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### **THE USE OF PUPPETS IN PRIMARY SCHOOL CLASSES AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON CHILDREN'S SPONTANEOUS PLAY**

**Sažetak:** *Lutka igra važnu ulogu u djetetovoj svakodnevnoj igri. Aktivnostima s lutkom učitelj može obogatiti sadržaj nastave i potaknuti kreativnost djeteta, a time i njegov psihofizički, emocionalni, socijalni i kognitivni razvoj. U radu predstavljamo rezultate utjecaja uporabe lutke u nastavi na spontanu igru djece u produženom boravku u školi. Istraživanje smo proveli u kombiniranom odjelu učenika prvog i drugog razreda u područnoj školi u Sloveniji. Pratili smo spontanu igru djece prije uključivanja lutaka i lutkarskih aktivnosti u nastavu i poslije toga. Htjeli smo doznati utječe li redovito uključivanje lutkarskih aktivnosti u nastavu i podučavanje s lutkom na djetetovu spontanu igru u produženom boravku. Rezultati istraživanja pokazuju da prije uključivanja lutaka i aktivnosti s lutkom u nastavu djeca nisu animirala igračke ni igrovni materijal. Dominirala je konstrukcijska igra. Poslije uključivanja lutaka i aktivnosti s lutkom u nastavu primjećujemo promjene u djetetovoj spontani igri u produženom boravku. Učenici su često upotrebljavali lutke i uključivali ih u svakodnevne aktivnosti. Igra s lutkom omogućavala je više kreativnosti, sudjelovanja i povezivanja između učenika kombiniranog odjela.*

**Ključne riječi:** igra s lutkom , kombinirana nastava , lutka u nastavi, spontana igra, vrste igara.

## 1. Introduction

The puppet interferes with various domains of human life; among others it plays an important role in children's everyday play. Playing is a free activity, where the most important factor is the process of play and the individual's satisfaction during play (Smrtnik Vitulić, 2009). Playing is limitless and varying in integrity. It represents the child's emotional social, cognitive and motor development (Marjanovič Umek and Zupančič, 2006). Play with puppets actually contains elements of children's play. The puppet as the object of a child's play was mentioned in writings by Vigotsky, Huizinga, Febre and Bloch (Đerić, 2011). Cvetko (2010) says that by including theatre and puppets in a child's active and imaginative play, children are then able to exchange experiences and are given the opportunity to re-live their experiences, which will help their individual personality in psychological, mental, emotional and cognitive terms. Play with puppets encourages the child's mental, imaginary and emotional worlds (Ivon, 2005). "In the child's consciousness there are no particularly sharp boundaries between imagination and reality. In their mind, what is possible and what is not are intertwined in one indivisible whole. The most important characteristic that the child gives the objects around them is life. For them, their teddy bear or doll is alive. The child says that their teddy is hungry or sad, that their doll is naughty, sleepy, etc. In short, they consider their toy to be so alive that in their play, no proof, no matter how logical it may be, can convince or persuade them of the contrary. In their imagination, the puppet is alive." (Pengov, 2004: 38). Based on this finding, pedagogues have included the puppet as a teaching and upbringing means in educational programmes (Pengov, 2004). Through the puppet, the child develops creative thinking and solves problems. This is why puppetry is a creative method of teaching through play (Baily Synovitz, 1999). With entry in school strongly influencing the child's social and emotional development, the puppet helps them bridge the difficulties in their transition to school and the interaction with peers and teachers. Korošec (2003) claims that the puppet helps the child cope with the crisis of their transition to school, while Ivon (2005) suggests that a toy that the child brings from home helps them keep connected with home.

## 2. Puppets in the learning process

With puppets playing a very important role in a child's life, children in preschool and elementary school should be enabled a great deal of experience of the creative process through play. "Most first-graders bring to school a

tendency to imitate, along with their love for puppets. Puppets come in many forms including teddy bears, soldiers, dolls or an ordinary piece of wood that can become a boat, a gun or a rabbit – they are a child's first joy, which they take with them to every occasion, everywhere. In giving one object many meanings and one meaning to various objects, the world for the child is somehow homogeneous with the transition from imaginative to real, and from the real to the imaginative being very subtle and easily possible" (Kovačič, 1981: 98).

