



## Inclusion happens with a puppet: puppets for inclusive practice in early childhood settings

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### ABSTRACT

The early childhood sector supports the realisation of inclusive education through a range of recommendations, policy statements and resources. With such a clearly mandated movement for inclusive practice it is imperative that educators are equipped with the attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary to ensure the full participation of all children. Despite this understanding, a discrepancy exists between the recommendations and the confidence or capacity of early childhood professionals to realise inclusion with authenticity. This paper highlights findings from my PhD research that showed how early childhood professionals and drama educators working with young children can apply the creative arts for inclusive practice. Drawing upon the methodology of portraiture, a series of vignettes illustrate how drama, puppetry, and movement can be applied to address barriers to authentic inclusion in early childhood contexts and create a culture that embraces all children.

### KEYWORDS

Inclusion; puppetry; early childhood education; drama

## Introduction

Inclusive practice in early childhood is supported by policy, recommendations (The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) 2009) a National Quality Framework (ACECQA, 2012) and research (Cologon 2012; Graham 2020; Raphael 2013) yet many early childhood educators (ECE) lack the training, experience, and attitudes necessary to meet the needs of all young children (Cologon 2014). Inclusion in early childhood means different things to different people. In this article, inclusion is defined as ensuring that all children participate meaningfully in their learning, share their thoughts and ideas and experience a sense of value and belonging (Cologon 2014). My research focused on how to increase the involvement of young children in their learning by offering them ways of making meaning and expressing their ideas that respected their strengths. The 'ways' in this study was drama.

This article focuses on some of the findings from my PhD research that explored the potential of drama and puppetry as an inclusive pedagogy. The research suggests that strategies related to working with puppets provided effective ways to motivate and engage children with and without additional needs. The study focused on changes in the children's social and communication skills during drama and puppetry related

creative arts experiences and showed the value of the creative arts for increasing inclusion within early childhood educational settings.

### *How the arts support inclusive practice*

Creative arts experiences offer children a broad range of forms and methods of making, sharing, and expressing meaning (Dunn 2016; Ewing 2020). By participating in arts processes young children can respond through movement, song, drawing and other forms to reveal themselves more fully to their educators and carers. Studies also associate exposure to dance, music, and drama in the early years with both social and academic outcomes (Ludwig et al. 2016).

Drama offers some particular benefits to young children. Ewing (2013) describes how young children engaged in dramatic play learn about their world, play out their experiences and in doing so, develop their communication, social and academic skills. Brown (2017) describes how drama can provide children with a safe place to learn how to problem solve, collaborate, and understand the perspective of others. One way, children learn through drama is by assuming different roles, roles that expand their sense of self and permit them to express a range of emotions, ideas and to interact with others (Ewing 2013; O'Neill, 1995). Roles offer children a sense of freedom and safety as they are protected by the dramatic concept of distance (Dunn 2016). Landy (1983, p. 176) describes how in drama participants 'suspend their disbeliefs and participate physically, emotionally and intellectually in dramatic actions'. The understanding that the action is not real gives children the permission to try new things and take risks. In role, they are no longer acting as themselves and playing in an imagined world that is connected to their lives. Teachers can work with students in different ways through entering playful and imaginative scenarios alongside their students when working in role and add to the dramatic play by assuming different characters and positions (Dunn 2012; Ewing 2013). From within these positions, they can guide or influence the drama but also engage in the imaginative, social, and emotional learning of their students.

### *Puppetry*

Puppetry as a form of drama, is a creative art form that has been associated with enhancing the social development and communication of young children and has a history of being applied in therapy and early childhood education (Korosec 2002; Campbell and Gibson 2013; Caçanaça & Kalmis, 2015; Kröger and Nupponen 2019). Studies show how teachers working with puppets have value in creating a positive atmosphere and in developing relationships between children and between children and adults (Remer and Tzurriel 2015; Kröger and Nupponen 2019). Central to the power of the puppet is its evocativeness of an identity or creature that exists beyond that of the teacher or adult manipulating the puppet and the perception of the children that the puppet has the potential, like a toy to come to life. Puppetry involving the teacher in the classroom operates as a form of teacher-in-role (Ahlcrona 2012) but is extended through the creation of an additional identity.

