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The Incorporation of Puppetry into Reading Instruction

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The Incorporation of Puppetry Into Reading Instruction

By

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State University of New York College at Brockport
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The Incorporation of Puppetry Into Reading Instruction

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Abstract

In this study, the use of puppetry was explored as a mediational means for students' comprehension while reading a variety of texts. Seven first grade students from a rural school district took part in this study. The study took place over the course of five weeks and included students using puppets with reader's theatre scripts as well as trade books. The students taking part participated in a twenty minute puppetry center where they were encouraged to incorporate puppets into their reading activities. Data were analyzed using triangulation of student interviews, live observations, audio tape recorded sessions, retelling rubrics, and student work samples. Analysis showed that the use of puppets influenced the students' reading experience in a variety of different ways.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Current trends in the educational world have led to students being required to learn larger volumes of information at earlier ages. While state standards vary, the trend has become quite consistent; children today are expected to learn much more information each year and perform well on standardized tests that did not exist fifteen years ago. In addition to being expected to learn a greater volume of material, students are also expected to understand the learning process, how connections can be made between the learning process and how information is acquired, as well as make connections between the material learned in multiple subject areas. As a result of these trends, classroom teachers have to find places in their daily schedule where they can make cuts. Many have decided to take out play based instructional strategies, and instead use more traditional lecture and auditory styles of teaching to cover the quantity of information that students are expected to learn. Speaking from personal experience as a classroom teacher, the use of play as an instructional strategy has become a chore to integrate and therefore is disappearing from primary classrooms.

Given the new strict standards being instituted in Elementary schools all over the country as part of No Child Left Behind (<http://ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml>) and federally funded programs such as Reading First (<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/readingfirst/index.html>), it is especially crucial that teachers find appropriate means through which to implement developmentally appropriate instructional strategies. According to the mandates put in place by

Reading First, all teachers in a district implementing this program are required to take part in an uninterrupted ninety minute reading block. During this time block, teachers are required to cover the areas of vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, phonics, and phonemic awareness. While the specific instructional strategies are not 100% controlled, the approved core curriculum programs rely heavily on whole group lecture lessons and pencil and paper activities. Not all students learn best through pencil and paper activities. Young children especially tend to learn better through a more interactive and hands on approach. One of the most widely used age appropriate teaching techniques is the use of play based learning.

Therefore, in an effort to incorporate play based instructional techniques in my own first-grade classroom, I developed this research study to explore how puppets might help mediate students' meaning construction. This research was significant because it shed light on an interactive and fun method of instruction. As mentioned before, as a result of state mandates and programs such as the Reading First initiative, reading instruction for grades K-3 has become extremely standards driven and has made the incorporation of play into the everyday classroom quite difficult. I explored the incorporation of play, specifically puppetry, and the impact the instructional technique had on student performance in literacy. My study provided insight into how this particular instructional strategy helped to mediate students' meaning making. My findings helped me shed light on the possibilities and alternative use of this technique and how it could be integrated into literacy instruction. This would ensure that students were provided with a more interactive and meaningful literacy experience

that is developmentally appropriate, but also helps young learners meet rigorous state standards. In addition, my findings allowed me to reflect on my own teaching practices and determine the most effective strategies I could implement within my classroom to ensure my students are successful.

For the purpose of this study the following definitions will be used:

Dramatic Play: the unrestricted play of a young child in which she is able to explore her own world by copying the behaviors and traits of the people she interacts with on a daily basis (McCaslin, 1984)

Puppet: "... 'actors' who come to life with the help of a puppeteer", either pre-fabricated or student made characters that are physically manipulated by the students and serve to represent a character related to the selected text (McCaslin, 1984, p. 120)

Comprehension: the process of constructing meaning while reading text, often characterized by strategic activities including solving words, summarizing, maintaining fluency, adjusting, predicting, making connections, inferring, synthesizing, analyzing, and critiquing (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009)

