

Puppets and education: ideas, beliefs, and school practices of Spanish teachers

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ABSTRACT

Puppets have been used in education for decades and they have become an indisputable educational tool. However, puppetry has a minimal presence in teacher training. This study uses a questionnaire to explore 453 teachers' use, perceptions, and knowledge of puppets as an educational tool in Valencian schools between 2020/2022 to reveal the relationship between puppetry and the school system. This study reaches several conclusions, mainly about the limited knowledge of this tool and its possibilities, that will open up new dialogue in today's schools. This study proposes some valuable reflections to achieve real change in the school–puppet relationship.

KEYWORDS

Puppets; education; school practices; teacher training

1. Puppets and education

Puppet theatre – understood as a stage genre with its own characteristics – offers educational, historical, literary, and plastic value as art object, leading many teachers to include it as an educational tool. However, this performance mode has been assigned relatively little importance in Spain within the dramatic and educational fields. Therefore, from the educational development viewpoint, there is much work to be done to make puppetry a traditional and educational tool that is available to teachers and students. Doing so could help to achieve a deeper connection between artistic, literary, and cultural traditions: in fact, many educational proposals are based on the various traditions of puppet theatre around the world and covering the entire process of creation: research, documentation, organisation, distribution of roles, rehearsals, and performances, adaptable to all levels of education and to different school realities (Kröger and Nupponen 2019; Muratori 2022; Todoli 2002; Zeinali 2017).

Puppet theatre offers us the possibility of developing different activities in the classroom with which we can work with very diverse contents, abilities, and attitudes, investigating the national traditions of puppets, folklore and oral literature, the types and methods of construction and manipulation, scriptwriting, staging, theatre direction, group dynamics, and organisation, always considering the age of the students, as well as other circumstances. On the other hand, by focusing on the aspects of diversity and the potential it offers for mutual enrichment, we can develop positive attitudes and advance the acquisition of intercultural competence.

Previous studies have explored teachers' initiatives (Bernardo 1962; Chessé 2005; Debouny 2002; Fourie 2018; Tappolet 1982; Todolí 2002) in terms of the possibilities of puppetry as a pedagogical tool, mostly from the didactic viewpoint of oral language skills in initial education. However, this research topic constitutes a relatively recent phenomenon that, at least in Spain, has not achieved the dissemination among the teaching community that one would hope for. Nevertheless, the use of puppet theatre in schools is currently being widely disseminated due to the will of the teaching community and the exchange of experiences between teachers from all over the world, which have been met with enthusiasm (Iakovakis 2008).

The various techniques and ways of understanding puppetry have been intertwined throughout history to form a complex web of mutual influences that have undoubtedly benefited the world's art scene (Jurkowski 1993; Kaplin 2001). Puppetry is the product of combined eras, places, traditions, and cultures; thus, it has the capacity of being an unbeatable tool in intercultural education (Almoznino 2002; Caamaño 2002; Eshuchi 2013; Oltra-Albiach 2022; Pate 2016). Due to this ability to put different cultures and languages in contact to discover what unites us as humans while respecting differences, a large number of teachers worldwide view puppetry as a first-rate educational tool, especially in schools in which where diversity is present in any of its forms, like the case of Spain, where in recent decades phenomena such as immigration or the opening to new ways of understanding the world and human relations represent an educational challenge.

Accordingly, this study attempts to explore the presence of puppets in Spanish teacher education curricula, the ideas about puppets in teaching, and the school practice related to puppets to better understand the relationship between these three topics. I distributed a questionnaire to 435 Spanish teachers to assess ideas about puppets in teaching and school practice related to puppets. The results reveal that teachers think positively of using puppets as an educational tool, but they have they have some prejudices related to them and make a very limited use both in terms of typologies and applications. This study contributes to the literature in terms of deepening the study of puppets as a curricular subject and showing how the low presence of puppets in teacher training influences both ideas about puppets and their application in the classroom.

This paper is organised as follows. Section 2 discusses the history of puppetry in Spanish teacher education curricula through the lens of official curricula. Section 3 describes the creation and distribution of the study questionnaire in Valencian schools to assess the current use and knowledge of puppets in the school context. Section 4 analyses the results, and Section 5 discusses the findings in terms of puppets as a curricular subject, ideas and beliefs about puppetry, and its use in the classroom. Practical implications are provided.

2. Puppets in Spanish teacher education curricula

This section explores the stance on puppetry in the Spanish and Valencian teacher education curricula through the lens of several official educational plans. The Spanish 1971 Experimental Study Plan did not contemplate the use of dramatisation or puppetry in the curriculum subjects from a literary viewpoint, although such usage may have been included in subjects related to literature and language education. Cervera (1975) criticises this point as it has experienced little variation over time.

