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PUPPETS AND INCLUSIVE PRACTICE: ENGAGING ALL LEARNERS THROUGH DRAMA AND PUPPETRY IN PRESCHOOL CONTEXTS

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Abstract

Inclusive practice in education is supported by a compelling body of research (Cologon, 2019; Graham, 2020; Raphael et al., 2019) policy recommendations (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009; Te Tāhuhu o Te Mātauranga–Ministry of Education, 2017(Commonwealth of Australia. (2003)) and mandated by legislation such as the Disability Discrimination Act of 1992 (DDA) (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003). It is also reflected in the Australian and New Zealand Professional Teaching Standards (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2014; Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2017). Early Childhood Australia [ECA] (2016) states that “inclusion means that every child has access to, participates meaningfully in, and experiences positive outcomes from early childhood education and care programs” (p. 2). This paper explores what this means for early childhood educators and examines the concept of inclusion through the stories of two children and two puppets. A story that outlines how the perspectives of teachers shifted to create places of learning that were welcoming and more inclusive to every child.

Introduction: Setting the scene

As the first step in formal schooling, early childhood programmes play a key role in establishing the relationships necessary for inclusive practice in educational settings (Cologon, 2019; Gupta et al., 2014; Hehir et al., 2016). In this paper, inclusive practice is defined by a commitment to teaching approaches that recognise the diversity of all children and aligned with the position of Early Childhood Australia [ECA] (2016). It is an approach to teaching and learning that values the uniqueness of each child.

Research shows that even young children can recognise differences in others and often show preferences for children they perceive to be similar in appearance and culture to themselves (Hong, 2014). In addition, children who interact and engage with others from diverse backgrounds, especially at an early age, are more accepting of difference (Kwon et al., 2017) and enjoy caring and respectful friendships (Hehir et al., 2016). In inclusive contexts, families of children with additional needs experience a greater sense of value and acceptance with the benefits extending beyond the programme walls and associated with positive expectations about their child's future (Cologon, 2019; Gunn et al., 2004; Mackenzie et al., 2016).

Early childhood educators also benefit from inclusion and reported a greater sense of collegiality and confidence in their own ability to create learning environments that welcome all children (Mackenzie et al., 2016). Inclusive programmes are often considered to be high-quality programmes, achieving short- and long-term social and academic benefits for all children (Gupta et al., 2014) and increased communication in children who experience disabilities (Rafferty et al., 2003). Yet, despite the numerous benefits of inclusion, inclusive practice poses several challenges, with many educators hesitant about their ability to create learning experiences that recognise the uniqueness of every child (Cologon, 2019). This article is the story of how puppetry may contribute to diminishing that hesitancy.

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The image of the child

Inclusive practice begins with how we see children, our image of them as learners and of their humanity (Malaguzzi, 1994). Disability can be viewed from two perspectives, the social model of disability and the medical model. Mackenzie et al. (2016) suggest that the social model of disability provides early childhood educators (with a valuable pathway to inclusion. This is because the social model defines disability in terms of the barriers that individuals may encounter in their daily experience; barriers may be the attitudes of others (barriers to being) or created by the social context/circumstances (barriers to doing) as well as the effects of the disability (Connors & Stalker, 2007; Furman, 2015; Mackenzie et al., 2016). The social model varies from the medical model of disability and its focus on the impairments connected with the individual that need to be solved. In early childhood settings, a medical model would focus on the deficits of the child that needed to be “fixed” while a social model would consider how to change the environment to suit the strengths of the child and remove any barriers to their participation (Cologon et al., 2016). Inclusion in early childhood recognises that all children are different and is primarily concerned with ensuring that every child is engaged and valued.

Early childhood educators communicate powerful messages about children through their everyday actions, their interactions and professional knowledge (Cologon, 2014; Kwon et al., 2017; Mackenzie et al., 2016). Professional knowledge is associated with positive attitudes to inclusion, attitudes that sees each child, including those who experience disability as competent and unique. Research calls for further opportunities for educators to develop their capacity to accept the complexity of all children, with an emphasis on examining their personal beliefs about children who experience disability and the core beliefs that influence their philosophy of inclusion (Cologon, 2019; Lambe, 2011).

The role of the puppet

My PhD (Karaolis, 2020) research revealed how the art of puppetry developed and supported early childhood educators to reflect on their inclusive practice in three preschools in Sydney. It is not the first study to show how puppetry can support relationships and learning associated with inclusive environments, but it is often undervalued in early childhood contexts.