The presence of this toy or magical creature can create a safe and playful place to play as the puppet also provides a sense of distance and protection. In viewing the puppet as real, young children may relate to the puppet as a friend and a potential source of

emotional comfort (Scheel 2012). For example, Scheel (2012) describes how children may substitute the puppet for real people and express their thoughts and feelings without fear or judgement. This action reminds me of my daughter, sitting in her cot telling her bunny puppet a version of the story that I had just told her and then adding 'now we will go on the train and not go to sleep'. Children can of course play and interact with puppets, they can act out stories, venture into imaginary worlds, make up puppet characters, tell them their secrets and act out parts of their day. However, in the classroom context, adults can manipulate the puppet through gestures and actions to add meaning to words and create a character that may be very different to their teacher role, and one that makes it easier for them to relate to the children and for the children to relate to them.

Research (Kröger and Nupponen 2019) indicates that puppetry can be a useful tool in facilitating conversations with children, giving children a voice, and changing the usual teacher/student dynamic. Without a *voice* of its own, the puppet may be far less threatening than an adult, encouraging children to share their thoughts and feelings (Caçanaça & Kalmis, 2015) and engage. This phenomenon has been reported in children that are shy or may need the protection of a puppet to express their ideas or communicate (Kröger and Nupponen 2019).

Children may also be more comfortable engaging in conversations with an adult because the relationship has altered, and they are now engaging through the puppet. Puppets can serve to change the status of the teacher and make them approachable and fun (Wallace et al. 2004). The children are talking to the puppet that is being brought to life by their teacher. This may lead to changes in the children's motivation to speak as they are interested in talking to the puppet. The interactions that take place during puppet play have therefore been shown to develop the quality of the learning environment for children and educators, supporting relationships, playfulness and one that allows teachers to learn about the children and their strengths (Gibson & Campbell, 2016; Majaron & Kroflin 2002; Scheel 2012).

An emerging area of research indicates that puppets enhance the participation of children with additional needs (Salmon and Sainato 2005). Siciliano (2016) describes how the physical nature of the puppet makes learning entertaining and gains the children's attention. This is because puppets are highly visual, tactile, and appeal to the senses (Gibson & Campbell, 2013). A teaching artist or teacher when manipulating a puppet can communicate through gesture and actions, moving the puppet to express an idea. Adults can use puppets to create the conditions for both non-verbal, and verbal communication as they provide a hook to anchor meaning to verbal expression. A puppet can demonstrate or dramatise feelings or concepts and be used to model correct vocabulary or act out parts of a story to enhance comprehension (Siciliano 2016).

A puppet can also act as a stimulus to involve children in their dramatic play. In this form, the puppet serves a similar purpose to a quality pretext (O'Neill, Cecily 1995) and provides the impetus for children to engage in the imaginary world. O'Neill, Cecily (1995) describes how a pretext should set the scene for the drama and motivate the participants to work together as a group. A pretext may take many forms, it can be directions or words given by the teacher (O'Neill, Cecily 1995) or any material that adds to the dramatic experience by providing additional information, information that is visual, evocative, and mysterious and that invites the participants to play (Dunn 2016).

Puppets support the engagement of children with disabilities as a puppet may become an object through which ideas and feelings may be communicated through actions and not just words. The puppet, brought to life by the teacher, or students, can express feelings through physical expressions and visual cues and represent information which can be adapted to meet the needs of different learners.

Puppets, like drama, can be tools used to celebrate the strengths of children and the teacher working through the puppet may be able to recognise and respect the communication preferences of all learners (Carter and Sallis 2016). An aim of my study was to examine how drama and puppetry could promote the engagement of all children by increasing their participation in learning activities and supporting their ability to contribute their ideas authentically and spontaneously.

### **Research questions and approach**

For the purposes of this article the focus draws from the guiding question that drove my doctoral research and the findings that related to puppetry:

- Do drama processes involving puppets act as facilitators to include all children in early childhood learning settings? If so, how?

For the research project, I took the roles of both researcher and participant working with early childhood educators in three preschools in Sydney. I was introduced to two of the three preschools that took part in this study when mentoring Early Childhood students at the University of Sydney. Both programs accepted children with additional needs, the only criteria essential for the study. I approached the final preschool following a positive conversation with a parent at my children's own school. The first stage of data collection took place at each preschool for between seven to eight weeks. In most cases, I observed and conducted drama workshops in the morning during the large group learning experiences. My training as an actor and early childhood interventionist with over fifteen years as a teaching artist in inclusive settings informed my approach.