In the 1993 Teacher Training Study Plan (University of Valencia), the presence of puppetry was both minimal and subject to its relationship with folklore and dramatisation. Then came the 2000 Teacher Training Study Plan in which puppetry disappeared and was not replaced.

The introduction of new degrees ('Childhood education' and 'Primary education') in 2009 added puppetry in the subjects of 'Literary education in the childhood education classroom' and 'Literary education for primary school teachers'. Accordingly, the presence of puppets in teacher guides was made explicit and was included in compulsory curriculum subjects. However, since this was however, since this was a limited step taken in 2009, it should be compared to actual teaching practices in the following years. As such, it is difficult to predict whether puppets will occupy a prominent space in teacher training or will continue to be residual and largely depend on the predisposition of individual teachers.

Despite the evidence of some evolution, the evaluation of the Spanish curricula since 1970 is negative due to the aforementioned inconsistencies and dispersions. The almost complete absence of curricular content on the use, construction, techniques, and educational potential of puppetry in childhood and primary education, has forced teachers to either learn about it autonomously or take advantage of training courses. Therefore, are drama and puppetry in schools as well-considered as they deserve, or are training courses sufficient? Despite this almost barren landscape, some studies have shown that there are some experiences related to drama (with or without puppets) in childhood and primary school centres that have almost always been voluntarily developed by teaching staff, who have taken advantage of their colleagues' previous experiences (Calvo 2019; Rogozinski 2005; Serrano Rus 2007).

Therefore, this study explores Valencian teachers' puppet-related beliefs, expectations, and classroom practices via a questionnaire to assess the following aspects: Puppet use and frequency in the classroom, the function of puppets in childhood and primary education, teachers' perceptions of puppet-mediated education processes, the resources used for training in this field, the perceived relevance of puppets in education, students' attendance to puppetry shows, perceived advantages and disadvantages of using puppets in the classroom, and the teachers' knowledge of puppetry companies.

Despite the use of a questionnaire, this study's goal is not to create a systematic database but to learn more about the everyday reality of teachers' knowledge and use of puppets in Valencian schools. This study also explores the teachers' knowledge gaps, whether they are aware of the use of puppetry in the classroom, and discover why these gaps exist. The ultimate goal is to obtain reliable data regarding the situation in the Valencia region.¹ The data can be used to create more suitable educational proposals for students and articulate a better curricular response to teachers' needs.

3. Teachers and puppets: questionnaire creation and distribution

This study created and distributed an anonymous 10-item questionnaire to state funded school teachers during the 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 school years. Its purpose was to collect data about the teachers' knowledge and use of puppetry in the school context, as well as their ideas, beliefs, attitudes, and expectations. The questionnaire was randomly shared in educational centres and via school practice tutors (who visit schools several

times throughout the school year) to collect the widest possible variety of educational contexts. Our collaborators did explain the purpose of the study, how the data will be used, and state that the data is anonymous to respondents. At the end of the 2021/2022 school year, a total of 453 questionnaires were collected from over 200 centres, which were entered into a database. The total sample consisted of 453 teachers (25% male) who averaged 37 years of age.

The questionnaire items were grouped according to different aspects of knowledge about puppetry, puppet types, knowledge sources, classroom use, theatre activities in and out of school centres, personal opinions on the advantages and disadvantages of using puppets in the classroom, and knowledge about Valencian puppetry professionals. These items were intended to verify the situation of childhood and primary education teachers regarding the use of puppets, and whether there were differences in knowledge and effective use depending on the variables of sex, age, school centre, and so on.

The responses were entered into a database to create corresponding tables and figures and provide absolute percentages for each item. In some cases, open questions involved an additional data systematisation effort so that different responses could be considered and reflected in the results. The question type (open questions, absolute questions, or questions with pre-fixed answers) was determined in a way that favoured the teachers' free expression. In other cases, closed-ended questions were used.

The teachers' responses (and the subsequent analysis) provided a more in-depth view of the situation, knowledge, and prejudices related to puppets, thus enabling us to detect the deficiencies, needs, and observations of a cohort that is directly connected to the future of puppetry in schools.

4. Results

The teachers' responses revealed some very interesting results concerning their puppetry-related knowledge, practices, ideas, and expectations. First, most of the teachers view puppets as a useful teaching tool (88%). It might seem obvious, but this finding is interesting when viewed in contrast with the following responses that reveal inconsistencies between declarations of principles and specific school practices.