This study took place for the duration of five weeks. I investigated my research question through the use of puppetry as an independent learning center in my first-grade classroom. Live observations of student behaviors, tape recorded observations of student behaviors, story retellings, and responses to student interviews served as the various sources of data. Data collection took place every day. I analyzed the data qualitatively through constant comparisons between observations,

retellings, and student interviews. This allowed for common themes to be identified in multiple sources of information, therefore creating triangulation.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

While developing this study, I reviewed literature focused on play, the zone of proximal development, creative drama, and puppetry. With current New York state reading mandates in place and districts taking advantage of grants such as Reading First, I was interested in exploring ways for play based instructional techniques to be implemented into reading instruction. For this study, I looked explicitly at the educational uses of play as well as the theories that drove other studies that revolved around play. All of the research had something valuable to contribute about play and the possibilities of using play based instructional techniques, specifically puppetry.

Vygotskian Theories and Educational Uses of Play

Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist and social constructivist was the founder of the idea of the zone of proximal development (Scherba de Valenzuela, 2009). Vygotsky's idea of the zone of proximal development, or ZPD, revolved around the idea that there was a difference between what a child can do independently, versus what he/she can do with adult guidance. Vygotsky's research supported the idea that children learn by watching others do things, and when the child is ready he/she is able to complete the task with an adult helping (Braunger & Lewis, 2004). His research also asserted that children were capable of learning and doing more complex things with adult assistance as well as developmentally appropriate instructional practices.

According to Mariane Hedegaard (1990), when children begin attending school the classroom teacher presents them with certain learning tasks that cater to their ZPD's, but also teach the children skills they need to progress to a more formal learning style. In other words, it is the job of the classroom teacher to help the child learn by catering to their ZPD, but also to teach them how to survive and learn in a traditional and formal school learning environment.

Accompanying the concept of ZPD, Vygotsky believed that play creates the optimal ZPD. He acknowledged that play was a transitional stage where students could take normal everyday objects and apply new meanings to them and convey ideas and understandings about the world using those objects (Vygotsky, 1978). He also pointed out how through play children are in fact demonstrating a great deal of self control and through that exertion are focusing inadvertently on the learning and meaning making they are attempting to convey through their play. In addition, he stated that "In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior: in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102). This quote directly suggests that children are capable of reaching beyond the typical expectations of their age group when they are taking part in play activities.

Many researchers have experimented with the educational implications of play. Vivian Paley for example, wrote numerous books encouraging the use of play as an instructional technique. In her book *A Child's Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play* (2005) Paley, who for years had engaged in a very sophisticated level of teacher research and self study, described the play driven learning environment of a

Kindergarten classroom. Following along with Vygotsky's theory, she observed the benefits of play, and how through the use of play based activities, young children were able to exceed their normal learning capabilities and gain new knowledge. She presented the argument that since she attended school in the fifties that the use of play has slowly disappeared, and is now virtually non-existent in schools.

Throughout her book Paley (2005) discussed a number of different scenarios in which children were engaging in play, providing actual scripts of the children's play. Coupled with thorough explanation and analysis of the play, she provided a strong argument that supported Vygotsky's point about children learning through play, as well as defending the use of play in the classroom. A clear example of this can be seen in a scenario in her book concerning children playing the game of school while actually in school. For this experience the children were pretending to play school in their classroom and the teacher pointed out to them that they really were in school (Paley, 2005). The children responded by elaborating their story and incorporating a book from their classroom and placing themselves as characters in the book. After providing this example, Paley stated that while this may appear to be average play, the elaboration and details the children added to their conversation was important because the learning done through the process translated into their writing assignments and story retellings (Paley, 2005). This extension by the students demonstrated Vygotsky's theory of how play allows children to go beyond their zone of proximal development and learn new information that would otherwise be considered too difficult. These observations also shed light on the benefits of incorporating play into

curriculum and instruction. It also fit with Shaughnessy's (1993) claims in his research for the need for children, both gifted and otherwise, to engage in play based activities.

