

Puppets in Preschool: Children as the ‘More Knowledgeable Other’ – A Snapshot from a Research Story

Handpuppen in der Vorschule: Kinder als ‚Kompetentere Andere‘ – Eine Momentaufnahme aus der Feldforschung

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ABSTRACT (English)

Puppets and dolls play an infinite number of roles in shaping children’s learning and development in early childhood settings. This paper examines the ‘principle of the puppet’ when viewing the doll/puppet from a twist on the Vygotskian perspective as the *More Knowledgeable Other* activating imagination and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky 1978). Traditionally, approaches in early education have placed the adult as the knower and the child in the position of *needing to know*. In this paper it is argued that this overlooks the knowledge of children and calls for a different research approach. In the following article I outline how the puppet may occupy the position of the *less knowledgeable other*, thus, redefining and expanding on the use of this strategy in early childhood settings. It includes one day of a six months research story when a yellow duck puppet, named Mabel, was able to activate the ZPD through this learning process and repositioned the children as experts.

Keywords: puppets as mediating tools, zone of proximal development (Vygotsky), early childhood settings, inclusion

ABSTRACT (Deutsch)

Hand-Puppen spielen in den Einrichtungen der Frühpädagogik unendlich viele Rollen bei der Gestaltung und Förderung von Lernen und Entwicklung. Der vorliegende Beitrag untersucht das ‚Prinzip der Puppe‘, indem – in einem Rückgriff auf die Vygotskysche Perspektive des *Kompetenteren Anderen* – die Handpuppe als diejenige betrachtet wird, die das Vorstellungsvermögen und die ‚Zone der proximalen Entwicklung‘ (ZPE) aktiviert (Vygotsky 1978). Traditionell haben die Ansätze in der Früherziehung den Erwachsenen als Wissenden und das Kind als *Wissensbedürftigen* betrachtet. Im vorliegenden Text wird argumentiert, dass ein solches Vorgehen das Wissen der Kinder übersieht, so dass eine andere Forschungskonzeption angemessen ist. Im Folgenden skizziere ich, wie die Puppe die Position des *weniger wissenden Anderen* einnehmen kann und damit den Einsatz dieser Strategie in frühkindlichen Einrichtungen neu definiert und erweitert. Innerhalb eines längeren, sechsmonatigen Forschungsprojekts geht es hier um einen Projekttag, an dem es einer gelben Plüschente namens Mabel durch diesen Lernprozess gelang, die ZPE zu aktivieren und damit die Kinder als Experten neu zu positionieren.

Schlüsselwörter: Handpuppen als vermittelnde Werkzeuge, Zone der nächsten Entwicklung (Vygotsky), Einrichtungen der Frühpädagogik, Inklusion



[...] ... imagination takes on a very important function in human behavior and human development. It becomes the means by which a person's experience is broadened, because he can imagine what he has not seen, can conceptualize something from another person's narration and description of what he himself has never directly experienced. He is not limited to the narrow circle and narrow boundaries of his own experience but can venture far beyond these boundaries, assimilating, with the help of his imagination someone else's historical or social experience. In this form, imagination is a completely essential condition for almost all human mental activity (Vygotsky, "Imagination and creativity in childhood", 2004, 17).

Theoretical framing of 'good learning' in early childhood settings

Social constructivist theories support an approach to early childhood education that recognizes the significance of a child's context, experience and relationships (Dewey 1963; Vygotsky 1978) Vygotsky's pedagogical approaches are grounded in the belief that learning takes place through interactions, interactions that include the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (Bodrova & Leong 2001). The concept may be broadly described as the space between what children can do independently and what they may do with support from a more knowledgeable partner or a More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). Many interpretations of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) exist with Vygotsky (1978) describing this process as:

[...] *It is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers* (86). [...] human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them (88). Thus, the notion of a zone of proximal development enables us to propound a new formula, namely that the only 'good learning' is that which is in advance of development (89) (italics in the original version).