Puppet activities enrich the teaching content and enable the flowering of a child's creativity and, in turn, development in psycho-physical and cognitive fields. Schmidt and Schmidt (1989) find that the inclusion of puppetry activities in the learning process is important both for children and for teachers. The puppets build a child's positive self-image and encourage activity and team work (Majaron, 2000). Korošec (2015) argues that children will play with puppets more often and will want to play with them if they have a good model of their (preschool) teacher who regularly includes interaction with the puppet in their work. Korošec also highlights the importance of the teacher's commendation of the child's progress, when they are making their own puppets. This will help the child build positive self-image and increase their confidence. Hunt and Renfro (1982) mention that in the creative process at school, the puppet enables the child to express their feelings more easily.

The puppet plays diverse roles in the learning process acting as a mediator between the teacher and the student, to encourage students to learn, co-operate and play together. Porenta (2003) describes different roles of the puppet in class.

- *puppet as motivation* (encourages learning, increases work enthusiasm),
- *puppet as teacher* (performs teacher's work and gives instructions for work),
- *puppet as student* (helps in co-operative learning),
- *puppet as the mediator in communication* (helps children become more relaxed and open),
- *puppet as a friend* (partner in play and children's ally),
- *puppet as artistic means* (experiencing the puppet as an artistic means),
- *puppet as the promoter of creativity* (encourages children's imagination, helps in creating new stories),
- *puppet – a character with a framework task* (encourages motivation for making plans, researching, testing and making contacts with a wider environment).

Introducing theatrical activities in classes changes the way of thinking

in children; the puppet enables children to explore and at the same time be more relaxed. Puppets turned out to be a quality education method oriented to the child's personality and stimulating the child's creative activity. The use of puppet and puppetry activities also enriched the learning process as written by Bredikyte (2002), Hamre (2004), Keogh and Naylor (2009), Korošec (2004), Kovačič (1981), Majaron (2014), O'Hare (2005), Vukonić-Žunić and Delaš (2009).

Through the puppet, children can communicate with their parents, teacher and peers. Play with puppets also enables easier inclusion in a group to children who are usually more reserved and have more difficulties being included. When observing children during their play with puppets, the extent of their skills can be observed as well as whether they accept their peers' opinions, and further, how they express their thoughts and whether they can co-operate and subordinate to the group (Majaron, 2000). Puklek and Gril (1999) write about the importance for the child of co-operation in group activities with their peers.

'The puppet brings fun and offers satisfaction. It helps children get to know themselves, others and the world around them, acquire competences and create social relations.' (Ivon, 2005: 34)

### **3. The research**

#### *Research aims*

We were interested in whether regular inclusion of puppetry activities during classes and teaching with puppets influences the spontaneous play of children in the class that was observed during the extended school day. This is why our research question was the following: What kind of spontaneous play predominates among students the class during the extended school hours?

#### *Method*

An empirical study with a qualitative research approach was carried out. The research approach that was used was qualitative case study. The research used the descriptive method of educational research. The group was systematically monitored and analysed.

#### *Participants*

The sample was a non-probability, purposive sample. The case study lasted for one school year. The research took place at the subsidiary elementary school

with a combined class of students. The study included a combined class of ten students aged six and seven, and two teachers. For monitoring and analysing data, the children participating in the study were assigned prearranged designations.

#### *Measurement instruments*

Spontaneous play was monitored with systematic observation in which we used the observation scheme to evaluate interactions of the children in the class, their communication and interpersonal relations. Spontaneous play in class during the extended school hours were video-recorded and photographed and observations were written down.

#### *Data collection*

The research data was collected over the 2013/2014 school year. Throughout the research process, spontaneous children's play before and after the inclusion of the puppet and puppetry activities in classes was monitored through systematic observation and video-recording. Apart from the classroom, a playroom with plenty of toys, games and playing materials was available to children. Their teacher did not influence their choice of game or toys. Throughout the study, children could choose any toy they wanted to play with. Observation proceeded according to the prearranged observation scheme. Observation blocks of spontaneous children's play went on for about 30 minutes. Observation, written recording and taking pictures was carried out by the teacher who also ran the class during the extended school hours. The pupils wrote down or drew their feelings and thoughts during their work with the puppets.

#### *Data procession*

The observation schemes, pupils' and teachers' writings, photographs and video-recordings were analysed through qualitative analysis. The acquired written data was analysed with regard to the research aims and questions. The typescripts of all documents were analysed, codes were determined and categories were made that were used to make conclusions for the presentation of results.