Paley (2005) also gave an example in her book about how play helps children understand difficult events in their lives. One scenario depicted how the students started the day out with innocent play that turned into a child's reflection about the events of September 11th. While the children were taking part in free play, one of the skits turned to an accident involving an airplane that crashed into a large building one of the other children had constructed within the classroom. When the teacher asked the children for more information about their skit she saw a twist from the actual events of September 11th. In the children's reenactment, they went to their cubbies and came back with their jackets folded into pillows that they used to swim to safety. Paley noted how variations of this story resurfaced for a number of days, always ending with the students getting their jackets and using them to swim to safety. This example demonstrated how the children used play to deal with events far beyond their understanding. In other words, the play allowed them to reach beyond their zone of proximal development to understand something terrible they had all witnessed on the news.

Similar examples can be seen in Paley's book *White Teacher* (2000). One such example comes to mind when Paley describes what several of her students were doing in the doll corner in her classroom. In this scenario, several girls were playing in the doll corner in her classroom. Paley noticed that the girls' play focused a great

deal around making meals, going to church, and talking on the telephone. She also noticed that the girls' play focused mostly around family roles and dynamics, touching on everything from family dynamics to deaths in the family. Her observations demonstrated Vygotsky's theories on ZPD and how through play children can understand more complex material than otherwise possible. This scenario also demonstrated how through the use of play, the girls were able to explore sociocultural norms, and the various roles that the members of the family they were portraying would hold in society.

Using Vygotsky's theoretical views, specifically the concept of ZPD and children learning from adults and through interactions with adults, Michael Shaughnessy reviewed Vygotsky's theories in his paper (1993). Shaughnessy asserts that the use of "a more on-going dynamic assessment and instructional mode" (1993, p. 4) was more beneficial to teaching children, particularly gifted children. Shaughnessy believed that traditional I.Q. tests were not the most effective means to assess children for gifted programs. He found fault in these tests because the examiner typically built no kind of rapport with the child before conducting the assessment and because the administration techniques were rigid and potentially restricted the child's answers. In addition to expressing concern over the assessment tools used with gifted and talented children, he also discussed his concern over the programs being implemented with these children. Shaughnessy stated that more often than not programs were misdirected and inappropriately designed by certified teachers who

were placed in the gifted and talented teaching position, but really did not understand how to best meet the needs of the learners in their classrooms.

In response to these concerns Shaughnessy (1993) proposed a number of steps that could be taken to help correct this problem. One of the recommendations he made was for gifted and talented programs to implement the use of mentoring. Going along with Vygotsky's theory of ZPD and the idea of learning from adults, Shaughnessy maintained that gifted children would learn better when they were paired with an adult who could in turn mentor that child down the road toward his or her goals and dreams. In conjunction with this same idea Shaughnessy also recommended the use of tutoring, parent involvement, community involvement, and support systems for encouraging gifted students to learn. These suggestions support the use of parental involvement and helping children learn beyond their ZPD. Shaughnessy also discussed using a dynamic assessment to measure students' ability as opposed to traditional I.Q. tests. He argued in favor of this technique because it identified "...how well a child can learn with support or assistance" (Shaughnessy, 1993, p. 12). This supports Vygotsky's views of ZPD and child learning. It also demonstrates the need for teachers to determine appropriate instructional techniques to best meet an individual learners needs.

In addition to suggesting more interactive teaching methods for these children, he also suggested providing them with individualized homework and additional reading materials, using humor and otherwise supporting their emotional education (Shaughnessy, 1993). While these suggestions did not directly involve parents and

their roles in helping children to learn beyond their ZPD, they do support the use of individualized instruction. This is relatable to Vygotsky's theory of using appropriate strategies for children. The difference in this case is instead they are appropriate materials that are within the child's ZPD.