Educators may also benefit from this 'good learning'. Recently, Breive (2020) provided an illustrative account of the collective meaning making associated within the ZPD when the teacher participates in the activity as a co-constructor of knowledge. This study added to our understanding of the learning that takes place through this joint experience, an experience that often used to position or regard the adult as the more knowledgeable other (Mercer, 2000). Instead, Breive's variation included a more even relationship between the participants (Breive 2020; Hernandez, Radford & Roth 2011) a "togetherness" (Breive 2020, 229) that describes an agreed commitment to mutual learning, elicited by the activity itself.

Essential for this commitment is a safe and trusting relationship, underpinned by the sensitivity and attunement of the educator to the child (Colter & Ulatowski 2017). This is a kind of sensitivity that is conveyed by supporting learning *when required* (cf. Lipscomb, Swanson & West 2004). Other studies (Breive 2020; Lipscomb et al. 2004; Colter & Ulatowski 2017) suggest that the timing and nature of the educator's response is essential to engage and sustain the ZPD as a sound knowledge of what the children already *know*.

In a similar way, Susan Engel (1995) refers to the psychological importance of positioning children as a *knower* and underscores the value of interpreting their communicative acts, even when adults are uncertain as to their true intention. Engel illustrates this claim with the 'story' reported by renowned linguist Michael Halliday that described his response to his baby son, crying in his sleep. Halliday's son had just had a vaccination and he as father attributed the tears to this event and responded with care to his distress. Although the child may not have been crying for this purpose, Engel described the importance of Halliday's reaction as an action by the parent that endowed the communication with meaning. She argues that this supported the child in learning to use communication as a tool as his response was validated or "heard". In the past, adults' assumptions about the competence of children to form and express their own ideas and feelings tended to prove as a barrier to being "heard" (Facca, Gladstone & Teachman 2020). Other barriers include the influence of adults on children, the power they hold in terms of their relationship with children and the accuracy with which they read the child's thinking and forms of verbal and non-verbal communication (Spyrou 2016). Children without spoken language, particularly children who experience disability, are often assumed either unable to communicate their thoughts and ideas or it is expected that their thoughts will be of lesser value. To overcome these shortcomings different, non-linguistic forms of communication have been utilized by researchers to learn what children really know; these have included photographs, drawings, artwork, role play, and analysis of body language and gestures (Tisdall 2012).

Drawing on this theoretical background, I chose to work with a puppet in order to get to know children more closely as knowers. I decided to extend on Vygotsky's theory and to see if a puppet was able to reveal to me (and to others) that all children have something to say and that their words can contribute to our collective learning. Some aspects of the 'principle' of dolls and puppets in education and children's development are addressed below. They are followed

by a short field report based on a participatory observation during one day in the course of a much longer research story about a puppet called Mabel interacting with children in an early childhood setting.

What is a puppet?

A puppet is a small creature, like a doll that can be brought to life through animation by a puppeteer (Ahlcrona 2012). Like a favourite toy or doll, the puppet can be imbued with a character and a life of its own. Unlike dolls, the character of a puppet is less fixed and relies on the animation of the puppeteer to be fully realized (Remer & Tzurriel 2015). The flexibility of the puppet allows it to take many forms and be constructed from a range of materials that include paper bags, gloves, rods or string (marionettes). They may vary in size and be as tiny as a finger puppet or as large as a full-sized stage puppet. Puppets can be human, animal and everything in between as seen with Jim Henson's famous Muppets, the cross between a puppet and a marionette. Melissa Trimmingham (2010) offers a different view of the puppet by comparing it to a transitional object. Thus, she refers to the British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott who introduced the idea of the transitional object as a child's ability to associate an object, such as a doll, teddy bear or a blanket, with the feelings he received from an important other person (typically their mother). The object as a result imparts the same sense of security or feeling derived from that person (Engel 1995; Trimmingham 2010). The appeal of the puppet makes them an ideal addition to an early childhood program, and they can be utilized for a range of learning experiences. In early childhood centres puppets are likely to be found in the dramatic play area, during morning circle or Storytime. Educators may also use them to support conflict resolution to teach social skills and support language development (Çağanağa 2015; Remer & Tzurriel 2015; Salmon & Sainato 2005).

