



USING PUPPETS IN WORKING WITH PUPILS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDSⁱ

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Abstract:

Artistic teaching tools included in the process of education increase the efficiency of traditional learning methods, since they help pupils to be more open, relaxed and motivated, while facilitating the presenting of information. Puppets present one such tool, as by including them in the educational process, they affect different areas of a child's development, which is important for all pupils, especially those with special educational needs. They help achieve general and specific objectives in the process of education set out individually for each pupil with learning difficulties, since they offer a more creative, more interesting and less stressful style of learning. Puppets can affect the emotional, cognitive and social development of pupils and enable their integrated development as well. The research is based on a descriptive causal non-experimental method of empirical pedagogical research and was conducted among Slovenian teachers teaching pupils with special needs in regular elementary schools. We presented the teachers with the possibility of using puppets in their teaching process, found out the frequency and the aim of the use, as well as teachers' opinions on the use of puppets, their acquaintance with their use and factors affecting it.

Keywords: pupils with special needs, additional expert pedagogical support, elementary school, work with puppets, factors of puppet use, integrated development

Povzetek:

Z vključevanjem umetnostnih sredstev v proces vzgoje in izobraževanja se poveča učinkovitost tradicionalnih metod učenja, saj so učenci ob njih bolj odprti, sproščeni in

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motivirani, posredovanje informacij pa je olajšano. Eno izmed umetnostnih sredstev so tudi lutke, ki lahko z vključevanjem v proces vzgoje in izobraževanja vplivajo na različna področja otrokovega razvoja, kar je pomembno za vse učence, še toliko bolj pa za učence s posebnimi potrebami. Na zanimivejši, kreativnejši in manj stresen način omogočajo doseganje splošnih ciljev vzgoje in izobraževanja ter specifičnih ciljev za otroke s posebnimi potrebami, ki se določijo v individualiziranem programu za posameznega učenca s posebnimi potrebami. Z njihovim vključevanjem k delu vplivamo na čustveni, spoznavni in socialni razvoj učencev ter jim omogočamo celostni razvoj. Opravili smo deskriptivno kavalno neeksperimentalno empirično pedagoško raziskavo med slovenskimi učitelji, ki poučujejo otroke s posebnimi potrebami v redni osnovni šoli. Predstavili smo jim možnosti uporabe lutk v pedagoškem procesu, ugotavljali pogostost in namen rabe lutk pri njihovem delu ter stališča do njihove rabe, poznavanje možnosti dela z lutkami in dejavnike, ki vplivajo na njihovo rabo lutk.

Ključne besede: učenci s posebnimi potrebami, dodatna strokovna pomoč, osnovna šola, delo z lutkami, dejavniki rabe lutk, celostni razvoj

Introduction

In Slovenia the work with children or pupils with special needs is governed by the Law on the Placement of Children with Special Needs. Children with special needs are directed to educational programmes taking into account their needs in physical, cognitive, emotional, social fields, as well as their special medical needs. The child's reached level of development is taken into account, the ability to learn and achieve standards of knowledge and the prognosis of future development. Depending on the criteria for identifying the type and level of handicap or disorders of children with disabilities, the children with special needs include: children with intellectual disabilities, visually impaired, deaf and hearing impaired children with speech and language disorders, children with physical disabilities, long-term sick children with deficits in certain areas of learning, children with autistic disorders and children with emotional and behavioural disorders. Pupils with special needs, who can, depending on the type and level of deficits and obstacles, achieve the standards of ordinary nine-year elementary school, are in Slovenia oriented towards the programme with adjusted implementation and additional expert pedagogical support (hereinafter referred to as additional expert pedagogical support), which allows suitable adaptation of organization, modes of assessment, progression and timing of teaching. They are generally directed towards the programme by a decision issued by the Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for Education at the Request for guidance from the institute or the

parents and at proposal of the Commission for guidance, which issues an expert opinion.

