

Puppets: Are they more than just entertainment?  
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**Abstract:**

Do puppets support learning in the classroom or are they just entertainment for students?

This inquiry explores the different ways puppets help support learning in the classroom.

Throughout this inquiry, the idea of what makes puppets inspiring to students and students responses to the use of puppets was the main focus: Do the students talk to the puppet instead of the teacher? Do the students look at the puppet during lessons instead of watching their teacher? During the inquiry, different students responded differently to the variety of puppets that were used.

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**“Puppets possess a unique feature that makes them valuable to teachers and students alike: they are not the teacher. They can be stupid (and let the students teach them); they can be silly; and perhaps that most important, they can be equals – not adult disciplinarians but understanding friends. Thus, they can help to open up the avenues of communication between teacher and students.” (Fleming, 1983)**

### **Where do I teach?**

I teach at Ferguson Township Elementary School. I am participating in a year long internship through Penn State University and State College Area School District. I work in full-day kindergarten with my mentor teacher. Our student’s learning abilities can be found on a very large spectrum and sometimes it is hard to keep the students interested in a certain topic for an extended period of time. We have students that are able to read chapter books and complete math equations in their heads to students who are still having difficulty writing their first and last name. Needless to say, it takes a lot of effort to keep these little guys on track and interested in what we are doing in the class.

### **What are my wonderings?**

1. Why are students so attracted to these puppets?
2. Why do the puppets receive such a great response from the student’s?
3. Why are the puppets intriguing and motivating to my students?
4. Do puppets support learning in the classroom?

### **What led to my wonderings?**

During our routine schedule, I noticed that some students were more attentive than other times and vice versa. My mentor introduced the students to a variety of puppets that have played different roles in the classroom throughout the school year. The most commonly used puppet was “Freddy” our frog. He helped the students read their morning letter each day. Freddy helped the students with their word of the week and would help the students recognize letter and sound recognition. As I began to take over more responsibilities in the classroom, my mentor and I rotated weekly using Freddy to read the morning letter. When it was my turn to help with the morning letter, I was unable to talk in the same voice for Freddy as my mentor had. The students were able to pick up on this and would ask Freddy everyday if he had a sore throat. When they began to make him “Get Well” cards, I knew it was time for me to get my own puppet. Deciding on what kind of puppet to use was very difficult. I wanted something that the students would enjoy, but also something that I could easily relate to. As I walked into the store, I spied the perfect puppet. It was a small, fuzzy, brown horse. I knew that this would be the perfect puppet because I have had horses all my life and I could relate this puppet to a horse that I had previously owned. I decided to name my puppet, Toby. Of course, the students loved him and so did I. I was able to create my own voice and my own life background for him. It was very easy to answer questions and remember the answers for the next time I was asked a question about Toby by a student. Prior to using

the puppet, I noticed that my management abilities were lessened when I was teaching a lesson, while using the puppets. The students seemed more willing to participate and enjoyed interacting with my puppet. After having such a great response with Toby, I decided that maybe I could use a puppet when I taught my math lessons. I had a few students who were “too tough” to enjoy the puppets and they were not very attentive during the lesson. I decided to go back to the puppet store and purchase another puppet. This time I found a cow. Since the cow was going to be used primarily for math, I decided that I should call him “Mac Moo”. Trying to use the M’s to relate to the subject of math. As I introduced him to the class, one of the students who did not enjoy the current puppets was very excited to see that we had a math puppet. He told me that he loved math and would answer any questions that Mac Moo would have during our math review. His reasoning behind this was that he loved math and that he was able to count to 600! Since Mac Moo has entered the lives of my kindergarteners, my students who were not very attentive before now love math and enjoy helping Mac Moo learn when they review math concepts that they have already learned.