The language of puppets

Much has been written about the language of puppets and their potential to evoke language in children. The evocativeness of the puppet, its physical attributes and capacity to 'move' and 'speak' make it attractive and engaging to young children. Many children perceive the puppet to be real and regard it as having feelings. The endowment of the puppet with feelings creates a dual effect and elicits feelings and responses in young children (Remer & Tzurriel 2015). They want to touch it

and stroke it. They accept the puppet as a live member of their group; they admire it and include it actively in their work, as a confidante and their ally. By occupying a space between reality and fantasy, the puppet may give children permission and freedom to express their ideas (Korošec 2012, 34). Remer and Tzurriel (2018) argue that this is because puppets are viewed as an "equal partner" (296) by children.

The puppet is therefore the perfect object to learn what children know through "egalitarian conversations" (358). It is also the perfect tool to attract children's interest and develop relationships. For this and other reasons puppets have been used widely by educators as a tool to develop communication. As with other mediating tools, objects or symbols that support a child's engagement with an activity (Bodrova & Leong 2001), the puppet serves to draw children into dialogue and express their ideas. The effectiveness of puppets for mediation may be attributed to the way they involve all the senses through their colours and textures as well as their "ability to portray exaggerated expressions and gestures" (Salmon & Sainato 2005, 12). Communicative acts are enhanced as puppets are easier to 'read' than people, because they are able to convey clear visual messages and support the meaning of language with actions or through play. The playfulness of puppets adds to their appeal (Remer & Tzurriel 2015; Korošec 2012) with studies indicating puppets create an atmosphere that is fun, relaxed and playful.

In the classroom, the teacher can also use the puppet to present information, engage in play and involve children in discussions. In this case, it is no longer the 'teacher' transmitting ideas, it is the puppet. If the children 'trust' the puppet and identify with its experience this can motivate their engagement, create a safe environment (Çağanağa & Kalmis 2015) and remove barriers that may be associated with the authority figure of the educators, reducing stress and creating an atmosphere that is playful and more relaxed (Majaron 2012). For this reason, teachers have utilized puppets to test the knowledge of children and to reduce the fear of exposure that often prevents children from revealing all their knowledge. Indirect communication with the puppet can minimize some of the anxiety associated with communication for a number of children, particularly shy or children learning to become more confident in social interactions.

Puppetry is also emerging in research as a useful 'tool' to reach children with autism. Being a mother of an autistic son herself Trimmingham's (2010) research focused specifically on the object of the puppet to develop empathy, commu-

nication and social understanding. As a researcher and concerned mother she has used puppets in her personal and professional life and concludes:

In the hands of a trusted operator, especially a parent, they [the children] adapt themselves continually to the situation of the child. They are predictable enough to feel safe, they entertain and amuse, they are funny, and they help a child to make 'sense' of the world. Uniquely, because they are objects, the child can focus on them as solid and real but imbue them with 'mind' (Trimingham 2010, 262).

The object of the puppet has a special significance for children with autism to engage and join this imaginative place as it includes their preference for object driven play. It seems that puppets may help a child 'make sense' of the world because of the non-verbal quality of their communication.

The puppet can symbolise and express so much through gesture and its visual form. An idea developed by Kruger (2007) attributed the success of puppetry in educational settings as being due to the visual aspect of the puppet and its capacity to convey ideas through movement and gestures. They can therefore be 'read' or understood without spoken words, triggering the imaginations and acting as another language for all children. Again, this quality may be of particular significance for children with autism (Trimingham 2010) as this imaginative world is a safe place for them to broaden or expand their experiences and understanding. It is not by chance that Vygotsky (2004) highly emphasizes the great importance of imagination and creativity in childhood within the context of social experience. Furthermore, in play, like in a story, individuals are able to inhabit and venture into another experience. Puppets, like props or images in a text, can provide a bridge to enter such imaginary worlds and enrich the participants' response and experience.

