



Dr. Mirella Forsberg Ahlcrona

Puppets as educational tool serve as animated symbols of thoughts, feelings and experiences. Research interests are directed towards the puppet's meaning and significance by the activity's subjective product in the human activity. By illuminating the puppet's communicative properties, the aim of my research is to develop knowledge about the puppet's relational, linguistic and action-related potential as a mediating tool in preschool and school education.

What is a puppet?

The word puppet comes from the Latin 'pupa', which among other things, means a small creature. It is also the way a spectator often perceives a puppet, which moves, speaks and in its performance, mediates actions and content. When a puppet expresses thoughts and feelings as being an individual, it is easy to perceive it as a "real" person, a subject with whom we can communicate.

The idea that an object can become alive has always fascinated people and challenged their imagination. A puppet (a glove, a string or a rod puppet) is a material artefact in which specific movements are incorporated, but not the activities or the purpose relating to the use of the puppet. By means of visual impression through external properties, such as appearance, movement and speech, the puppet's actions can evoke and arouse the spectators' emotions, thoughts and associations.



With our help, a puppet can begin to live and do the unthinkable – to act, and to give the illusion of life. It is first, in the relationship with a person, that the puppet's communicative potential can emerge and it is through communication that the puppet's existence can be acknowledged and developed. Viewed from a historical perspective, the puppet's communicative properties have been utilised for different purposes and in different areas, such as the theatre, education, therapy and politics.

While a puppet's body and construction is, in general, governed by technical rules, the content and aim for the use of puppets in education is governed by the didactic questions: what, how, why and for whom. This means that a single puppet can be used for different purposes and in different educational contexts.

A puppet's ability to link the "real world" and possible imagined worlds means that what is happening in front of the spectator at the given moment both is and is not – a puppet is not really alive, but what it does and says at a specific moment, that is real. This over bridging between what is and what is not, but what may be, illustrates and represents the puppet's duality the acting puppet's basic characteristic and behaviour. The puppet's actions can also be understood in accordance with the double vision concept, which means that a puppet is perceived by the audience in two different ways at the same time – as an acting object and as an imaginary life.

The theoretical base of research is grounded within the sociocultural tradition. The use of tools in this tradition is regarded as an individual and a collective act in which appropriation of social and cultural practices take place in relation to other individuals, other contexts and activities. The use of the puppet in education covers acts that are both collective and individual and are dynamically related to each other. Research interest is focused on the content of communicative processes where the puppet is a mediating tool between the teacher and the children, and to uncover the puppet's communicative potential, properties and opportunities in educational context. Mediation and "the act of mediating" is the link that helps thinking and conceptions to be created and to emerge. Mediation concerns how children, in their communication with the puppet, about the puppet and because of the puppet, construct and mediate their conceptual world, develop knowledge, exchange experiences, establish relationships and create new activities (Forsberg Ahlcróna, 2012).

Teacher, the puppet's creation and mediation

From a didactic perspective, the puppet's creation as a tool is primarily intellectual as it is based on the teacher's reflection of her/his work, and the way in which certain requirements can be processed with the help of the puppet. The process of creating is about the creative activity circle - an interaction between an individual's intellectual and emotional ability, which means that both thoughts and feelings contribute to make a creative action (Vygotsky, 1971).

If a teacher can make puppets, then she/he can also both make and use a puppet as a tool based on suitable educational purposes and contents. It may be about responding to situations identified in everyday life, or about specific content that a teacher wants to develop in the work with children. It is the teacher's professional intention in using the puppet that forms the basis of the puppet's aesthetic creation and con-

tent. The creation of a puppet is emotional as it is based on the teacher's personal commitment. Both the intellectual and the emotional elements make an impact on the artistic design of the puppet. That is, the puppet's aesthetic design - choice of colours, details and materials are not random but part of the teacher's didactic strategy and mediate a certain intention or message. Then, in mutual interaction with children, other potential properties develop. In other words, the puppet as a tool, implements only a small part of the spontaneous imagination. Largely, a puppet as a mediating tool is a product of an intellectual and emotional interaction, through the construction of meaning.