When asked if the teachers used puppets in their own classrooms a third of the teachers (33.5%) state that they do not use puppets in the classroom, and almost 37% state that they do not use puppets frequently (less than once per term). The number of teachers who state that they never use puppets (31%) is consistent with the 33.5% who stated that they did not use them in the previous question. As to the remaining teachers, 10% use puppets on a weekly basis, 10% use puppets on a monthly basis, and the rest choose the remaining possible options. Only 5% use puppets in the classroom daily. Regarding the type of puppets that the teachers use, glove puppets are the most common (62%) followed by finger puppets (18%) and marottes or stick puppets (9%).

The remaining types are limited, at around 5% each, while the use of shadow puppets is low (2%). About 3% of teachers state that they use other types of puppets. As to the choice of one puppet type over another, 40% of teachers state their reasons are related to affordability and provision by the centre or department of education. Meanwhile, 40% of teachers state that some puppets are easier to use, 10% state that the puppet use can be adapted to the students' needs, and 5% state they have a personal

preference for a certain type of puppet. This study continued to observe the teachers' passivity in their choice of classroom tools. It is noteworthy that the unanswered percentage for this item is 60% [Figure 1](#).

In response to question 4 which asked about why the teachers used puppets in their classrooms 50% of the teachers state the main function for puppet use is as a support for storytelling activities. Other reported functions include to explain content (26%), dramatise important events (10%), make puppets available to students (7%), and use puppets to maintain order (2%).

Question five asked about the teachers' perceptions of their own training, this question provided some very useful information; the objective was to understand how they interpreted and evaluated the fact that – with some notable exceptions – they received very little puppetry training from their teaching schools (this study gained objective information on this point, based on the absence of puppetry content in study plans since 1971). The results show that 79% of the teachers consider their university training to be insufficient, 11% think it was sufficient, and 6% think it was good or excellent.

When asked how the teachers obtained their knowledge the results reveal that information and training sources constitute the main responses. Overall, 30% of the teachers consider themselves to be self-educated; 24% learnt from experience (i.e. from their own practice, with no prior courses or autonomous training); 24% learnt from teacher training courses; almost 10% state that colleagues comprised of their source for information, materials, and advice; and 7% learnt how to use puppets at university.

In response to question 7 which asked about whether students attended puppetry performances more than 68% of the teachers state that their students sometimes watch puppet shows, while 27% state that they do not. Question 8 went on to ask about the frequency that the students watch puppetry performances and the percentages reveal that their students watch puppet shows less than once a year (25%) is certainly noteworthy. Most of the teachers (49%) state that their students attend puppet shows every school year, 18% state that they do so twice or three times per year, and 3% state they do so more than three times per year [Figure 2](#).

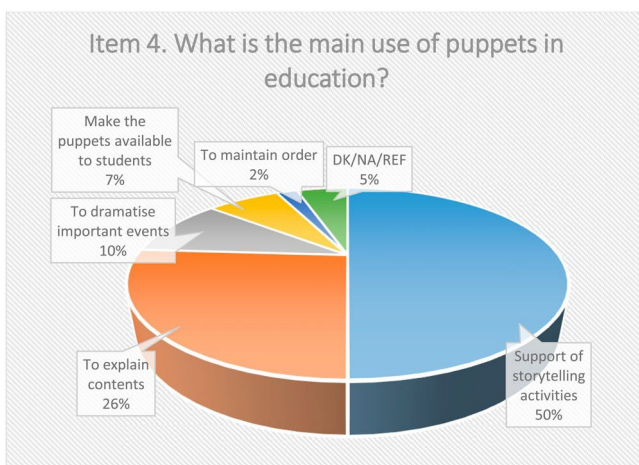


Figure 1. Main use of puppets.

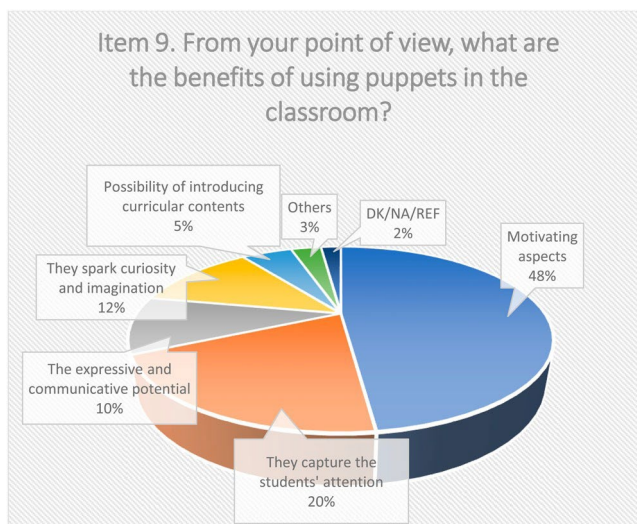


Figure 2. Benefits of using puppets.