The research story – A personal report on first insights and preliminary conclusions

The setting

The vignettes and reported impressions below are a snapshot of my research story and the role of a puppet in supporting the play of all children. The study was undertaken as a postgraduate research degree and included three preschools, over sixty children and nine early childhood professionals. I took the roles of both

researcher and participant working alongside the early childhood educators and leading a series of experiences with puppets. All the preschools accepted children with additional needs, the only criteria essential for the study. The first stage of data collection took place at each preschool for between seven to eight weeks. All the sessions were designed in collaboration with the Early Childhood Educators (ECE), who identified parts of the day to explore drama as a strategy to increase the participation and motivation of all children. Data collection methods included my researcher journal, written reflections from the ECE, informal and formal interviews with the children and educators and images. A follow up structured interview took place with the director and educators at each preschool after the research period to further understand the benefits of the drama as a result of participation in the study. My analysis of the data involved 'listening' for the research story, to see patterns in the language used in the descriptions in the reflections of the adults and by the children when looking at their images and drawings. These patterns became codes that guided which moments from the research to describe in each of the three preschool narratives.

In most cases, I observed and conducted drama and puppetry workshops in the morning during the large group learning experiences. In our initial meeting, the staff had identified group time as one of the most difficult times to engage all children. This was consistent with my observations and in particular some specific children, children whom they suspected or who experienced disability. In this paper, I will refer to two of them and call them Jack and Joel. During my first observation, I had seen Joel refuse to join group learning experiences, to run away and hide. His teacher guided him inside, holding his hand and he cried throughout the group time, crying out he wanted "sleep". His teacher, Miss Belinda, held him and looked very upset at not being able to console him. She clearly cared very much about this child and wanted to find a way to support him to engage with his peers and in the learning experiences. She shared with me that she was unsure how to go about this as every group experience, including naptime ended with him distressed and in tears.

As a guest teacher and researcher, I am constantly seeking to develop a rapport and a relationship with the children, a relationship in which their *knowledge* can be revealed and that allows us to create new *knowledge* together. Puppets are my co-teacher and act as a bridge to the children and their learning community. This is especially true for children with disabilities or those who seem hesitant to



Figure 1: Mabel, the duck puppet
(Folkmanis® Puppets) —

engage with me. For example, in my own work, shyness or hesitation can be conveyed through a turtle puppet that retreats in and out of its shell. That was, why I decided to introduce a puppet: Mabel, a friendly looking yellow duck (see figure 1).

Vignette part 1

Mabel is a gentle soul who wants to make friends and play. She is in fact one of my personal favourite (but please don't tell the other puppets!). As the children come to the rug, Miss Jola, one of the lead teachers, after making eye contact with me to get the green light, gives me the floor. I smile and wave at the children as I take her place on the sofa. I motion to Joel, standing by

Miss Penny at the edge of the group to come and sit near me and suggest Jack may like to sit on the floor in front of his Miss Penny.

O.K.: (in a whisper) I have my friend Mabel in my basket. She is asleep and I have to wake her up, but I can't ... Can you help me?

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

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

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

O.K.: Would you like to have try?

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

Harry: (softly) Wake-up

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 and Joel are still watching me. I notice that Joel's eye movements have become very fast and think this is a sign of stress. I decide to ask him to wake up the duck. He looks at me for a few seconds, 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, another lead teacher. 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. Although I am not a huge fan of the gesture it is one way that I have seen the staff celebrate an accomplishment with the children. I want to be consistent and so I offer him my hand. He hits it, gently, looking all the time at Miss Belinda. I look to Miss Belinda too, imploringly. As if on cue, she says, "Great job, Joel" and turns back to the computer. He 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.