Additional expert pedagogical support is implemented as an aid to overcome deficits, obstacles or disabilities and as an advisory service, and is carried out weekly: individually or in a group within or outside the department. The scope and method of additional expert pedagogical support implementation is determined by the provision on guidance, while the more in detail method of implementation of the additional professional help is defined by an individualized education programme, which is, in cooperation with parents, prepared by a professional group of people who work with the individual pupil. The largest amount of additional expert pedagogical support is 5 hours per week, of which one hour is dedicated to consulting services.

A guide for teachers of additional expert pedagogical support in working with students with special needs are not only the child's deficits, obstacles or disorders, but rather also their needs, desires and interests. When working the teachers must be flexible and use various forms and methods. It is important that a multi-sensor approach is used, which can be achieved by integrating art tools. Among these, there are also puppets, which for quite a while now have not been only a means of preparing performances, but also a good help to teachers who teach and pupils who learn and develop, as the puppets affect the emotional, social and cognitive development and are a great motivational tool. They allow indirect communication between teachers and pupils, as direct communication is often difficult for children, and thus the puppet becomes the interface, even a shield and an authority that is chosen by the pupil. With the help of puppets, teachers working with pupils with special needs follow and meet different objectives of the individualized programme and curricular goals, such as learning objectives, development of coordination of body movements, reading and writing skills, language development, verbal and non-verbal expression, imagination, auditory processing, emotional expression and learning of social skills. Puppets are also a great motivational tool, not only for younger pupils, as they attract also the elderly, although the need for game with years declines.

When working with pupils with special needs, it is important that teachers try to draw as close to children as possible and enable them the path appropriate for their own abilities, so that with the teacher's support they progress and achieve the objectives of the individualized programme and curriculum. A variety of methods and types of work can be used; which to select depends on the skills and interests on one hand, and taking into account the needs, desires and interests of the pupils on the other.

Below we present the possibilities of using puppets within the process of education. We will also present the results of research of puppet use among teachers of pupils with special needs within the additional expert pedagogical support in Slovenia,

their views on the use of puppets at work, and factors that affect the use. We will present the proposals, which could lead to a more frequent use of puppets when working with children with special needs.

1. Integration of puppets into the entire curriculum

Puppets can help enable the process of curriculum implementation - they can help with acquiring the knowledge, as the pupils can read, write, count, talk and learn. Through their creation and animation the pupils can develop their skills and express creativity, while the performing of different scenes offers the possibility of exercising educational elements, especially the socializing ones. It is important to recognize that pupils do not learn just by listening and sitting with a book, but gain new knowledge through experience, and they do not like the monotonous repetition and reinforcing of the learning material, which may well be overcome by means of puppets. When using them, pupils can express themselves freely and make mistakes, while their whole body and not just the intellect are expressed. Through puppets the pupils are allowed their own way of learning, while considering their individuality and creativity, and encouraging their imagination. The school offers also a strong process of secondary socialization, which is based on communication rather than on mutual identification of teacher and pupil, and a puppet can be a great medium of communication between them, especially with introverted and less successful students (Retuznik Bozovičar, Krajnc, 2010, p. 69 and 83).

The objectives of puppet use and links to the curriculum may therefore be very different. The goals between them cannot be completely separated, because the puppets influence cognitive, social and emotional development of the child at the same time, as they allow expression of feelings, development of empathy, they promote moral development and learning of social skills, enable the development of self-esteem and strengthen self-esteem, affect the performance of both brain hemispheres and promote intellectual development, creativity, imagination, distinguishing between reality and fantasy, language development and verbal communication.

2. Puppets for working with pupils with special needs

The puppets can be, due to numerous possibilities, successfully included in working with pupils with special needs within the said program with adjusted implementation and additional expert pedagogical support, as they enable development and achieving of the objectives of the individualized program, at which point the teacher plays an important role; it is necessary that the teacher believes in puppets, knows at least the

basics of working with them and uses them in the right amount in various forms and on various occasions. The puppets can be used for achieving various objectives of the individualized programme for each pupil, which is presented in more detail below.