The approach used in the classroom and in working with the teachers was a form of co-mentoring approach, which was inspired by Sydney Theatre Company's *School Drama* program (Gibson 2015). The children participated in weekly drama sessions for a period of eight weeks. All the sessions were designed in collaboration with the Early Childhood Educators (ECE), who identified parts of the day to explore drama as a strategy to increase the participation and motivation of all children. Data collection methods included my researcher journal, written reflections from the ECE, informal and formal interviews with the children and educators and images. A follow up structured interview took place with the director and educators at each preschool after the research period to further understand the benefits of the drama as a result of participation in the study. The study received ethics approval (2018/979) from the University of Sydney and was undertaken as post-graduate research degree.

Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot 2005) was adopted as my research methodology, selected for its intention to depict the strengths of the participants and to include their voices vividly in the study. It is a qualitative research methodology that attempts to capture the experience of the participants with the same detail as a painter. The difference

in portraiture is that the tools used to paint a picture are words and not paint. Lawrence-Lightfoot, who pioneered the approach wrote how she wanted her audience to be:

introduced to a perspective that they had not considered before. And finally, I wanted the subjects to feel “seen” like I had felt seen—fully attended to, recognized, appreciated, respected, and scrutinized. I wanted them to feel both the discovery and generosity of the process as well as the penetrating and careful investigation. (Lawrence-Lightfoot 2005, p. 6)

Brunker (2019) describes the process of investigation using portraiture. Central to this methodology is the role of the researcher in capturing a complete and rich picture of the participants in the study and a concern with their ‘lived experience’ (Brooks 2017, p. 2236). Lightfoot (2005) likened this role to that of an artist painting a portrait. The details of the portrait found through qualitative research methods are presented with the intention to engage and involve the audience in the lives and experiences depicted in the study through rich description (Brooks 2017; Brunker 2019).

The description is shaped by qualitative methods of inquiry that include written reflections, detailed observations, and in-depth conversations and interviews with the research participants. The intention of the descriptions is to attempt to capture details of experience and the context of the research setting (Brooks 2017). It is through this process, the researcher ‘listens for’ and then ‘interprets’ the experiences of the individuals (Brennan et al. 2007). It is important to note that part of the researcher’s role is to interpret in detail, the specific strengths of the participants, to share their story with authenticity and a “focus on goodness” (Brooks, 2017, p. 2240).

The role of the researcher drew me to portraiture. In portraiture, the researcher is interested in depicting through the narrative the strengths of those involved in the study. Lightfoot (2005) positions portraiture as unique from other forms of inquiry as it does not seek to identify the problems in the lives of the participants or view them through a deficit lens. This perception of those involved in the research also fitted with my belief and value of inclusive practice. The portraits developed for this study were inclusive as they evolved from an ongoing dialogue with the children and early childhood educators that were involved (Brooks 2017). They focused on what was good, the strengths that were revealed about the children when working with puppetry. The portraits were also written in a way that was inclusive, to be accessible to a wide audience that went beyond the walls of the University. The story of each preschool is told in three portraits, each one attempting to portray the daily experiences of the children and examine how drama and puppetry changed their experience in small but significant ways.

The following section brings some of the ideas found in this study to life with vignettes based on my PhD research. The vignettes capture some of themes that emerged from the research and tell the story of how puppetry offered children a way to engage in group learning experiences, to hook their interest, develop their understanding of important social skills and to express their knowledge. I have chosen vignettes as a methodology for their similarity with both portraiture and puppetry. They are evocative and capture the meaning or ideas found in the research, with the simplicity and (hopefully) effectiveness I found when communicating with a puppet. Vignettes are different from portraiture in their length, (each portrait in my study was over seven thousand words and too lengthy for a journal article) and used to illustrate a particular point (Thompson 2017). The particular points in this article are ones that depict some important themes that were

generated from the research. The vignettes are snapshots of moments that convey the 'goodness' and the strengths of the participants found through this study (Brooks 2017). The small stories capture how drama and puppetry led to an increase in the participation and engagement of the children in different aspects of their preschool experience. Their significance was confirmed by the ECE educators in follow up discussions after the moments they depict. The vignettes demonstrate how puppetry motivated children with additional needs to join in group experiences and participate in these group activities spontaneously. They also demonstrate how puppets can reduce some of the barriers to inclusion by providing children with a way to share their ideas and learn important social skills such as taking turns, sharing, and interacting positively with others.