As we can see, regarding the question on perceived benefits of using puppets in the classroom, the teachers highlight the motivational aspect, curiosity, and imagination. The teachers' most common perceived disadvantages of using puppets are the necessary time investments (15%), difficulty in organisation due to the student-teacher ratio (11%), lack of adequate resources and materials (6%), knowing how to use the puppets (4%), and the difficulty of working with the puppets (4%). The item 10 (on knowledge of local puppet companies) receives affirmative responses from 19% of teachers, while 56% do not know of any companies.

Regarding the relationship between age and the other variables in the questionnaire, there are barely any significant age differences in classroom puppet use. Regarding the type of puppet, there is a slight difference in relation to the use of glove puppets (their use is more widespread among younger teachers). The variance comparison indicates no relation between the teachers' ages and their opinions on their own training or the way they learnt about puppets. Thus, this study concludes that the perception of having received insufficient training does not correlate with any particular age group.

The relation between gender and classroom use is quite significant and evidences the fact that female teachers use puppets more than male teachers. There might be different interpretations for this. The most immediate is that there is a higher percentage of female teachers in childhood education than in primary education. When correlating educational level with non-use of puppets, primary school teachers use puppets less than childhood education teachers.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This study explores the use of puppets in Valencian schools between 2020 and 2022 to reveal the teachers' perceptions and knowledge of this educational tool. The results reveal that most of the teachers consider puppets to be a positive educational tool. However, this does not correspond with the indicators of knowledge and effective use,

as only 10% of teachers regularly (i.e. weekly) use puppets in the classroom. Similarly, the general enthusiasm for puppetry does not appear to correlate with the frequency of use; innovation; or knowledge about puppetry materials, courses, and companies.

The results highlight the widespread use of glove puppets over other types that are used to a much lesser extent. In some way, there is a lack of innovation and research due to the absence of new techniques and typologies. The teachers confirm that this is related to convenience and the momentum of routine work, as reflected in the main reasons for using only one type of puppet (44% for availability and 42% for convenience).

Regarding puppet use, the main reason is to accompany stories told either by the teacher or the students. Puppets are more commonly used by teachers, mainly in childhood education. At other educational levels, storytelling is replaced by puppet shows.

The teachers' perceptions of their own training generally highlight a sense of deficiency, since many teachers resort to self-education on puppets. Only 10% of teachers had received some university training on this subject. Regarding the knowledge of educational materials about puppetry, a high percentage of teachers do not know of any book or website on the topic.

Among the perceived advantages of using puppets in the classroom, almost half of the teachers attribute puppet use for enhancing student motivation. Some of the perceived disadvantages include time investment, organisational elements, the lack of resources, and so on. However, some of the teachers claim that there are no disadvantages to using puppets. This response might indicate that the teachers think the puppets are superficial as educational tools (since puppet use requires training, a considerable investment of time and resources, and specific preparation that cannot be ignored in any way). Similarly, the prejudiced view that puppets are only suitable for the earliest educational years remains pervasive, leading some primary school teachers to disregard them or consider them to be merely a leisure activity with no educational value. Regarding education level, however, there is a clear prominence of puppet use in childhood education, but this tends to decline in primary education.

The results of this work are broadly aligned with other similar ones in their cultural environment, in a special way those of Moreira Viteri and Lescay Blanco (2022), Muratori (2022) and Zeinali (2017); In any case, it is an object of study that needs more work to enrich it and promote discussion for example on issues such as the importance of motivating teachers or the incorporation of technologies.

In summary, the results provide insight into the use of puppets and reveal the teachers' deficiencies, prejudice towards puppetry, and so on. Accordingly, these aspects, and their corresponding shortcomings, can be used to outline future study plans for teachers. In their long journey through civilisations and history, puppets have been a constant presence in the religions, entertainment, therapy, and education of the people. Their acceptance by a renewed school, open to innovation and creativity, is always a challenge for teachers from all nations and levels who want to include performing arts in their educational project.

Note

1. The *Comunitat Valenciana* is one of the 17 autonomous regions in Spain. It's located in the east, next to Mediterranean Sea, it has 23000 km² and 5.000.000 inhabitants.

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