An emerging body of research shows that puppets can contribute to creating relaxed and playful environments that foster the relationships between children and between children and adults (Korošec, 2012; Majaron, 2002). Alchrona (2012) and Čaĝanaĝa (2015) describe how puppets create opportunities, through playful interactions for children and adults, to communicate and in doing so create relationships and trust. In puppet play, children may reveal their interests and abilities.

Puppets and puppet theatre also have a long history as a tool to bring about social change and have been used in educational settings to model and encourage positive interactions between children that experience disabilities and children that do not (Dunst, 2014). In schools, puppets have been used to teach children social skills, to encourage or model classroom expectations and as an intervention to address and reduce challenging behaviour and to motivate learning (Čaĝanaĝa, 2015; Gronna, 1999; Korošec & Zorec, 2020).

My own study explored drama and puppetry as a pedagogy for inclusion in early childhood settings. The study involved three preschools in Sydney and included 50 children and 10 early childhood educators. Eight of the educators were experienced preschool educators and two were early career teachers. Participant teachers gained new insight about the children in their care from these observations and these observations led to revelations that brought about a change in their feelings or views of the children (Karaolis, 2020; Korošec, 2012, Korošec & Zorec, 2020). These alternative lenses shifted their understanding of how to design truly inclusive learning experiences.

This article focuses specifically on the changes in teacher perspective and the distance travelled in their learning, with the intention of sharing how puppetry brought about a change in the attitudes of early

childhood educators about children with additional needs and their ability to engage them meaningfully in their education and care.

Portraiture as a research methodology

I have selected a series of vignettes to tell this story, as they are a more concise version of the research methodology of portraiture used in my PhD research. Portraiture is a research method invented by Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot (2016) with the intention of conveying the study with a “text that came as close as possible to painting with words” (p. 6). It is an evocative approach that seeks to capture the research process, its participants, their actions and their voice.

Vignettes have been used in this article to convey aspects of the research story that emerged from listening to the participants. I found vignettes an ideal device to show a “snapshot” (Thompson, 2017) or moment from the research, one that may encourage the audience, as it did the educators in this study, to pause, and consider a different approach. The following vignettes illustrate how puppetry brought about changes in the educators and guided us towards new ways of learning.



Figure 1: Bruce

Vignette 1: Puppets as a way of seeing

It is my first visit to the preschool. The lead teacher, Maxine, calls me to a section of the room and gestures towards Mason, standing in front of a bookshelf. The rest of his class is sitting on the mat, listening to another teacher tell them a story. One girl calls out, “I have that book.” His back is to the classroom, and he is placing coloured wooden blocks on the shelves. He does this with care. Maxine stands beside me. She is an elegant figure, dressed in a long navy, linen skirt, and light blue linen blouse. Her gaze is fixed on Mason as she turns and tells me, “This is so typical of him, back to the class, fiddling with things ...” I move back from the group of children and from Mason to avoid him hearing our discussion as Maxine continues, “I mean ... what do you think? This is not normal, is it?” I look at him and smile, as she adds, “His parents are in complete denial and think he is a genius. He has no interest in the other children and never speaks to us. I am no expert, but it looks like autism to me. I don’t know what to do ... we have done everything we can.” I continue watching this exceptionally fine-boned little boy as he meticulously places each block in place. At that moment, as if he is aware of my gaze, he looks up at me. I smile, and he furrows his eyebrows. Maxine looks at me and calls his

name. He does not respond. She calls again, louder, and slowly, looking worried. I can tell she cares very much as her eyes soften and she moves away.

I learned (by observation and asking Maxine) that Mason liked books and sea creatures (much more than arranging blocks). It was for this reason I decided to introduce the class to Bruce, my 90-centimetre grey nurse shark, complete with two rows of teeth and a large fin. Bruce's character is the opposite of his imposing appearance as he is an anxious shark. I explain all of this to the children at morning group time as Bruce sits on a chair behind me, looking longingly at the goldfish bowl. Mason is also looking at Bruce, not the goldfish bowl and is now sitting in the circle—the part of the circle that is the greatest distance from me. I ask the children if they would like to meet my friend Bruce, the shark, after explaining that he is feeling quite nervous about meeting new people. A hand shoots up and Gizem, stands, asking, "Can I meet Bruce?" Ariella, sitting next to her adds, "Me too." A chorus of "me too's" fills the air. Mason looks at the boy next to him and then back at me. He might have moved forward a little bit. Just a little bit.