### **Vignette 1: caring for baby dino**

The first vignette describes how I experimented with puppetry to support inclusive play. I selected a dino/egg puppet as I had observed the children's interest in dinosaurs. The puppet play was shaped to elicit certain responses in the children and provide them with an opportunity to develop self-regulation and kindness and to reduce aggressive actions and words in free play. The outcome was surprising as it led to a change in one early childhood professional's perception of a group of boys.

*It is early on a Friday morning and a small group of four- year- old boys follow their preschool teacher into the classroom. It is a sunny morning and they have been playing outside. Their play is the very reason for my visit, it was described by their teacher as 'aggressive' and filled with comments such as, 'I hate you' and 'I am going to kill you'. Despite re-direction, the boys continued to enjoy this type of play, assuming the role of Spider Man or Ninja Turtles and resisting any attempts to play differently.*

*The boys look sheepish. Aware of their predilection for superheroes and lots of action, I begin to read a story about Dinosaurs-Bumpus, Jumpus, Dinosaurumpus. I sense they are tolerating me and would rather be elsewhere, their eyes are looking at each other, the floor and one boy is playing with his shoelaces. I suddenly stop, shut the book and lean into them while whispering ... " Did you hear that?"*

*You can feel the tension in the room. I quietly share with the group that I have my Super-saurus egg with me and that it is about to hatch. I have still not showed them the egg (only point to it in my basket) and then invite them to help me bring the dinosaur into the world. The mood alters and the four quietly move in closer. They watch as I gently lift the egg out from its resting place. The baby dino (puppet) pops her head out of her shell. Baby dino is bewildered and hesitant as she discovers the world, noises make her retreat into the safety of her shell. I make squawking sounds. The boys coax her back out and offer to take care of her. One boy announces he is her mummy and then another quickly adds he is the daddy. They use the quietest voices and move slowly so not to startle this tiny creature. She tells them she is hungry. A lolly pop is offered to suck, "because you are too little for teeth". The imaginary wrapper is put in an imaginary garbage bin, "because you have to take care of the world and put your rubbish away".*

*They stroke the dino with the utmost care and ask their teacher if they can draw presents for the 'baby dino' to take home. A boy kisses the puppet and asks her name. The puppet pauses and quietly shares, 'I don't have a name'. I look at this lovely boy and ask him if he would like to name the baby dino. He nods and after a few seconds calls her, 'Olivia'. This is*

*my name, and I was incredibly touched. His teacher places her hand on her heart. We look at each other for a split second to share this moment. A gentle and tender session, that is eliciting different qualities in the boys and novel ways of playing. Their responses are eliciting alternative views of the boys in the eyes of their teacher and they are moved by their actions as these same boys were noted for their aggressive play and excluding other children.*

This vignette demonstrates how puppets can provide children with alternative and meaningful ways to engage with one another (Gibson & Campbell, 2013). In the example above, educators were able to see how the boys could behave with kindness and play in unexpected ways that moved beyond their typical habits of play and were not 'aggressive'. During the improvised puppet play, the boys were able to share their concept of care and kindness. It was inspired by the puppet, but the ideas they generated were spontaneous and surprising. One of the teachers from the preschool in the vignette above, highlighted the role of the puppet not only in bringing about new abilities in the children but a growth in her understanding of the boys' capacity for friendships.

The vignette highlights how the puppet play led to a change in the educators view of the children. As one teacher noted, she was able to observe from a distance and see the actions of the children in more detail, this led to insight. One such insight was the role of the puppet as a tool to foster positive interactions. Its presence motivated the boys to behave in different ways, collaboratively rather than competitively. The educator was given an opportunity to reconsider the strengths of the children and drama technique to address a behaviour concern.

Positive relationships between children and between children and teachers are essential for inclusion (Mackenzie et al. 2016). The following vignette, at a different preschool, illustrates how a puppet influenced two boys to include another child, who they had previously excluded in their free play.