### **How did I collect my data?**

Before I began collecting my data, I wondered what a puppet was and why my students were motivated by this non-living object. I asked myself, “What is a puppetry?” I found that puppetry begins with the first breath of life into an inanimate object. Any object can be given this life by a puppeteer. Puppetry holds a strong appeal for young children. Children love to both lose themselves in the world of make-believe, and model their play on adult life and behavior. Among its many qualities, Puppetry provides an

outlet for this expression and provides the teacher with a happy medium for educating children. “In a nutshell, the puppetry strategy simply means that a primary teacher uses a classroom puppet throughout the school day in a variety of ways – for classroom management, for the introduction of new concepts, for language development, for exposure to poetry, and for problem solving. Actually, its uses are endless, limited only by the creativity of the teacher who is using it.” (Dempsie, 2004) I found that my students love to role play and lose themselves in the world of make-believe. I began to question how I was supposed to use my new puppets. I am not the type of person that can perform in front of a large group of people easily and now I am expected to change my voice and pretend to be a horse. I found a lot of motivation in this quote from Rucker, “Skillful use of puppets allows the teacher to initiate, control, and terminate discussions easily, and, at the same time, maintain the appropriate mood.” (Rucker, 1978) I found this quote to be very true. As soon as my management was beginning to slip, Toby would ask the students to please be quiet so he could finish reading his letter. And sure enough, the students sat up and all eyes were on this fuzzy little puppet.

Throughout the semester, my mentor and PDA observed my teaching both with and without the use of the puppets. They would record any management issues that I would have, watched to see if some students were more attentive than others during lessons with certain puppets, and we kept a record of which students responded more during the different lessons. I observed my mentor teaching lessons both with and without the puppets and recorded the student’s responses to her and her puppet. I then compared my notes with my mentor and PDA’s notes to see if there were any dramatic differences. I wanted to see if any of the students were acting differently with me

because I was not the “real” teacher in the classroom. I did have problems with this at the beginning of the school year. However, our observation notes agreed with each other, so I was able to further suspect that the puppets had a significant impact on the student’s attentiveness and behavior. I observed other people in our classroom that were not my mentor or I, B.A.B.E.S. B.A.B.E.S. is a program that was developed by the Y.M.C.A. They came into our classroom for six weeks and discussed problem solving strategies, how to deal with peer pressure, and how to help improve their self imaging. Each Friday, they used puppets to act out a skit that focused on the topic for that day. At the end of each skit, they asked the students to recall important facts and what they would do if they were presented with a real life scenario like the situation that was described in the skit. During the skit, I noticed that my students were very attentive and were very interested in what the puppets had to say. As soon as the performers put the puppets away, I noticed a lot of students fidgeting with their neighbors, playing with their shoe laces, or sneaking toys from the toy shelves. However, as soon as the performers started asking questions about the puppets, I noticed that my students became attentive and interested in recalling what the puppets should have done during the skit. I used the same observation questions that my mentor and PDA used while I was teaching; however, I was observing the authority figures in our classroom.

Another way that I collected data was through a project that I created at the end of the animal unit. At the end of our animal unit, I had my students create their own paper bag puppets. We paired them with a friend and they had to use their puppets to talk to each other. They had to describe what kind of animal they were, what type of habitat they lived in, and what kinds of food they enjoyed eating. The students used different

voices when using their puppets. This was a great way to help the students review what they had learned and to also make the unit more meaningful for them. “Puppets appear to help children to coordinate their own experiences with language as well as teaching them to be an attentive audience and to overcome their egocentrism...Puppets can be a learning tool used to stimulate socio-dramatic play and positively influence the child’s intellectual, creative, and social development.”(Quisenberry ,1972) The students are still creating their own puppets during our “choice time” and have organized their own plays with written scripts. I have watched many students who were very shy become more social when they are using their puppets in their own created play.

After using a variety of puppets in the classroom, I decided to have my students create a self portrait of them with their favorite puppet. I wanted to see if they would draw a picture of the puppet teaching, them playing with the puppet, a picture of just the puppet, or any other drawing that would inspire a new wondering. After the students created their portrait, I performed individual interviews with each student. I asked each student the following questions:

1. Why is (puppet name) your favorite puppet?
2. How does (puppet name) help you learn in the classroom?
3. Do you like when the puppets visit the classroom?