O.K.: (to Mabel) Good morning, darling

Mabel: Hello...Where am I?

O.K.: (to the children) Who can tell Mabel where she is?

Lyndall: (one of the little girls I met last week looks as if she is about to burst, calls out laughing)

At preschool.

Mabel: What is preschool?

(Laughter in the room, and the children exchange glances, how can this teacher be so silly and not know about 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.

Commentary note 1: More knowledgeable other

What were my intentions and actions in the episode sketched out above? My primary goal in this first session was to help the children feel comfortable and safe with me, have all children be part of our whole group learning experience. I also intended to establish their position as expert at our first encounter. My approach was informed by research in primary school settings that showed children were more confident to answer questions to "help" a puppet to understand concepts or solve problems (Naylor, Keogh, Downing, Maloney & Simon 2007; Simon, Naylor, Keogh, Maloney & Downing 2008). I introduced Mabel when she was asleep

and enlisted the children's help in waking her up. In this instance, both Mabel and I were less knowledgeable, and the children were trusted with the responsibility of waking her up and then make her acquainted with preschool. I was very careful in responding to the children, to wait for them to provide me with the answers and not to correct any of their ideas. On this first day, I also made another choice (and a leap of faith) in asking one of the children that typically did not engage in group experiences. I took this risk as I wanted to learn more about this child, to see how they engaged with the puppet and compare this interaction with my observations of him in other group experiences and the impression I was given from his teachers. I also wanted to model to the other children that everyone was a valued part of this learning experience. Joel showed me that he wanted to be part of the group and that he could participate, that he was following the meaning of the dramatic play when a puppet was utilized and that he looked for the affirmation of his teacher. Mabel gave him the perfect motivation to play.

Vignette part 2

For the next part of our workshop, 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 distract some of the children but persevere. I gently tap Joel on the knee and smile, motioning for him to sit next to me on my right-hand side. We move to the floor, he smiles. Jack appears delighted in his new position on the floor, he is looking at his friends next to him with his legs stretched out and he is smiling. Miss Penny is just behind him, sitting on a child sized chair. To build a sense of connection between the children, I begin with my favourite circle ritual. It involves the children looking at each other and passing a wave and/or 'hello'. I add that Mabel does not yet know how to 'say hello' and so this will help her learn. Mabel models a wave by flapping her wing, to a little girl seated at my left. She is wearing a bright pink shirt with a unicorn on it and has her hair in bunches. She looks at me and smiles, then reaches to touch Mabel. Miss Belinda quickly instructs her to, "Turn and say hello to Pete". After a few more prompts the wave/hello goes around the circle. Most children do both, all wave. Jack adds a vocalization and Joel waves too and then looks again at his teacher. In the next part of the session, we pass a smile and then a silly face. Every child smiles to each other and then they take turns to pass a silly face. Jack is laughing and tapping his feet.

Commentary note 2: Puppet as a meditating tool

In the circle above, Mabel acted very subtly as a role model and supported the children to make meaning of the language in the game. I chose this game to learn how many of the children could follow simple directions, participate in collaborative play, self-regulate and act with autonomy. Some of the directions in the game are more open and give the children permission to create a facial expression or a gesture. It encouraged them to take turns and 'look at each other' it also placed them in the valued position of being the MKO for Mabel. It is possible that their attention was enhanced by Mabel and by their role of 'helping her'. Bodrova and Leong (2006) explain how mediating objects can support children to attend to an event or learning experience. They provide numerous examples, such as pens, pencils, posters and other objects that support children to complete an activity with autonomy. The authors also add that the object should be meaningful to the child, to hold, "special meaning for the child and be able to evoke that meaning" (61). This is illustrated in the description above as the children represented their ideas through words and actions, because they were motivated by the presence of Mabel and excited about sharing their ideas with her. Furthermore, Miss Belinda noted in her reflection:

This experience was great for their attention/emotions and connection to other. It really supported their right to play and express themselves, and for us to respect that too. We used some hand puppets this morning just to follow up and it worked well. We are looking into getting some larger puppets to use at group time and throughout the day (personal correspondence, 12/4/2019).