2.1 Development of coordination of body movements

Puppets can be used for motivation of physical activities, as children are almost always attracted to them. When a pupil with the body or a body part animates a puppet, he must master the coordination of movements of a certain body part. Various puppet activities encourage different effects and each and every one of them requires from the pupil a unique control of a certain part of the body and muscles, or even coordination of the movement of the whole body. The pupil is directed toward feeling individual parts of the body and sets of muscles, which he then masters via the puppet, gradually establishing the control over his body (Majaron, Korošec, 2006, p. 98-100).

2.2 Development of fine motor and graphomotor skills

The development of fine motor skills can be achieved especially with animation of hand puppets. The fingers thus obtain individual functions; one or two bear the head, while two represent the puppet's hands. The puppet must not be greater than the child's hands, as that is the only way the pupil will enjoy its animation and look for different options of moving the puppet, such as bowing it, carrying, jumping, rotations, dancing, etc. (Majaron, Korošec, 2006, p. 101)

Even the creation of a puppet contributes to fine motor skills. Drawing, cutting, gluing, sewing, bobbin the thread, embroidering of clothes and buttoning of buttons represent an opportunity to express creativity and to make their own puppets, as well as influence the important development of fine motor skills. The puppet may also be only the motivation for the pupils to carry out activities for the development of fine motor skills.

The development of fine motor skills is linked also to graphomotor skills, which are important for the development of writing. There are various activities that help the development of graphomotor skills, such as drawing bent lines of diverse shapes, writing exercises, relaxation of wrists and fingers; we can give them sense by incorporating puppets, which encourage motivation and thus the willingness to perform the above mentioned exercises.

2.3 Developing a symmetrical movement

With the animation of finger puppets, student can be motivated to develop a symmetrical movement. When, for example, the left index finger is looking in the mirror, which is represented and mimicked by the right index finger, the child controls

symmetrical movement. If the same index fingers start dancing, the child must control the parallel movement. Similar scenes can be performed with several fingers, even an arm or a leg. The puppet can also motivate when observing the symmetry of objects and nature, on human body and face, as the child with its help makes symmetrical images, copies one half of the image symmetrically onto the other side, watching what happens with objects in movement, if looked at in the mirror, etc.

2.4 Orientation development

A pupil can develop body orientation by means of a physical puppet, as its movement depends on the movement of the pupil who is moving on the spot or in the space. The movement can be added various instructions which the pupil performs through the puppet, while being guided when doing so. Puppets can also be incorporated when mastering orientation in space, as the pupil, for example, by moving through space, learns notions such as below, above, beside, between, behind, on, left, right, forward and backward, all of which can be transferred to the orientation on a sheet of paper. Learning of time orientation can with puppets be achieved through storytelling and conversation, setting stories in the past and the future, searching for sequence of events, etc.

2.5 Puppet as work motivation

The puppets can motivate pupils to develop **attention and concentration**. The mere inclusion of puppets when lecturing can attract the pupil's attention, the workflow becomes more interesting and closer to a game, while the pupil obtains additional ways of image creation and greater dynamics of the learning process. Even when pupils demonstrate their knowledge, a puppet can be helpful; it may be helpful when on the teacher's hand, asking questions or giving hints, as well as with its involvement in the work process of education, gaining the pupil's attention in all areas and thereby indirectly transferring the pupil's attention to the activity with which the puppet helps. The puppet can also help the pupil with concentration, when it directs him to the work, and encourages him and comes to the rescue when the teacher deems it necessary.

The puppet can also be used for the development of **visual discrimination** through a variety of activities that promote distinguishing of symbols. The pupils can compare two puppets looking alike and try to find the differences between them, while things can be added or removed from the puppet, making the pupil wonder what has changed about it.