### **4. Results and interpretation**

Before the inclusion of the puppets and puppetry activities in the classes, *two kinds* of play were observed among pupils in the class during the extended

school hours, namely construction play, where children played with *Lego bricks* connecting various constructed parts and creating a new object within a certain theme. In construction play, typically, children use diverse objects and materials, such as Lego bricks, wooden bricks, sand, etc. to construct or create something (Smilansky, 1968; in Marjanovič Umek and Kavčič, 2006). *'After classes, games with Lego bricks predominated. The second grade boys G and J were jointly constructing a big house, the second grade girls H, I played with the first grade girl E, and the first grade boys C and D constructed together. A first grader B played first in one group and then in the other.'* Our findings match with those by Wood and Attfield (1996; in Fekonja, 2009) who say that older children are more accurate in the creating of more demanding constructions and their skills of spatial perception are more developed. In construction play, students also used *wooden bricks*. In this play they occasionally experienced interpersonal conflicts. According to Smrtnik Vitulić (2009), conflicts among peers are important for the individual's social development enabling mutual adaptation and exchange of different wishes and aims. At school, children learn tolerance in interpersonal relations. In this type of play, children can think of a theme and can imagine what things look like (Smilansky, 1968; in Marjanovič Umek and Kavčič, 2006). The teacher's records show that students *imagined a theme and created what they had in mind with wooden bricks and dominos. 'After the finished homework, the first grade girl E, first grade boy A and second grade boys G and J played with wooden bricks and dominos. They constructed tunnels and towers [...] First grade boys A and C and second grade boy J created compositions from wooden bricks.'* In their play, they also *combined wooden bricks and Lego bricks*. Johnson (1998, in Papalia et al., 2003) finds that construction play in six year olds is becoming increasingly more elaborate. Johnson et al. (1987; in Marjanovič Umek and Lešnik Musek, 2006) say that construction play is also encouraged by the teacher's guidance and by many appropriate toys and playing materials. If there is not enough playing material or room for play and if the teacher does not encourage the play, construction play is observed to be rare. It was found that during construction play, students *did not communicate much*. The finding that construction play predominated in the group can be explained by Marjanovič Umek and Kavčič (2006), who argue that construction play is becoming more frequent and integrated. Similar results have been obtained in a study carried out by Papalia et al. (2001; v Fekonja, 2009) who established that construction play presents a large share of play in preschool children.

Apart from construction play, which predominated in the class, students played comprehension games, where they *described subjects* and *responded to*

questions. 'After lunch, the second grade boys G and J decided to take a look at a book brought to school by a fourth grader. The book was about monsters. The boys leafed through it and talked about what they thought was going on in it and what would happen if the monsters came to life in the real world. Later a second grade boy F joined them and their conversation. Also, second grade girl I joined them, but she only listened and looked at the book.' According to Zupančič, Gril, Cecić Erpić and Puklek (1999; in Marjanovič Umek and Kavčič, 2006) answering and raising questions and giving instructions are typical of comprehension play.

According to Toličič (1961), comprehension play involves listening, imitation, observation and reading. Also in the group, according to the observation of the teacher, students *were looking at and reading a magazine*.

Children also like games with rules. Duran (1995) sees games with rules among primary school children and young people as most frequent among children, in which it is essential that the children subordinate to certain rules and accept them. Pupils also engaged in games with rules in the playground, such as *motor and sports activities*, in which certain kinds of play were carried out on selected, specific grounds. This claim complies with Brown's (1995; in Fekonja, 2009) statements saying that the choice of playing activity depends on the availability of required players and adequate playgrounds. In the *Cats and dogs* game, children get used to consistently respecting the rules and co-operating, which was also described by Fekonja (2009).

Sociodramatic play was also observed, where students *pretended they were somebody else*. According to Korošec (2015) in sociodramatic play, a child's activity is oriented to precise imitation of the world that they understand in their own way. The students *made agreements regarding the roles* and the settings, while *planning the play* and *setting the rules* (Eljkonjin, 1981; in Marjanovič Umek and Kavčič, 2006; Fekonja, 2009, Korošec, 2015, Marjanovič Umek and Kavčič, 2006). Marjanovič Umek, Lešnik Musek, Pečjak and Kranjc (1999; in Fekonja 2009) find that children tend to play in diverse contexts in regard to subject matter. These kinds of play enable interpersonal interaction between children, persistence, verbal interaction and pretend play related to objects. Doing meta-analysis, Fisher (1992; in Fric Jekovec and Bucik, 2015) finds that sociodramatic play encourages cognitive, emotional, verbal and social development.