Besides his theories on ZPD, Vygotsky (1966) also believed that developmentally appropriate practices and experiences were the key to supporting children's learning. He specifically identified that play is a cognitive process and a motivating force. In his research, Vygotsky discussed how children react strongly to motivating forces, and that they seek out immediately what they desire. He listed play as a means through which children could receive some kind of gratification or reward while still learning at the same time. He specifically noted that in play the children take on a specific role, based in an imaginary situation which they act out, all the while following a predetermined set of rules based around the scenarios in which they are acting (Bodrova, 2008).

Stemming from Vygotsky's theories on the zone of proximal development Randy Bomer (2003) conducted his own study. In this study Bomer specifically addresses the use of various different tools as meaning making devices. He also explored how students took every day stationary items and extended their meanings and uses to demonstrate developmentally appropriate uses and also to extend their meaning making process through play based learning experiences.

Bomer (2003) conducted this study in a K-2 multiage classroom composed of 20 students ranging from 5 to 8 years in age. The participants of the study were taking

part in writer's workshop and worked on the same writing project over the course of a week. Observations were conducted on a weekly basis over the course of a year, with reflective notes, video taped sessions and teacher interviews being reviewed on a regular basis. The tools provided during the writer's workshop were broken into ten categories: environmental tools, pages, tools used for making marks, tools for joining pages, tools used for the storage of texts, tools designed to draw attention to print, mnemonic tools, personal proxies used to encourage students to read, text structures, and procedural tools. The classroom teacher had to conduct a few mini-lessons to prevent the abuse of the materials, such as a mini-lesson on how to handle books like babies as opposed to throwing them across tables. Other than these few mini lessons, the materials were left out for the students to use as they saw fit.

After conducting and reviewing the research, Bomer (2003) found both anticipated and unexpected results. One unexpected example mentioned was how children occasionally got caught up in the materialness of the tools rather than how they could be used. For example, the pillows that were provided were intended to invite the children to be comfortable with the act of writing, but instead were tossed around like toys instead of being used for comfort purposes. He did note that in some situations the children did use the pillows as the teacher intended, as a comfort providing tool that allowed them to write freely around the room. It was also noted that tools were not used as the teacher intended. A notable example is how the stuffed animals designed to be a listening audience for the children's reflection on their writing were occasionally turned into missiles and points were turned into swords.

Bomer did note that while there were some unexpected uses of the tools provided in this study, that the children were simply using the tools as they might in a different context, such as imaginative play at home. Bomer also noted that despite the unexpected outcomes, students did connect specific tools with their intended actions. One example cited was how the students associated the tape dispensers and markers specifically with the writing process and composition.

Bomer (2003) discussed these multiple uses of tools as the children understanding that different tools can be used in different contexts and acting within their zone of proximal development. The use of markers and pointers as swords for example, may not have been appropriate or intended for the school setting, however, it demonstrated the children's understanding of overlapping contexts. The use of the markers in this context as well as being used as a writing tool, demonstrated that the children understood the use of it as a tool for learning in the school setting, and not merely as a toy used at home.

In terms of educational implications Bomer (2003) noted that it is especially important for a teacher to consider the tools she has available in her classroom and the ideas of literacy development and learning they convey to her students. In other words, think carefully about the tools you have available to your students and what they are telling your students about learning, rather than only considering how the children can use them. He also stressed understanding that the tool points to the possibilities and can always be used in a new and creative way and is not limited to its literally intended use. In essence, he recommends providing the children with

meaningful literacy tools and allowing them to act within their zone of proximal development to use them and extend their intended uses in order for the child to extend his learning and meaning making through the use of the tool in the educational process.

As the previous studies demonstrated, there are benefits of using play in schools. The studies showed that as Vygotsky suggested, play allows children's learning to elevate to an entirely new level. The children in these studies were able to take everyday items and extend their uses in creative ways to perform higher level thinking and understand more complex concepts. These findings support using play as an instructional method.

