰

Additionally, puppets can enable teachers' understanding of a student's feelings and perspectives. Students may be more likely to confide in a puppet than a teacher.⁵ This knowledge can then be used as a foundation for future interactions and for building positive relationships.^{4,5}

Benefits to Student Learning

Puppets can enable students to be more active in the learning process.^{5,7} Puppets have also been shown to encourage collaboration skills.¹² For example, students and their puppets can work together to solve a task, particularly during activities that require increased amounts of "trial and error" problem solving.¹² In addition, puppets can stimulate students' imagination,⁵ which can both ensure retention of learned information and increase engagement in the task.



Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Outcomes

Puppets have been shown to be beneficial for promoting positive social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes. For one, when used in dramatic and imaginary play, puppets can help students better understand one other's perspectives, which can help to foster empathy and positive changes in beliefs and attitudes.⁵ As mentioned previously, puppets can also act as confidante for students, as they symbolize a friendly, safe receiver of the student's feelings; this can foster abilities related to



emotional identification, vulnerability, and self-advocacy.^{4,5,7,13}

When a student builds their own puppet to use in an activity, that puppet can become an extension of the student,⁸ which provides them with a vehicle to express their thoughts and emotions. Puppets can also be used to help students practice aspects of social-emotional learning, including social skills, empathy, and perspective taking.^{1,3,4,6,7,14}

Puppetry can improve outcomes for children with and without disabilities.

In addition to helping teachers impart academic information to students, puppets can also be used to strengthen student communication skills.^{4,5,8,9} Speaking through and talking to a puppet about thoughts and feelings can facilitate student practice of emotional identification and self-advocacy skills.³

Students with Disabilities

There are unique and specific benefits of using puppetry to support students with disabilities. For one, puppetry can be adapted for most cognitive and ability levels from preschool through high school.¹² Puppets can be used to model social stories and coping strategies for students with emotional and behavioral disorders and autistic students.¹⁵ Puppets can also be used to engage with students with communication differences. For example, among students with selective mutism, a puppet can serve as an alternate voice.¹⁶ Puppets can also be used to connect with students who can be more difficult for teachers to reach, such as those who are nonverbal¹⁷ or those with emotional and behavioral disorders.¹²

Recommendations for Using Puppets

Now that the potential benefits to puppetry have been reviewed, you may be wondering how to incorporate puppets in your work. In this section, we summarize recommended practices, followed by additional resources for further information.

Use puppets to model behavior

- Use puppets to teach and model using different coping strategies.
- Use puppets to model behavioral expectations. For example, have puppets model how to use respectful language.
- Use puppets to remind children of classroom expectations. For example, a teacher might put on a sock puppet and have the sock puppet say: "Alright class, remember to push in your chairs when you go to line up!"



Incorporate puppets into existing lesson plans

You can incorporate puppets into existing lesson plans in a few ways.

- Have a puppet help you deliver a pre-planned whole group lesson to promote engagement.
- Encourage children to use their own puppets during opportunities to respond. For example, you might ask children to have their puppets shake their heads “yes” or “no” to respond to a check for understanding.
- Have a puppet reinforce understanding of the content that is being taught in a lesson. This might look like having a puppet summarize the key points in the lesson: “So, Mr. Thomas, you’re telling me that the main idea of a passage is what it’s mostly about, and supporting details are facts or examples in the passage that illustrate the main idea?”



Design learning activities that integrate puppetry

- Design learning activities that use puppetry. For example, instead of a group presentation, you might have children create and perform a puppet show to demonstrate new learning.
- Have children teach their puppet a new skill that they are learning. This could look like having children talk their puppet through the steps involved in long division or the steps involved in a new coping strategy.

Have students use puppets to help work through feelings

- When students are experiencing challenging emotions in the classroom, consider having them go to a calm or quiet corner with their puppet. The student can disclose to the puppet how they are feeling, and the student and puppet can take actions together, such as calming breaths, feeling it together, or grounding it down.
- Provide discussion cards or scripts with questions or affirmations for the puppet to say to the student posted around the quiet corner. For example, “Remember to take a deep breath in, count to 5, and slowly breathe out.”

Summary

In summary, puppets can promote positive outcomes across domains of development. We offered recommendations for how you can use puppets to benefit the children with whom you work – specifically, using puppets to model behavior, incorporating puppets into existing lesson plans, and designing activities that use puppetry.

Additional Resources

[Building Extra Fun and Creativity into Feel Your Best Self: Steps to Puppet Building](#)

This guide provides a resource list along with step-by-step guidance on how to create a sock puppet.

[Making Puppets from Classroom Materials](#)

This YouTube video shares ideas for using classroom materials to make puppets.

[Minds in Bloom](#)

This blog illustrates how to teach a lesson on writing, dialogue, writing narratives, and presentation goals using a puppet show.

[The Power of Using Puppets in the Classroom](#)

This article provides another look at the research behind using puppets in the classroom.

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