The puppet can also motivate pupils in training of **auditory processing**. With the help of the puppet, the pupil learns word games, for example, trying to identify the first and last sound of words, guessing words that begin or end with a certain sound,

counting syllables of words by clapping, dancing to music and performing rhythmic exercises. The puppet can play different sounds from the environment, while the pupil guesses them, or it can provide the instructions that the pupil meets.

Puppets can be incorporated also into the development of **organizational skills**. The puppet can motivate the pupil to organize school bags, notes, notebooks and accessories, help to prepare the timeframe for afternoon activities, which include both school work and leisure. Through the puppet the teacher, together with the pupil, prepares a list of tasks that the pupil follows with the help of the puppet, which advises the pupil on their improvement.

2.6 Help and motivation in the acquisition of educational content in subject areas

Puppets can be useful for literacy, when the letters change into puppets who dance, sing, create, etc. The letters may appear in their own story, where each has its own characteristic, for example: *a* yawns, *o* wonders, *s* hisses. Even repetition of reading is funnier, if the puppet assists as a catalyst or as one of the performers in the text, which changes the point of view of events. The songs are also easier to remember by using puppets, if the puppet whispers or plays with the pupil. Literacy may also be associated with other subject areas - music education, where the letters are dancing; recognition of instruments; mathematics, where letters are classified according to colour, size, are counted, and form new characters; in obtaining understanding of the environment where pupils recognize objects, events, locations that begin with the same first or final letter, etc. (Majaron, 2006, p. 138, Korošec, 2007, p. 123).

The puppets may assist with calculation, namely, the visualization, sorting, counting, dividing and the like. Finger puppets help with calculation to 10; getting to know shapes is aided by puppets that are composed of different ones, and the puppets caterpillars assist in calculation of lengths. The mouth of a hand puppet, which eats only larger numbers, helps understanding the ratios *more* or *less*. When learning about the environment, the curious puppet may help, as it is interested in everything that surrounds it and thus by asking continuous question collects data, which it then passes on to the pupils. It can also encourage pupils to a simple theatrical game through which they repeat all the knowledge, or asks them again about information already given (Majaron, 2006, p. 39). While studying geography, puppets can help by creating a map, playing the roles of people from different regions, countries or continents (Korošec, 2007, p. 124). In the case of a foreign language, a puppet can play a foreigner who finds himself in the classroom, but does not know the Slovenian language. Pupils therefore help it learn Slovenian words, while expanding the set of words from a foreign language. Puppets can participate in physical education classes, where students carry out different activities with them and encourage them in climbing, jumping and

running. They can show a variety of exercises that the pupils carry out according to instructions, or pupils determine the movements and exercises themselves and pass them on to the puppet. With the help of puppets, pupils can learn stave and notes: the stave can be the puppet's stage, and the notes the puppets half notes, quarter notes or pauses. Puppets can sing songs, act out the life of a composer, play instruments or perform musical fairy tales and children's operas (Majaron, 2006, p. 39). Art classes can be used to make puppets, whereby the pupils acquire concepts of profile, nature or character, left, right, below, above, meaning and properties of colours and characterization of the face (for example; two dots are eyes, mouth is a semicircle). If the making of puppets is linked with the technical education, the pupils learn about the natural and man-made materials, tools and processing.

3. Views of teachers of additional expert pedagogical support on the use of puppets in their work

Material and methods: Considering the presented starting points on the meaning and possibilities of using puppets to achieve curriculum goals and objectives of an individualized programme, we were interested in whether the teachers of pupils with special needs within the programme with adjusted implementation and additional professional support of regular elementary schools are familiar with the possibilities offered by puppets in their work, how often and for what purposes they use them, what views they have on their use and whether the use of puppets is linked to their education, number of years of service, creativity, different activities that they perform, and the upgrading of knowledge. We also wanted to discover the factors which influence the more or less frequent use of puppets by teachers who work with pupils with special needs, and have thus prepared an online questionnaire and sent it to elementary schools for teachers who work with such pupils to fill out. The questionnaire was filled out by 297 teachers who work with pupils with special needs in regular elementary schools. The research is based on a descriptive causal non-experimental method of empirical pedagogical research and was conducted among Slovenian teachers teaching pupils with special needs in regular elementary schools.

