

**RELATIONS BETWEEN THE USE OF PUPPETRY IN THE CLASSROOM,  
STUDENT ATTENTION AND STUDENT INVOLVEMENT**

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## **Introduction**

Puppetry is a very old, traditional form of art that is used in many cultures. Burn (1989) suggests that puppets have united people of the world through a language unique to puppetry, consisting of more than words. It is a language that conveys feelings, ideals, and passions with a combination of gestures and words. Play therapists have used puppets successfully as a tool to encourage children to express their feelings, and even to change their behaviors (Lennon & Barbato, 2001). Use of puppets makes risk-taking feel a bit safer for children. Puppetry also has great potential for use by teachers in elementary school classrooms. Puppetry can help to improve upon communication skills, overcome language barriers, and teach self-control (Burn, 1989). Hunt (1982) suggests that young children can usually accept puppets as non-threatening, sympathetic friends. The addition of a puppet to a child's world can positively influence them to become more comfortable with, and open up to their world. Puppets can become an integral part of the classroom environment. They can be used to increase dialogue, modify inappropriate behavior [as children desire to please the puppet by following his/her/its requests (Hunt, 1982)], manage the classroom, or add an element of play to lessons. According to Peyton, (1996),

In a popular vein, puppets are widely recognized for their beneficial influence on learning and social development. They exert a powerful influence on children of all ages. Puppet language is unique in its ability to help teachers and children learn from one another, grow, relate openly, to be self-confident and self-expressive. Speaking this language, a teacher can personally transform common learning barriers—oppositional behavior, negative moods, defensive attitudes—

into a windfall of learning benefits and surprises. Children become more responsive and motivated. Teachers find themselves suddenly having fun, unable to wait for the next day. Teachers who keep themselves and their emotions at arm's distance in the classroom are suddenly enthralled by the impact of puppets and their children's response to them...Puppets call up in teachers and children something spiritual and vital to a learning process struggling to rise above itself (pp. 2-3).

While many individuals have made observations about the great communication and learning possibilities that the use of puppets has to offer to our knowledge, there has been no quantitative research conducted to explore the topic. Therefore we decided to conduct much needed research on the effectiveness of puppetry as a teaching tool. We focused the study on the relations between the use of puppetry in the classroom, and student attention and involvement during the teaching-learning process.

### **Purpose**

The intent of this study was to determine the relations between the use of puppetry as a teaching tool in the classroom, and student attention and involvement. We developed the model shown in figure 1 to guide the investigation.

The hypotheses we developed for the study are as follows: (1) The use of puppets as a teaching tool in the classroom directly influences student attention; (2) The use of puppets as a teaching tool in the classroom directly influences student involvement; (3) The use of puppets as a teaching tool in the classroom indirectly influences student involvement through attentiveness.

## **Method**

The sample consisted of two first grade classes from two different K-6 elementary schools in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn. One group of 16 children in a music cluster classroom made up the control group, while one group of 16 children in a general education classroom made up the experimental group. A total of 32 children participated in the study. The student population at each school is approximately 80% Black, and 20% Hispanic, and of low socioeconomic status.

The researchers recognized that there were weaknesses to the control and experimental group design, but it was not possible to design the experiment in an alternate manner because of homogeneous leveled class composition, and availability of willing teachers.

The instrumentation selected for the study was an observation checklist. Children were rated twice a week for one week each pre- and post- treatment, as well as during the three-week treatment period. Ratings were recorded by the teacher for each student participant using the following scales:

Not at all Attentive    1   2   3   4   5   Very Attentive

Not at all Involved    1   2   3   4   5   Very Involved

Attentiveness was measured by how well the student was paying attention and tuning into the lesson at hand. Involvement was measured by the degree to which a student was participating in the lesson and attending to his or her own independent task(s).

The reliability of the teachers' ratings was checked before beginning the actual data collection. Each teacher rated her students simultaneously with another staff

member. There was a high correlation between ratings for both of the sets of teachers-- .8 and .89 on the attentiveness scale, and 1.0 and .86 on the involvement scale. This test showed the instruments developed for the study to be reliable.