### **Vignette 2: Bruce the shark who worried**

*A group of four-year-old preschool children rush inside to come to the mat. They are very excited to meet Bruce, a full-scale shark puppet, complete with two rows of teeth and an enormous fin. Before I introduce Bruce, I ask the children for their help and explain that Bruce is very worried about starting preschool. All the children agree, and I begin the interaction with the puppet. I give Bruce a very broad, deep Australian accent. He is loud, but he stumbles over his words and looks to me for reassurance. Bruce tells the children how he feels about preschool and I ask the children to tell Bruce what they think would help him.*

*The children are thoughtful and engaged as they carefully explain how to be a friend through sharing and playing with everyone. I am very interested in this discussion as I am aware that some of the children refuse the invitations to play initiated by others. I am also interested as a couple of boys, known for speaking out of turn wait and listen to the other children speaking to Bruce. I think they may explode as they jiggle up and down, start to call out and then stop. The director of the program was pleased with the workshop and the understanding expressed by the children and for their ability to practice the social skills of self-regulation and turn-taking.*

*She was even more pleased by the generalisation of this behaviour to the playground for two students in particular. At our next session, she shared with me how she had overheard a boy, who she previously described as having 'challenging behaviour' tell another boy to, 'remember*

*what Bruce said that we have to be kind and gentle to our friends'. She added, 'It was not something I expected him to remember and apply in a situation but was very impressed how he used Bruce to remind his peer the importance of inclusive play in social environment'.*

This vignette provides an example of the power of work with puppets to change attitudes, develop social skills and provide a tool for self-regulation (Majaron 2002). The behaviour of the boys was an increasing concern to the director of this program, and she described them as, 'challenging'. They were not considered ready for school because of their inability to follow directions and the disruption they caused. The boys would not transition from outside to inside experiences and refused to play with peers in the class. The dramatic device of having the children in role as 'experts' encouraged them to help the very anxious and brash, Bruce learn how to be a friend at preschool. My intention was to support the social and emotional development of all the children. The strategy of having a puppet learn the rules from the children was effective as the children seemed more willing or motivated to follow the behaviour expectations in other settings or circumstances. It is possible that in the conversations with Bruce, the children were able to form a fuller appreciation of the reasons for certain rules and understand them in a way that was meaningful to them. The puppet supported positive behaviour and motivated the children to remember the behaviour expectations and follow them (Canganaga & Kalmis, 2015).

Engaging all children actively in their learning experiences is one of the hallmarks of inclusive practice. It is important to consider that interest can be expressed in different ways. The motivational aspect of a puppet has been found in numerous studies surrounding puppets in education (Kröger and Nupponen 2019). The following vignette describes how puppets generated excitement during group times in another preschool class of twenty-four children.

### **Vignette 3: Mabel the duck puppet at story time**

*Preschool teachers found morning large group learning experiences to be the most challenging part of the day to involve and engage all children. Two children with autism and another three children diagnosed with developmental delay were noted to find this time particularly hard. Two boys would resist joining the group by running away, another child would get up and move to other parts of the classroom, trying to get away. One boy, when entering the classroom, would become very distressed and start crying and screaming and another had developed a habit of hitting or touching other children. Extra adult support was necessary to keep the children calm and to remain in the circle. I decided to introduce a puppet to add interest and a visual context to the group experience. Mabel, the adorable yellow duck puppet did not communicate with words, only in quacks. Adult support was not needed to bring the children to the group, the presence of a puppet was enough to encourage every child to be part of the activity. The children came in from outside and sat in a circle, all looking at Mabel. They moved in closer to her and giggled when she quacked along to the song. I asked the children if they would like to come and say hello to Mabel after the story. One at a time, the children came over to and patted Mabel. I then asked them to show her how to listen to a story about three bears that go on an adventure to a spooky tree and act out the actions. The circle was filled with so much movement as we climbed up the ladder to the tree, crept through the rooms and ran on the spot to get away from a giant sleeping bear. We had more giggles when Mabel fell asleep and started to snore.*

The above vignette shows how teachers can combine puppets with drama strategies to engage all children in a group learning experience. This was achieved through the selection of a puppet that was gentle in her appearance and by the suggestions I made to the children to 'teach' Mabel how to listen to a story. Mabel provided an effective pre-text (O'Neill 1995) as she motivated the children to come together and enter the dramatic play. Research consistently shows that puppets are effective as a device to attract the interest of children and more importantly, sustain it throughout learning experiences (Korosec 2012; Cağanağa & Kalmis, 2015). The visual nature of the puppet immediately captured the children's attention, drew them into the drama and compelled them to share their ideas with and for Mabel. The Centre Director at this site discussed how the puppet 'led to the inclusion for all children through different ways of interacting, verbal, non-verbal, actions, eye contact and smiling' (personal email, 5/31/2019).