After the inclusion of puppets and puppetry activities in the classes, students tended to choose different *types of play*. Construction play was observed

using *Lego bricks* and *wooden bricks*. On the basis of the teacher's observations, it can be concluded that after the inclusion of puppets, constructing using Lego bricks still retained its popularity, particularly among boys, who, however, showed more communication and animation of objects. *'A first grade boy C and second grade boys G and I were constructing a house with Lego bricks. They started to animate individual Lego bricks. Lego bricks represented people who lived in the house they constructed. They played family. Each of them animated several Lego bricks.'* While Papalia et al. (2003) claim that interest in symbolic play in the school period diminishes, we find that after the inclusion of puppets and puppetry activities in the classes, more sociodramatic play was also noticed among students. *'First grade boys C and D and second grade boys G, H and I imitated a television show in their play. They talked about what belongs in the kitchen and what they need for their work in the kitchen. Waiters and cooks were appointed. Waiters issued bills. They also used pretend money. They used plastic plates, cutlery and plastic toys.'* Students used real *play tools*, which corresponds to the findings of several researchers (Bretherton, 1984, Garner, 1998, Johnson, 1998, Rubin, Frein and Vandenberg, 1983; in Papalia et al., 2003) who say that children in symbolic play used real or imagined tools for their play.

Games with rules were mainly seen in the playground and mainly included *motor and sports activities*. *'All students played Brother, save me!'* wrote the teacher in charge of the class during the extended school hours. Students in the class expressed their *wish to play with puppets*. The teacher noticed that *while playing with puppets, the students were more creative and enjoyed what they were doing*. She wrote: *'During the extended hours, they continued their play on their own initiative, playing ever more creatively and having a lot of fun.'* They mainly used puppets that they had made during their classes. Similar results were observed by Lukman (2010) and Porenta (2003). They noticed that students played *more co-operatively*, which parallels Majaron's (2000) opinion that the child's ability to co-operate and subordinate to the group can be observed during their play with the puppets. The author highlights that children feel the importance of co-operation with schoolmates and friends. *'Only rarely a student played alone and I noticed that when playing with a puppet, they co-operated more intensely.'* Their play with the puppet also enabled them to meet new friends. They *talked and danced* together. Porenta (2003) also explains that after inclusion of the puppet in the educational work, children often develop friendly relations. Students also used puppets during school breaks. It often happened that during the breaks, they continued their play that referred to the *learning contents of the past lesson*. The teacher who was doing an apprenticeship in the combined class

of students wrote: *'This was most apparent during school breaks, when students individually played with the puppets that they had used during classes. I noticed that when playing, they remembered and used mathematical expressions (ones, tens, hundreds), creative procedures (making of puppets) or they summarised a fairy tale.'* In their play, the students used either ready-made puppets or they animated toys. After *puppetry techniques* had been used during classes, theatre of objects became the dominant type of children's play during extended school hours. They were used during children's play in *animation of toys* and other play materials that had been used before the introduction of puppetry activities in classes. *'The second grade girls H and I animated figures from surprise eggs. Second grade boys F, G and J played detectives. Also third graders played using the theatre of objects. They animated their soft toys,'* says the teacher in charge of their class during extended school hours. *'The first grade girls D and E and the second grade girls H and I animated soft toys that they had brought from home. In the play they also included a character called Pika, the beloved of the group. They played house with the puppets. They made beds for the puppets and tucked them in with a little blanket. Meanwhile, the boys played cops and robbers.'* The girls often included scenes from their home environment in their play, such as childcare, making lunch, etc., while the boys liked to play cops, robbers, security guards, fire-fighters, etc. Similar results were found by Smith and Cowie (1991; in Marjanovič Umek and Kavčič, 2005), Sanders and Harper (1976; in Marjanovič Umek and Kavčič, 2005), Fagot and Leve (1998; in Papalia et al., 2003) and Nourot (1998; in Papalia et al., 2003), who all stated that girls tend to play house, which includes shopping and baby care, and the boys take characters from books, television heroes and play Superman, police officers, fire-fighters, etc. Students were also *enthusiastic* about shadow puppets. The teacher in charge of their class during extended school hours wrote: *'They were so enthralled by the shadow puppets that they could continue playing on and on, use an endless number of combinations, and still they would not get bored.'* Children's enthusiasm about this puppetry technique can be substantiated with Majaron's (2014) theories. The author says that the shadow theatre is the oldest form of human creative expression and resembles film.