I go to Bruce and bring him to the circle. The room is now noticeably quiet. Maxine and the centre director, Marie, are seated at the back of the room and watching. They are both so worried about this little boy. I look at Bruce and ask him if he would like to meet some friends of mine. He looks back at me, nods, and says (in an extremely broad Australian accent), "I'm ... a bit ... I'm scared." He then places his enormous jaw behind my shoulder, long tale quivering in fear. I look hopefully at the children and ask, "What should we do?" I look at a boy sitting cross-legged next to Mason and say, "I wonder if you could show Bruce how to say hello to a new friend." This boy, whose name I do not yet know, is moving towards me and nodding his head of loose curls. I move Bruce from behind my shoulder and assure him that everything is going to be fine. The children are all still quiet, exchanging looks at each other. Mason is watching, too. "Hi," says this gentle boy. "My name is Barclay." Bruce turns to me in a panic and with a deep breath says, "Umm ... hello. I am Bruce." Gizem is up again and (I already love her enthusiasm) she suggests to Barclay, "Say, nice to meet you." Barclay obliges and Bruce responds and looks at me to say, "I think that went well." I tell Bruce that it went very well and ask him if he would like to meet the rest of the children. He nods and we continue to meet every child, including Mason.

Bruce is having fun and I hate to break up the party. It is time for the children to go to music and Maxine starts ushering the children into a line. Marie has come over from the back of the room saying, "That was wonderful, Olivia. Everyone, what do we say to Olivia?" Gizem responds by asking me, "Do you have any other animals?" Mason looks in my direction, eyes on his shoes and says something. His speech is fast, and I don't understand. Before I can ask him again, Marie bends down to him asking, "I'm sorry, can you say that again for me, Mason. I didn't quite hear you with everyone getting ready for music." Marie, full of care, waits with interest as Mason repeats his request. I still don't understand his speech and start to worry (as much as Bruce) until I hear her say, "Are they the ones that light up? Angler fish," confirms Marie, then adds, "You have the most remarkable knowledge of sea creatures, Mason. Was that what you liked with Olivia?" Mason stops for a moment and Maxine steps in saying, "What did you like best about today?" "I liked everything," replied Mason. Maxine and Marie both smile. Bruce and I head off with happy hearts and a hope for an angler fish puppet waiting for us at home.

Analysis of vignette 1

The above moment illustrates how a puppet started to shift the perspective about the potential of a child to fully participate in group learning experiences in his preschool.

The vignette highlights the attitudes of the educators towards Mason, how our first discussions were concerned with his "problems" and how these "problems" supported their belief that he could not achieve "positive outcomes" (Early Childhood Australia, 2016, p. 2) from attending their preschool. His teachers voiced their concerns about his differences; his difference in ability to interact with other

children, with adults, his difference in communication, in his choice of play and his refusal to join in group activities. These are responses that are unintentionally aligned with an ableist and deficit-based view of disability (Beneke et al., 2019) because their attention is on the skills they believed Mason needed and not his interests and strengths. It is also a common response to diversity, with children expected to be guided or shaped towards the norm with only the most minor adjustments to their learning (Furman, 2019).

After the puppet play with Bruce, the conversations with the educators began to change in tone. For example, Marie, the director, emailed the following week and said how Mason “was animated and fully engaged. He sat next to Abel whom he has gravitated towards in recent weeks, and frequently made eye contact with Abel to share his delight” (Personal correspondence, 31/5/2019). As with other studies (Simon et al., 2008) a puppet was effective in supporting children to share their ideas and engage in large, group-learning experiences. Bruce seemed to contribute to breaking down some of the barriers to his participation. As Maxine wrote, “The drama enabled Mason to participate more readily in a group experience—something he has been reluctant to do. Speaking via a puppet seemed easier for him—possibly less threatening?” (Personal correspondence, 9/23/2019).

Over the following weeks, Mason’s teachers were able to see him respond to a range of puppets through puppet play. They were given an opportunity to observe him and, as Korošec and Zorec (2020) found in their research, learn more about him as he (and the other children) were inspired to share their thoughts and feelings with the puppets. Maxine described this when writing: “The entire group was engaged and willing to share their ideas, particularly when a puppet was involved” (Personal correspondence, 9/23/2019). As in other research, teaching with a puppet seemed less threatening to many of the children and created an atmosphere that was both relaxed and playful and conducive to conversations between the children and the children and adults (Kroger & Nupponnen, 2019).

The puppets also led the teachers at the preschool above to recognise that reducing the barriers to participation for one child enriched the experience for everyone (Cologon, 2014). Communication was reconceptualised through introducing a puppet; the children became more comfortable speaking and interacting with one another and with their teachers. The dynamic and relationships had altered as the puppet removed some of the barriers that prevented or reduced the desire to engage.