Puppets can embody ideas and promote participation and they are much easier to 'read' than an adult as it gives clearer sensory information (Salmon and Sainato 2005). Puppetry, combined with drama strategies, such as movement, sounds and other forms of physical expression gives children many ways to understand and show their understanding as is not dependent on words.

In the vignette above the children showed their understanding of the characters and events in the story. Through movement and gesture every child took on the role of the bears and followed the narrative. Children that typically needed adult support to initiate an idea or contribute their thoughts about a story acted with autonomy. This contrasted the typical engagement of the children. In the past, a select few would contribute with verbal responses to the teacher's questions. In the session above, all the children were actively involved. In follow up interview an educator noted, 'As a whole I believe you supported us in teaching our children and finding new ways to engage' (teacher, personal email, 4/16/200).

#### **Vignette 4: the butterfly puppet finds her voice**

*Although they watched intently, I noticed two children that that spoke English as an additional language (EAL/D) rarely shared their ideas in class. They would touch the puppets and hug them during group times and wave to say hello and goodbye. Their classroom teacher rarely heard them speak, although they followed all classroom directions. When the girls did speak, they did so in very quiet voices, almost unintelligible. I noticed the girls smile frequently, giggle and look at one another when I introduced puppets to the group. They did not socialise with other children and looked to their teacher to answer when I asked them a question, even when asked through the puppet. After a few weeks of getting to know the class, I introduced finger puppets to the children and a small puppet theatre. The scenario presented was that of a baby duck, a very sassy baby duck that refused to share their toys. I then asked for a volunteer. Hoping one of the children would like to be the butterfly finger puppet and help baby duck learn to share. To my delight, the hand of one of the girls that never spoke shot up. She very much wanted to be the butterfly and once that dainty finger puppet was on her finger, she shared her ideas about friendship thoughtfully and with confidence. Puppetry clearly supported her expression. Very soon the whole group was brainstorming ideas with the Butterfly. It was beautiful to hear her voice the butterfly with so much confidence.*

The vignette above describes how finger puppets may be used with children speaking EAL/D to support their ability to communicate in English and their self-confidence. Studies have shown puppets can provide children considered shy with confidence (Remer and Tzurriel 2015). I have found puppets may be helpful in including children from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds. As noted earlier, the visual form of puppets may enhance meaning of language and serve to motivate conversations and promote the understanding of new words or concepts (Maharani 2016). This is helpful for all children in developing their language and early literacy (Ewing 2020). It was apparent that the finger puppets provided comfort or protection to the children and they seemed comfortable to share their ideas. Other factors contributing to the appeal of this puppet may be its size, intimate quality as well as the ease with which the children could manipulate the puppet on their finger. An interesting insight is provided by Remer and Tzurriel (2015) who explain that 'through puppets children can freely and legitimately express their feelings, without any guilt or fear' (p. 358). This point was confirmed through the vignette above as the two girls that had not participated in the previous lessons lead the puppet play and felt comfortable to speak in front of the whole group.

### ***Key findings for teachers and artists working with puppets***

The vignettes above describe the key findings related to puppetry that were found as part of a much larger study. This section seeks to analyse the learnings emerging from these vignettes that may be of value for teachers and teaching artists interested in using puppetry to nurture the inclusion of all learners. In all four vignettes, puppetry was an example of 'mutually interesting cooperative activities between individuals with and without disabilities' (Dunst 2014, p. 137). My study found puppetry to be very helpful in gaining the children's interest in joining both large and small group learning experiences (Salmon and Sainato 2005; Campbell and Gibson 2013). It also found that the children's degree of interest was dependent on the selection of the puppet. An important part of this process is to learn about the children through observations and semi structured interviews with their educators. Decisions about my choice of puppets emerged from this evidence and was guided by the learning intentions. These questions provided a framework for the drama experiences in the study and may be helpful for drama educators. They include the following:

- (1) What is the problem that the puppet is going to help solve? (Communication, interest)
- (2) How do I plan to use the puppet? (Dance, music, greetings, dramatic strategies)
- (3) What do the children like? (favourite animals, creatures, or activities)
- (4) Do they have sensory preferences? What are their preferred colours and textures?