Teachers' thoughts about how to influence their practice occur initially only as a condition, as a prerequisite for activity. According to Aleksei Leontyev (Cole, 2009), the need steers the subject (teacher), but that it is the object (puppet) that steers the activity processes through the driving force of objects. Situations in which teacher communicates with the puppets bring the object to life and can be described as the revitalization of things. Revitalization of things develop and strengthen a relationship between teacher and children and contribute to the development of children's inter-subjectivity in particular when children and teacher share the focus of attention and when they share intentions and emotional states. Such activities, makes their actions both external and internal, both emotive and cognitive.





Puppet as a subject and the puppet's relational potential

The puppet's emotional value as a subject manifests itself and develops primarily in children's dialogues and ways of talking about the puppet. Here, the emotional value not only refers to the existence of emotions that children express, it also includes children's negotiations concerning the meaning of the puppet as being 'for real' and what it then consists of. When Leontyev writes about "the driving force of objects", he is referring to the process whereby the object's hidden properties create the mutual interplay of the driving force of different communicative acts. Applied to the puppet, this means that the puppet's specific movements "are hidden" and only emerge when the puppet "acts" on the hand, and in mutual interaction. The puppet's relational potential emerged when the children, in relationship with the puppet, develop emotional values, and perform communicative acts based on knowledge-related and emotional motives, which overstep boundaries between actual and imagined worlds.

Mediation and the puppet's linguistic potential

One of the fundamental assumptions within the framework of a socio-cultural perspective is that language functions as a link between society and individuals, since it enables one person to participate in other people's perspectives and

experiences that are mediated. According to Lev Vygotsky (1986) language functions as a link between people and within people – between the external communication and the internal thinking.

Communication, in the form of narrating, is not just a simple presentation of events. It embraces one's own perspectives, motivations, values and contemporary and spatial orientation – aspects that Jerome Bruner (1990) calls "the landscape of consciousness". According to Bruner (1986, 2002) and Bert van Oers (2003), narrating and narratives are a way of organising experiences and can be seen as social phenomena and a basic form of communication through which people express their thoughts and emotions.

The puppet's linguistic potential emerged when the children, in communicating with the puppet, mediated cultural and social experiences, expressed their conceptions of knowledge and learning, and developed indicative, semiotic and rhetorical functions of language. Most commonly the children's non-verbal and verbal activities with the puppet presented mostly current issues of today, but by overstepping the limits of the possible and imagined worlds, puppets also generate visions of a potential future.

Three-party relationships and the puppet's action-related potential

Three-party relationships refer to those that are developed in the communication between the teacher, the puppet and children – these are a way of participating, creating and developing common knowledge in social learning activities. The communication is based on a common object, the puppet, and the puppet's actions within the contexts. The three-party relationship concerns the objectivity and subjectivity process of the object through the creation of meaning in the educational process. Vygotsky (1986) regards the educational process as a participatory process and interaction in which the exchange between spontaneous and scientific conceptual thinking is developed





in mutual assistance and interplay between the parties involved.

The puppet’s action-related potential emerged through the development of those three-party relationships, which can also be described in terms of “the zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky, 1978). The puppet’s action-related potential emerged

in children’s play and through collective and creative actions. Children’s performances and games with the puppets conveyed the children’s attempt to make sense of situations, where imagination and narrative played important roles.

References

- Bruner, J. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of Meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, J. (2002). *Making Stories. Law, Literature, Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cole, M. (2009). *The development of Mind. Selected Works of Aleksei Nikolaevich Leontyev*. Marxists Internet Archive. P:O:Box1541; Pacifica, CA 94044; USA
- Forsberg Ahlcróna, M. (2012). *The puppet’s communicative potential as a mediating tool in preschool*. DOI: 10.1007/s13158-012-0060-3, in press. *International Journal of Early Childhood*
- van Oers, B. (Ed.). (2003). *Narratives of Childhood. Theoretical and Practical Explorations for the Innovation of Early Childhood Education*. Amsterdam: VU University Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1971). *The Psychology of Art. (The Massachusetts Institute of Technology)*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1986). *Thought and language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.



Dr. MIRELLA FORSBERG AHLCRONA is a lecturer and researcher at the University of Skövde, Sweden. As a researcher, she participates in different projects that aim to invent and create methods by using puppets as an educational tool. As a lecturer in Early Childhood Education, she teaches courses on the puppet as a mediating tool in education and puppet play as a different way of communication. She can be contacted at mirella@viovio.se