Data was generated through a manipulative approach. The teacher of the experimental group used a puppet to teach for a number of lessons throughout the week, and the children also created their own puppets for use during certain lessons.

Path analysis was used to analyze the data, and *t*-tests were calculated to determine the differences in observation scores between the control and experimental groups.

## **Results**

***t*-test outcomes.** The results of the *t*-test outcomes appear in table 1. As shown in this table, the groups did not differ significantly on the pretest scores. The experimental group scored significantly higher during all treatment periods except for the seventh and eighth periods. This exception was probably due to the fact that the student puppeteers were given too much freedom to manipulate and “play” with their puppets during a particular lesson. The two groups also differed significantly on the first post-test with the control group scoring significantly higher than the experimental group. This outcome was likely due to the sense of disappointment that the children experienced at the conclusion of the experimental puppet period. By the time of the second post-test, the difference between the two groups disappeared. This was most likely due to the children’s adjustment back to routine classroom activity. As expected, the puppets did not have a residual effect; their effect is based on continuous use.

**Path analysis outcomes.** The path analysis outcomes appear in figures 2 and 3. Figure 2 shows the results for the teachers as puppeteers, and figure 3 shows the results for the students as puppeteers.

A great degree of success was experienced when teachers instructed the class in the role of puppeteers. There was a very high positive correlation (.63) between the use of puppets, and student attention. The positive correlation between student attention and student involvement was even higher (.92). We originally thought that the use of puppetry as an instructional tool would directly affect both student attention, and student achievement. However, we learned that student attention was actually a strong intervening variable for student involvement, which greatly reduced the direct correlation between the use of puppetry and student involvement to a low .16.

The findings were also very encouraging when students took on the role of puppeteers. There was a high positive correlation (.53) between the use of puppetry and student attention. There was also a very high positive correlation between student attention and student involvement. And, as occurred before, the direct correlation between the use of puppetry and student involvement was reduced to a moderate .26 with student attention again acting as the intervening variable, while the correlation between student attention and student involvement remained positive and very high at .75.

As teachers, we thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to communicate with and instruct our students using the unique language of puppetry. We found that with puppets in hand, we were much more dramatic and entertaining teachers, and in turn, our students really appreciated sharing those learning opportunities with us. It was mutually beneficial.

We also discovered that puppets were a great asset in addressing specific individual student issues. For the defiant, behaviorally challenged student, giving him or her the responsibility of helping his or her own puppet to listen and participate appropriately lead to remarkable change, along with the privilege of having something to hold preventing them from causing disruptions to the rest of the class. The child took the challenge very seriously, and performed much closer to expectations than ever before. A student with a number of significant delays, including a speech impediment, who rarely speaks, would speak freely and non-stop when we engaged his puppet in conversation.

Additionally, independent activities that are often difficult for first graders to accomplish were carried out with ease. Students were able to read quietly and independently to their puppets, and were even spotted teaching them reading comprehension strategies that we model as teachers. Students were able to complete written assignments independently with the company of their puppets. They had a “buddy” to share the task with.

## **Discussion**

We conducted this study to measure the relations between the use of puppetry in the classroom, and student attention and student involvement. The first hypothesis we developed was as follows: The use of puppets as a teaching tool in the classroom directly influences student attention. As mentioned above, through our data analysis, we have proved this statement to be true with correlations of .63 and .53 respectively for teacher puppeteers and student puppeteers. Our second hypothesis was the following: The use of puppets as a teaching tool in the classroom directly influences student involvement. As discussed above, this data analysis proved that this statement was incorrect. We

discovered that the use of puppets in the classroom indirectly influences student involvement through student attention. The third hypothesis addressed by this study was: The use of puppets as a teaching tool in the classroom indirectly influences student involvement through attentiveness. As discussed in the findings of this study, this hypothesis was shown to be correct, with correlations of .82 and .75 respectively for teacher puppeteers and student puppeteers.

The findings of this study are very significant for teachers. Puppetry holds much power in raising student interest, therefore increasing their attention and involvement in classroom activities. As we discussed above, it is also a great communication tool to be used when addressing difficult individual students as well as whole-group needs.