The questions above support the inclusion of all children. Teachers can identify the interests and strengths of their students and use them to select a puppet that will have the most impact, gain the children's attention and provoke their curiosity. I discovered with my work in these contexts it appeared to be most effective to introduce puppetry with an animal puppet that is mainly one colour and hand sized. My all-time favourite is a yellow

duckling, named Mabel and a baby dinosaur that pops out of an egg. The children appear to be very fond of these puppets and as one ECE noted in an email, 'the baby dinosaur provided children with a new opportunity to practice their gentle hands, empathy skills and compassion' (personal email, 12/4/2019). Their simple appearance supported the understanding of spoken words and gestures for children with autism as other puppets with lots of colour or details could be distracting. Research (Salmon and Sainato 2005) suggests this may be related to the visual appearance of the puppets and the clarity with which it can communicate feelings and ideas through gestures and actions.

In my study, I learned that through working with puppets I was able to communicate and quickly develop relationships with the children. The first and second vignette illustrate how puppets can be used by teachers to build positive interactions between children and between children and adults. Children were found to be more interested and excited to engage with me and join in the drama activities when working with a puppet (Kröger and Nupponen 2019). Ahlcróna (2012) attributes this to the relational aspect enabled through use of the puppet, and the process of co-creation with the children. Although the selection of the puppet and its visual properties was based on the learning intentions, the puppet and its character evolved with the children. The children were motivated to be involved in the creation of the puppet's identity. The children, teachers and I co-constructed the character and the puppets as well as the puppet story. For example, I often began by having the children name the puppet to bring about a sense of ownership and connection to the puppet. Children were also involved in deciding the qualities, characteristics, feelings, or situations for puppet play. The teachers and I were able to learn about the worlds of the children, their likes, interests, and fears. A common finding from the early childhood teachers was a change in their understanding of the children's knowledge, skills, and an increase in their understanding of their behaviour.

The vignettes above show how puppetry revealed different aspects of the children's personalities as they provided them with another form of communication and interact with others. Puppetry enabled inclusive practice as the teachers were able to see the children differently and learn about their interests (Mackenzie et al. 2016; Raphael 2013). Through the puppets, children were offered an alternative way, non-verbal way to communicate. For example, the puppet would model giving the signals for a game using a bell or musical instrument. Children would play Stop/Go with the puppet by making the sound once for "Go" and twice for "Stop". The puppet provides non-verbal, shy or children with selective mutism a voice, an opportunity to be in charge and build their sense of value and capacity to contribute to the play.

The puppet as a tool for supporting children to engage in group learning and collaborate is another promising finding from this study. Educators in all three preschools reported the effectiveness of puppets to motivate and sustain the children's attention when they were teaching with a puppet. Educators from all three sites continued to use puppets after the research period. One teacher said she 'used the puppets to help with self-regulation and supporting behaviours at group time' (personal email, 4/16/2020) and another Centre Director wrote 'We will use puppets to convey messages in story books and continue to use drama to encourage children to language skills, as well as social and emotional development in understanding feelings of others' (personal email, 12/2/2019). The puppet and learning experiences with the puppet created an exciting learning environment that engaged

the children in a multitude of ways. The puppet acted as a role model for pro-social behaviour with children wanting to please and care for the puppet. This supports findings that have also been identified in numerous studies and attributed to the puppets influence on behaviour expectations (Remer and Tzurriel 2015). The children in my study were able to recall important social skills that they had explored with puppets after the drama experiences and in a range of other circumstances.

## Conclusion

The aim of this article and related research was to investigate how puppetry and drama can be used by early childhood educators to facilitate inclusion for I children in early childhood settings. The vignettes in part tell of a much larger research story. These vignettes touch on how puppets can motivate children to engage in their learning experiences, and support educator's knowledge about the children to encourage their social and communicative skills. The active engagement of children in their learning is one of the hallmarks of inclusive practice. The vignettes are written with the intention to provide educators with ideas and another language, the language of puppetry to communicate with children that respects the diversity of their experience.

In my work, puppets have been a constant friend, helping me to develop playful connections and meaningful encounters with all children. I believe the findings have significant implications for the field of early childhood. Early childhood education is built on the understanding that children learn through play (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) 2009). A willingness to play is an important skill for teachers wishing to explore puppets with their students. At each of the three preschools, puppets supported inclusive practice and enabled young children to play, learn and enjoy positive relationships with other children and adults. They also provided educators with valuable tools that opened the door into realising the strengths and abilities of the young children in their care. The vignettes showcase puppets as a way to support inclusive practice in the lives of young children. How to bring this professional learning to early childhood educators and support their ability to implement puppetry as a part of their inclusive practice is an area worthy of future research and perhaps another portrait.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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