During the extended hours, they played *improvised scenes* with paper puppets that they had made in classes. *'The first graders B, C and D and the second graders I and F played with paper puppets. Soon, the second graders H and G joined them. By shouting "hurray" they showed their enthusiasm for the play. They called the scene "The post for Daisy."'*

In body puppets, they seemed most interested in *making the puppets*. *'They also showed much interest in making the body puppets for an oral performance. Even while they outlined their bodies it was very interesting to observe how they reacted when they saw the shape of their bodies. Some of them could not recognise themselves, others complained, and some had a good laugh,'* said the teacher. While making the body puppets, the students learned how to adapt and developed diverse skills and co-operation (Ivon, 2005). How *the body puppets looked* was very important for the students, as the teacher said: *'Most of the students' work and care was devoted to the drawing of the faces and clothes, because it was not just any face or clothes, but their own, so it was very important that they looked right.'* The teacher's statements match expert findings that show how important it is for a child to be proud of what he or she makes (Kroflin, 2011), and that the character of the puppet is made according to their standards and in their own way (Hunt and Renfro, 1982, Ivon, 2005, Korošec, 2015, Majaron, 2002).

Finger puppets were made by students by putting some *playdough* on their fingers: *'The second grade boys F and G made each their own finger puppet by shaping some playdough on their fingers.'* Finger puppets as an important part of the child's play are mentioned by Cvetko (2010), Majaron (2000), Sitar – Cvetko (2009), and they are also considered to be the simplest puppetry technique (Baily Synovitz, 1999).

Letter puppets were also used as *symbols or objects* in children's play. *'The second grade girl I used the letter L as a golf club, the second grade boy G played that he was an old miner and used the letter L as a pickaxe. The second grade boy I used the letter S as a horse, jumping with it around the classroom. He also took the letter I and pretended that it is his whip,'* says the teacher. In their symbolic play, letter puppets appeared in the function of various objects (golf club, pickaxe, whip, etc.) and adopted different meanings. The children recognised the letters that stand for *sounds*, and composed *syllables*: *'The first grade girl D took the letters N and E. She put them together and repeated: 'NE.'* (Slovenian word for 'No'.)

## 5. Conclusion

Before the introduction of puppets and puppetry activities in the class during the extended school day, construction play was predominant among the children. They did not animate toys or playing materials. In construction play, only certain constructions (such as a castle, bridge, house, etc.) were animated and were not composed according to the instructions for sets of Lego bricks. Apart from construction play, students chose some games with rules that predominated in outdoor playgrounds (playing run-and-chase, hide-and-see, etc.). Occasionally we noticed that children also used sociodrama and comprehension games. After the inclusion of puppetry activities in classes, imaginative play with puppets predominated among the students. Out of all the puppetry techniques, the theatre of objects and toys predominated. They preferred animating figurines from surprise eggs, and soft toys, mainly those brought from home. With letter puppets, they established the sound–letter connection and composed syllables. The introduction of puppets and puppetry activities in classes brought changes to children’s spontaneous play during their extended school hours. After the puppets attracted the children’s attention and enabled communication, the students started animating puppets composed from Lego bricks and communicated through them. Students were able to upgrade their play from simple construction play so that through the puppets, they managed to convey meaningful messages. Based on the teachers’ written records and statements, it can be concluded that the use of puppets in classes encouraged the child’s wish to play with puppets. During puppet play, students of different ages were observed to be creative and mutually cooperative. Making their own puppets in classes encouraged them to more often communicate to each other and use the puppets they made in their play during extended school hours. Puppet play enabled students’ spontaneous consolidation of the learning materials of the past lesson. According to the teacher’s statements, in their spontaneous play with puppets, students also used mathematical expressions that they had learnt in the past lesson. Therefore, we find that the use of simple puppetry techniques alleviates the achievement of learning goals and the understanding of the learning subjects. Diverse didactic and learning methods were introduced through the use of puppets and puppetry activities in classes of the combined class of students, thereby achieving that students were active during classes and learnt the subject through play. Creative contents and promotion of creativity also encouraged the development of friendship among the students. Presumably, students’ similar interests, which they identified during puppet play, influenced the development of friendship among some of them,

which shows the influence of puppets used during children's spontaneous play. The inclusion of puppets in classes not only brought changes to spontaneous children's play, but also to relationships between students of different ages. We noticed that their play with the puppets contributed to building even stronger connections between them.

Our conclusive findings are that puppet play encouraged creativity among the students. Their simple construction play developed into creative symbolic play, which reflected their understanding, interpretation and response to everyday events and objects.

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