The limitations of our study lie mainly in two areas. The sample size was small, and lacked diversity. Secondly, no effort was made to measure the effect of puppetry on student achievement. We recommend that future studies in this area address these two issues more comprehensively, with a larger, more diverse sample, and a measure for academic achievement. It would also be poignant to research why puppetry is such a powerful tool in the hands of educators—whether the use of puppets activates a portion of the brain, or whether something else is going on to trigger the success.



FIGURE 1.  
MODEL

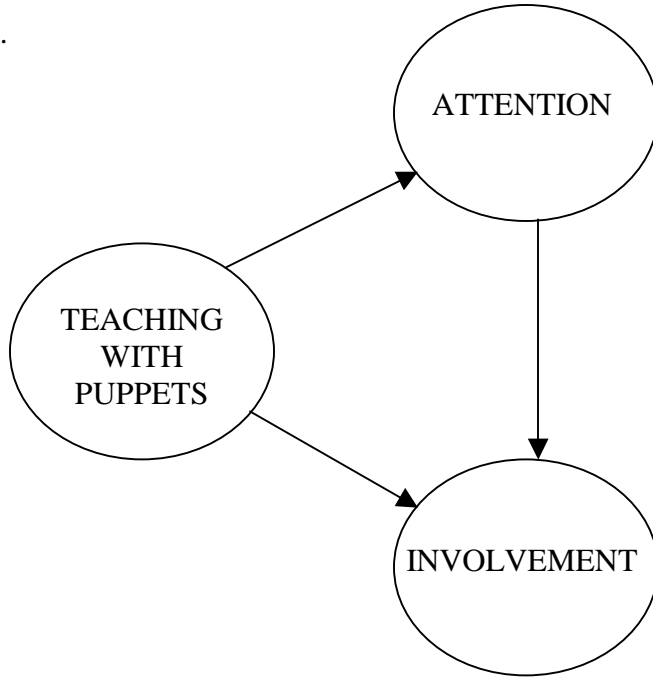


FIGURE 2.  
TEACHER PUPPETEERS

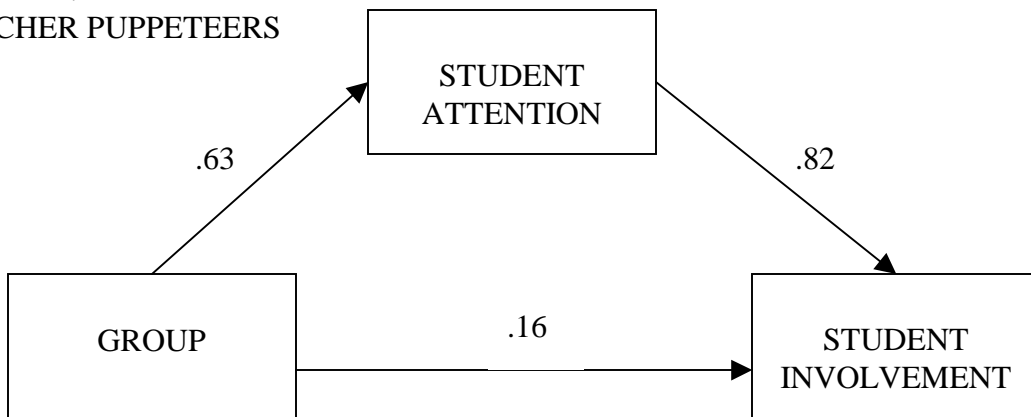


FIGURE 3.  
STUDENT PUPPETEERS

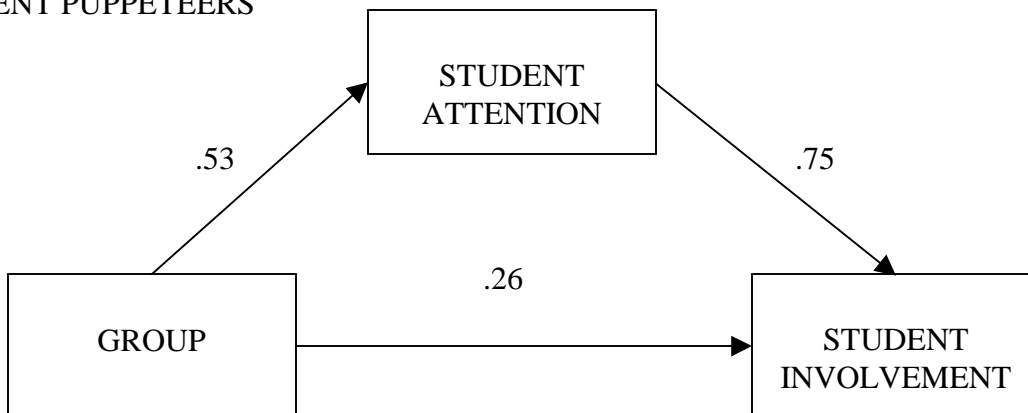


TABLE 1.  
GROUP STATISTICS

|     | GP      | N  | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error<br>Mean |
|-----|---------|----|------|----------------|--------------------|
| A1  | CONTROL | 16 | 2.63 | 1.147          | .287               |
|     | EXPER   | 16 | 3.13 | 1.025          | .256               |
| A2  | CONTROL | 16 | 2.31 | 1.078          | .270               |
|     | EXPER   | 16 | 2.63 | .719           | .180               |
| A3  | CONTROL | 16 | 2.69 | 1.138          | .285               |
|     | EXPER   | 16 | 3.50 | .894           | .224               |
| A4  | CONTROL | 16 | 2.19 | .911           | .228               |
|     | EXPER   | 16 | 2.94 | .854           | .213               |
| A5  | CONTROL | 16 | 3.00 | 1.033          | .258               |
|     | EXPER   | 16 | 4.31 | .873           | .218               |
| A6  | CONTROL | 16 | 2.38 | 1.088          | .272               |
|     | EXPER   | 16 | 3.94 | 1.063          | .266               |
| A7  | CONTROL | 16 | 3.06 | .929           | .232               |