Changes in the quality of engagement and play were noticed in many of the children and this helped the relationships between the children and between the children and adults. Maxine became especially interested in understanding Mason’s sensory preferences and often continued the games after our sessions were completed. In one email she wrote, “After you left, Tracey asked Mason if he wanted to go back to the blocks and he said ‘no’. He was going on a picnic! We sang the bean and pass the clap in the afternoon—two great songs” (Personal correspondence, 5/30/2019). The puppets, it seemed, evoked playfulness and positivity in everyone, by offering different ways to engage, to see and to listen to children. The value of the puppet as a communicative tool is explored further in the following vignette.

Vignette 2: Puppets as a way of listening

He is all over the place—socially and emotionally. I worry about his language, poor eye contact, very poor ability to concentrate and his body coordination is not that great either. The gap between his peers is widening every week. (Personal communication (5/5/2019))

It is morning group time. Miss Jola is sitting in the centre of a large green sofa. Children are coming to the rug and sitting in groups. Three boys are at the very edge, in front of a bookshelf, pulling books on the floor and reading them at a rapid speed. One boy walks in with a teacher holding his hand. They sit together on two child-sized chairs. Another boy joins us with huge tears rolling down his cheeks. He is holding the hand of the lead educator as she reminds the rest of the children to come to the floor and put their water bottles away. There is some discussion about a lost hat. It seems serious. Ben, the subject of the email above, is standing near the wall. His fingers trace the bricks. He is called to the floor and

in a few seconds comes to sit, slightly apart from the main action. I think he looks tired. Miss Jola begins with a Welcome to Country and a few children join in—only a few, and not with much enthusiasm. Ben is up and looking at the pencils in a jar on a nearby table. He is called back to the floor again. Miss Jola begins to read a picture book and by the second page Ben has left the floor and headed towards the bathroom.

A few weeks later I watch as the same children come to form a circle. This is our third session, and they are used to me already, expectantly sitting in a circle and waiting for a puppet friend to arrive. Annabelle, a very articulate four-year-old girl, wants to know the names of the puppets I have brought today. There is a scramble to sit next to me (or is it the puppet?). Their teachers smile and guide the children to move back a little. It is nice to see everyone so excited. Ben has found a space as close as he can to me but up on a sofa. This gives him a good vantage point and one that I am fine with, despite all the other children sitting on the floor. My bongo drum is next to me and poking out of the top is George, a monkey. He is ready to play with the children and they are ready to play with George.

After the children greet George, he invites them to play his favourite game—the magic chair. The magic chair is a feelings chair, and the children must guess the feeling by the actions made by the person sitting in the chair. I ask for someone to help George and I teach the game. To my astonishment (and guessing by Miss Jola’s expression, her surprise, too), Ben slides off the sofa and is standing in front of me. I ask him to whisper how he feels, and he smiles at me. I interpret this as happy and so does George. Ben and I sit on the chair and give everyone a big smile. “Happy,” says Zane. I look to Ben, and he nods. The game continues with different children coming to the chair to use gesture or actions (no words) to express a feeling. The “silly” chair is extremely popular. I end the game with a sleepy chair, and George and I go to sleep.

Ben stayed for the game and sat next to Miss Jola. She smiled and he moved close to her and popped his finger in his mouth. As I was putting George in my bongo and getting ready to leave, Jola came over. “Ben was very interested and seemed to follow everything. George held his attention. He wanted to play.”

Analysis of vignette 2

Ben *did* want to play. Over the following weeks puppetry and drama proved helpful in gaining Ben’s interest and providing us with an alternative way to listen and learn about him. Cologon and Mevawalla (2018) highlight the dominance of verbal communication in many educational settings and the common assumption that an individual without speech is unable to communicate. The authors connect this phenomenon to the social model of disability as the acceptance or recognition that only one form of expression may be a barrier to participation and full inclusion. Puppets helped us to discover Ben’s communicative preferences; the staff were able to engage him in a wider range of daily experiences and develop their inclusive practice through using a puppet as a way of listening.

In the vignette above, Ben’s educators were able to observe him interact with me and the puppet using gesture, actions and single words. His participation indicated to them that he was following verbal instructions, that he understood the play and wanted to participate. This contrasted with the first email that I received about Ben in group times: “He struggled again, he just can’t maintain attention and he loses his interest very fast. I am worried about him as parents don’t want to see but his developmental gap is widening very fast” (Personal communication, 4/2/2019).