I found that all the students were able to give me answers to all three of these questions. When asking them why they liked the puppet, most of them responded with telling me that the puppet helped them to learn certain things (reading, writing, listening, math, etc.). I found one interview to be very interesting. The students all told me that the puppets are not real, but one students’ response was very interesting to me. “Freddy is my favorite

puppet because he helps me read the morning letter. He is funny too. He *thinks* that he is real, but we all know that he is just a puppet.” Even though he knew that Freddy was just a puppet, he gave the puppet the ability to think on his own.

### **How I analyzed my data?**

I used my data collection to help me to better understand why the students liked the classroom puppets. After collecting my data, I read through all my classroom observations to see if I noticed a pattern in classroom participation and management issues. I compared these issues to both when the puppets were used and when they were not used during lessons. I eliminated data that did not hold any significance in my wondering, while also trying to recognize a pattern for any new wonderings for findings. The child interviews for very important to this inquiry. The answers are straight from the students. No observation would have been able to truly tell me how the students felt. The observations were used to monitor behavior, attentiveness, and to see if the students spoke to the adult or the puppet. These observations were able to show me that the puppets had an affect on the students learning.

Throughout April, the students have been involved in many days that did not follow our daily routine. On April Fool’s Day, the school day was backwards, except for our music class and lunch. The students wore their clothes inside out and backwards, while Mrs. Bruening dressed as an 80 year old woman. The kids loved it and had lots of fun, while they were still well behaved. Another day that did not follow our daily routine was when the students took their trip to the International Space Station. As teachers, we were skeptical of how the students would behave during this two hour activity.

Surprisingly, the students were very well behaved and stayed on task throughout the entire activity. Observing their behavior and attentiveness during these special events led me to a new wondering:

***Does adding variety to the daily routine help keep the students attentive and engaged in their learning?***

**What have my students and I have learned from this inquiry project?**

Claim 1: The students understand that the puppets are not animate objects, but I did find that some students did refer to the puppets as having the ability to think.

Claim 2: Daily routine is very important to classroom management; however, adding variety is also helpful in keeping the students interested in what is going on in the classroom.

- April fool's Day: Everyone was able to wear their pajamas to school, clothes that were inside out or backwards, and we flipped our entire daily schedule.
- Puppets: I used our math puppet one morning to help with the morning letter. The students became very excited and wanted to help explain what they had to do and what they puppet needed to do to help.

Claim 3: Incorporating puppets into the unit is very helpful for both the student and the teacher. The lessons become more meaningful and the puppet can be used to help review important key terms with the students. Classroom puppets are nothing more than a visual metaphor that represents real life but at the same time is one step removed from the real world.

- The puppets were used to help the students review key ideas about certain animals and the habitats that they live in.
- The puppets review with the student's math concepts and the morning letter.

I also now know that the purpose of puppets is beyond my original belief. The puppets have helped to develop community within my classroom (paper bag puppets), build social and language arts skills (morning letter and paper bag puppets), and role play (performing their own plays with written scripts).

In my future classroom, I will use puppets in the classroom to help make learning more enjoyable and the make learning more meaningful to the students. School needs to be meaningful in order to allow the teaching and learning to reach its fullest potential. Teachers are competing everyday with television and other distractions that are more entertaining to children. It is through the use of the puppet that we are able to delight children and touch their hearts. Increasingly, it is recognized that puppetry is a unique and innovative way to reach out to children. Puppets can entertain, inform, persuade, and appeal. They are part of the world's ancient history, and at the same time, they are also part of the world's modern imagination.

As a future educator, I have found myself believing more in an inquiry based classroom and curriculum rather than a more traditional classroom setting and teaching strategies. I have noticed that my students have all opened up more to participating in the classroom when a puppet is present during any lesson. After performing the individual interviews, I was able to see which puppet helped certain students in certain subjects. I was also able to see why the students liked these puppets. I have used this information to

help adjust my lessons and include these puppets more when teaching. When puppets grip our imagination, they can help support positive changes in our classroom community. Each puppet has a unique quality that has reached out and grabbed the interest of each of my students.

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