4. Results

We found that teachers have a favourable attitude toward the use of puppets in their work, as they define them an appropriate, yet rarely used method of working with students with special needs. Of all the teachers of our sample, the puppets are mostly used by those who are social pedagogues or special and rehabilitation educators, and

those who have been working with such pupils for a longer period of time, in our case 10 years or more. Teachers assess puppets as suitable for carrying out various activities, and consider them the most appropriate as help with expressing pupils' thoughts and emotions, encouraging imagination and the development of verbal and nonverbal communication. They use them the most for the development of speech and communication, expressing of emotions and thoughts and for the promotion of imagination, and the least for the development of spatial and temporal perception, development of fine motor and graphomotor skills and symmetrical movement. We note that their estimates of the suitability of individual activities with puppets are related to their actual use.

The frequency of puppet use depends on the diversity of activities, methods and forms of work. Those teachers, who carry out more diverse activities, use puppets more often. As the main reason for the rare use of puppets, the teachers cite lack of knowledge and ideas for work with them, but not the interest and time pressure, due to which they consider it difficult to use art resources in the process of their work. Most frequently they use puppets with younger students. Once the puppets are included in their work, the most commonly used methods are storytelling with puppets and talking through puppets, and often use toys, instead of puppets; which is followed by hand and finger puppets.

The teachers would be willing to educate themselves about working with puppets, and thus for the promotion of a more frequent use of puppets suggest seminars, workshops and training sessions on the possibilities of working with puppets, presentation of examples of good practice in schools, edition of a handbook and opening of web pages about using puppets in the teaching process, and professional assistance in carrying out their work. UNIMA, the international organization, is committed to the education of teachers, and emphasizes the importance of knowledge and use of puppets in educational work, while also being committed to conveying professional knowledge on working with puppets to the greatest possible number of students.

5. Conclusion with recommendations

Puppets can be incorporated into many areas of work with children with special needs, which help achieve development and goal of the individualized programme.

When working with children with special needs, we must take into account all aspects of their development: cognitive, social, emotional and physical. Puppets combine almost all areas that are important for a child's development, such as perception, understanding, movement, speech, cooperation with the environment; they

stimulate the child's imagination and creativity. The pupil through puppets develops language, counting, adopts new material, practices communication, develops motor skills, visual and auditory attention, and when making the puppets practices fine motor skills, improves attention and concentration, expresses creativity, develops imagination, learns with the puppets, trusts them, expresses feelings with them, practices social skills and develops self-esteem.

Based on the findings from the questionnaire among teachers for the more frequent use of puppets when working with children with special needs, we find that puppets are not used often used, but the teachers advocate positive attitudes. We therefore propose the dissemination of knowledge about working with puppets through organized training and presentation of examples of good practices of all who have knowledge and experience with puppets. We encourage the creation of didactic materials with different types of puppets, linking to teachers teaching fine arts, and especially the increase of teachers' own initiative.

It should be stressed again that we need to bear in mind that work with puppets is sensitive and requires a relativized approach. It must be adapted to each pupil, the aims that we strive for and the pupil's needs and desires. Surely all teachers try to be as successful as possible in their work, to get closer to pupils and help them. Everyone chooses their own methods and forms of work, but we believe that everyone has enough knowledge, skills and abilities of artistic expression that they could, in their process, use also the method of working with puppets and thus discover their extensive possibilities and their power; all they need to do is try.

About the Author

Darja Pekolj is a social pedagogue who continued and completed her master's degree in social education and rehabilitation. She studied at the faculty of education in Ljubljana. She began her career working with physically disabled persons and persons with mental health disorders. Today she works in an elementary school with pupils with special educational needs. In her current work she uses puppets, which is achieving positive results and progress of pupils she works with.

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