|     | EXPER   | 16 | 3.38 | .957           | .239               |
| A8  | CONTROL | 16 | 2.56 | 1.094          | .273               |
|     | EXPER   | 16 | 3.13 | .806           | .202               |
| A9  | CONTROL | 16 | 3.13 | 1.088          | .272               |
|     | EXPER   | 16 | 4.38 | .957           | .239               |
| A10 | CONTROL | 16 | 2.63 | .885           | .221               |
|     | EXPER   | 16 | 4.19 | .834           | .209               |
| A11 | CONTROL | 16 | 3.19 | .750           | .188               |
|     | EXPER   | 16 | 4.06 | .929           | .232               |
| A12 | CONTROL | 16 | 2.88 | .806           | .202               |
|     | EXPER   | 16 | 4.38 | .719           | .180               |
| A13 | CONTROL | 16 | 3.06 | .929           | .232               |
|     | EXPER   | 16 | 4.25 | 1.000          | .250               |
| A14 | CONTROL | 16 | 2.94 | .929           | .232               |
|     | EXPER   | 16 | 4.00 | .816           | .204               |
| A15 | CONTROL | 16 | 3.06 | .929           | .232               |
|     | EXPER   | 16 | 4.38 | .719           | .180               |
| A16 | CONTROL | 16 | 2.88 | 1.204          | .301               |
|     | EXPER   | 16 | 4.44 | .629           | .157               |
| A17 | CONTROL | 16 | 3.00 | .966           | .242               |
|     | EXPER   | 16 | 3.94 | 1.181          | .295               |
| A18 | CONTROL | 16 | 2.63 | .885           | .221               |
|     | EXPER   | 16 | 4.44 | .629           | .157               |
| A19 | CONTROL | 16 | 3.31 | .946           | .237               |
|     | EXPER   | 16 | 2.63 | .806           | .202               |
| A20 | CONTROL | 16 | 2.69 | 1.138          | .285               |
|     | EXPER   | 16 | 3.44 | 1.209          | .302               |

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