Puppets removed a barrier to Ben’s engagement in group experiences as they gained and sustained his interest and supported his communication. We noticed that when seated next to a puppet, Ben was able to maintain focus during circle time. The puppet guided him on where to pay attention and supported his understanding of spoken language with gestures and physical actions. With a puppet, Ben was comfortable to talk to an adult; this provided us with insight about his communicative preferences and encouraged his teachers to set up small group experiences with one or two other children. As one teacher

said, “The inclusion of puppets was an effective way to gain children's attention and provided some of our children with a new way to “share” during group times” (Personal communication, 12/4/2019).

The puppets also inspired the teachers to try other ways for the children to “share” their ideas, for them to listen to the children. The educators had expanded their perception of Ben (and the other children) and responded with more flexible and creative approaches that recognised their interests and strengths, such as Ben’s interest in books. By communicating through a puppet, Ben could assert his autonomy, through making choices and being involved in the daily activities. The puppets had helped broaden the educators’ concept of the learning space (Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2012) and consider different actions and approaches to support the development of every child. For example, puppet play with Ben indicated he was able to engage with two communicative partners (the puppet and the teacher). The teachers then designed small-group activities to develop his social skills and help him to engage with other children. This in turn developed their confidence in their ability to include him in other parts of the preschool day, with a puppet as a support. The puppet provided a pathway to friendship for Ben as he began to interact with other children in puppet play and then later repeat the activities in drama spontaneously.

A change in educators’ attitudes and practices

The experience with the puppets was also viewed by the educators as transformative and the inspiration for a change in their attitudes and practices. One teacher wrote:

As a team, your drama techniques enabled us to support so many of the children in our program. It gave us new techniques to work with and heightened our awareness of inclusivity and engagement for all the children in our program. The way you engage with children and your use of puppets/drama during group times gave us so many ideas and we are still constantly changing up our small- and whole-group times. (Personal correspondence, 4/19/20)

Studies indicate how the arts can provide meaningful professional development and training for teachers at all levels of education (Ewing & Hughes, 2008; Gibson & Campbell, 2016; Koch & Thompson, 2017; Maclean, 2008; Raphael et al., 2019). This resonated with my research findings, as many of the teachers’ reflections discussed the shift in their perspectives about the actions and capabilities of the children and in their abilities to teach inclusively. Furman (2015) writes of the understanding that is gained about children when educators engage in frequent reflective discussion. The puppets provided the educators with many opportunities to observe the children in a new light by describing and discussing their observations. Our shared understanding of the child grew because of this process.

The puppet further added to the educators’ professional knowledge as it became a tool or material to “learn together” (Furman, 2015, p. 67). Materials and tools associated with the creative arts can provide children and teachers with a point of connection (Gallas, 1991). For example, painting, drawing or Lego may be the object or tool that supports teachers and students to communicate and learn about one another. The object of the puppet can also serve this purpose and encourage children to talk to teachers (Kröger & Nupponen, 2019) and help teachers learn about the children.

Gallas (1991) suggests that the arts provide children with multiple ways to show their knowledge. It appears that when mutually engaged in this process, the relationships between teachers and learners change as the children no longer view the teacher as an authority and the teacher can communicate and “bring the child into larger conversations” (Furman, 2019, p. 12). Puppets helped teachers to give children a voice and listen to that voice, either by direct interactions with the puppets or through listening and learning about the children when engaged in puppet play.

Social cultural theory argues that learning is a social act. The vignettes above illustrate how social constructivist learning took place when the children were able to co-construct learning experiences with their teacher and their educator (Vass, as cited in Sawyer, 2018). The puppet supported this learning for children that may experience barriers to social interaction and this form of meaning-making. Teachers

can enhance meaning-making by using a puppet in large-group learning experiences to gain and focus the children's attention, to help direct them where to look or what to look at, to add gestures to the meaning of words and model behaviour, such as the rules of games.

This study suggested that the meaning-making and communicative benefits of the puppet increased over time as the children became more familiar with the puppet, regarding it as a special friend. For teachers interested in finding new ways of giving children an alternative way to find and express their voice and build a sense of their world, a puppet may be a welcome addition to the classroom.

Concluding thoughts

Inclusive practice can be developed in many ways. It begins with a willingness to embrace the uniqueness of every child and a belief in the value of that diversity. It is a response that includes diverse and innovative teaching practices. The vignettes above share some of the findings of a small study that showed how puppets can be one of the “ways” towards inclusion, a valuable consideration in reconceptualising how we teach. They contribute to our field and provide insight about how puppets can facilitate the inclusion of *all* young children in early childhood settings and set the tone for schools that celebrate each and every child.

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