Vignette part 3

Once I feel we have moved enough, we freeze in navy beans pose, (salute). After holding for a few seconds, I ask the children to sit down. I want to read one of their favourite books, this time by adding some movement and actions that I hope will help all the children discover the meaning of the book. Last week, I noticed Jack ran over to the table activities that were being set up and then was taken for a walk outside. Another boy, Ben, moved over to a table by the wall and touched the pencils in a jar. He seemed far away. I open The Berenstain Bears and the Spooky Old Tree (Berenstain, 1978). Instead of reading the book, we act it out, so when the bears have a torch, we all pretend to hold a torch, we act out going up the tree, climbing down the stairs, shivering and climbing over a sleeping bear.

Mabel sits and watches as all the children are following along, either inventing their own actions to the story or copying one another. It is a very busy rendition, but no-one is running away.

Commentary note 3: Environment of trust

In the moment above, the children are engaged in a collective, joint experience in which they re-create a story through movement, improvisation and role play. I was aware that *The Berenstain Bears and the Spooky old Tree* was a favourite book, read frequently in the preschool and that many of the children would be familiar with the story and sequence of events. I gave the children the responsibility in re-telling the story for Mabel (who did not know the story). The children worked as a group, committed to the task and making the story come to life with Mabel. Breive (2020) found in her study the act of giving children responsibility in their leaning activities was associated with a greater commitment to the learning experience. I gave the children that responsibility through endowing them as the MKO and having Mabel as the less knowledgeable other. Their knowledge was seen in the vignette above and the children took turns and collectively worked (Abtahi, 2014) as the more knowledgeable to progress the story further. As with Breive's study, the children were trusted and given the permission to lead this learning. Mabel's reaction to their contributions encouraged the children. She also created an atmosphere that was playful and safe (Kröger & Nupponen, 2019) and one in which the children believed their ideas would be accepted. I see the puppet as being essential for this to have occurred on the first workshop! Interesting to the educators was the different ways in which the children engaged after the event, as one teacher said:

The puppet had a big impact. So many children participating and also showing post experience role modelling teacher behaviour and the puppeteering. This experience was great for their attention/emotions and connection to other. It really supported their right to play and express themselves, and for us to respect that too (Personal correspondence, 19/4/2020).

When we finish the book, 22 exhausted *Berenstain Bears* come to the floor to go sleep. We all slowly wake-up, except for Mabel, who is now fast asleep and snoring. We try a few un-successful attempts at waking her, then we give up. I ask the children if I can visit them again next week. I hear a lot of children say, yes. As I get ready to leave, the little girl in pink with bunches comes over to me to ask if

Mabel can come too? Of course, I reply, making a mental note that I need to find out her name. Miss Jola and Miss Belinda both come over, they look happy. I feel we have so much to say and no time to talk as they must supervise the children, waiting at the table for small group work, Lego boards, puzzles and beads are set up at each table. They promise to email me with thoughts on the day and pictures, we hug. By the time I am on the bus, the images are in my Inbox.

To conclude: Who is the more knowledgeable other?

I recall an interpretation of the ZPD that likened the process to that of an adult lending their voice to a child, the voice was on loan until the time when the child could speak alone. At the time, this view appealed to me, now it has lost some of its charm. I no longer view myself as the *knower*. My work with puppets (Karaolis, 2021) has shown me that it is too easy to assume the knowledge of others and instead to see how it is constantly evolving through experiences – in particular experiences that involve a puppet. Abtahi (2014) in writing about Vygotsky approaches in mathematics, proposes that rather than focus on “the more knowledgeable”, educators should look to the creation of, “a zone within which we learn (we come to know?) with others” (38). The puppet may be worthy of further consideration as a key player in that zone.

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