Creative Drama

One specific kind of play being used in classrooms as a teaching tool is creative drama. Creative drama is a process in which children are able to participate and involve themselves and their life experiences through a creative and imaginative outlet (Cottrell, 1987). This learning method allows children to practice their listening and speaking skills through a variety of different experiences (Cottrell, 1987). These experiences range from pantomime, role playing, and puppetry, to name a few. Through these experiences, children are able to learn new material, such as literacy skills like fluent reading, but they are also able to acquire appropriate social skills due to interactions with others that take part as a result of these methods.

One study that revolved around creative drama was conducted by Ellen Appleby (2005). This research project sought to analyze sustainability education and

how it fits with the latest theories on multiplist and evaluativist meaning making. According to these theories, dramatic play is a means through which children can experiment with social interactions and study them through their play from multiple perspectives, allowing them a first hand perspective through which they can evaluate those interactions. The participants in this study were fifth grade students who ranged from 10/11 years old. The students all came from a lower socioeconomic area of Southwest Brisbane. This study asserted that these methods of meaning making are needed to best meet the pedagogical goals of an eco-connected curriculum. In an attempt to teach the eco-centered curriculum, the teacher used a hand made puppet called Mrs. Blue Gum to motivate the students to create their own puppets who could speak for the forest in which Mrs. Blue Gum lived.

When the students were first introduced to Mrs. Blue Gum they found her to be very rude and outspoken about the preservation of the forests. As a result the students were assigned the role of helping Mrs. Blue Gum to effectively convey her message to an audience in a manner so that the audience would listen to her perspective (Appleby, 2005). Upon completing this experience the students took on the role of researchers and learned about forests and ecological practices that would help preserve those forests. Once the research was completed the students created their own puppets and wrote scripts which conveyed the information they learned while conducting their research. Upon the completion of the scripts and puppet construction, the students performed their skits for the whole class.

Appleby's study (2005) found that the students were very engaged in the learning process and were enthusiastic about learning about forest environments and ways to preserve these fragile places. In addition, the study showed that puppetry was an effective way to promote multiplist and evaluativist thinking in an elementary classroom. It also revealed that this drama based instructional technique caused the classroom teacher to reflect on her pedagogy and gain new insight on her learners and what they are capable of doing, as well as new instructional techniques that can effectively be used within a classroom. This study also supported Vygotsky's studies about ZPD and using developmentally appropriate instructional techniques. The study demonstrated how the children were able to understand the complex ideas about forest preservation because they were using play based, age appropriate instructional techniques.

A second study which focuses on the use of creative drama was the study conducted by Deborah Wells Rowe (1998). This study focused specifically on how preschoolers who were read to on a regular basis made spontaneous connections between dramatic play and the meanings of the texts they listened to regularly. The study addressed the following research questions "a) what kinds of book-related play do children engage in at school and at home? And b) what is the role of book-related dramatic play in the children's literacy learning?" (Rowe, 1998, p. 10).

This study was actually two related studies put into one. One of the studies took place in a preschool classroom that was composed of 16 Caucasian middle class children ranging from 2-3 years in age (Rowe, 1998). The other study was a case

study of Rowe's son including his literacy development from birth through age four. All of the children taking part in the study had various experiences with books both in and outside of school.

In the classroom portion of the research the children took part in independent and small group reading experiences where there was typically a teacher who read the books to the children and helped them engage in conversations about the books (Rowe, 1998). The children also took part in whole group read-alouds. In both cases the books chosen were picked because they fit with some common theme, whether it be topic, genre, or author, to name a few. In conjunction with the reading experiences the students were allowed to act out parts of the books they listened to through dramatic play. The teachers also provided the children with toys that fit with the books being read so that they could use the toys to act out portions of the books. For the at home portion of the study, Rowe talked about how she read books with her son Christopher and engaged him in talks about the books. She also discussed how she would take the connections her son made with books and help him create props he would then use to act out parts of the books he had listened to.

The results of the classroom research showed that the students frequently chose to reenact parts of the stories as opposed to reenacting the entire book (Rowe, 1998). She specifically noted that the children chose the portions of the texts that they related to the most closely and used their dramatic play to further explore the character in that portion of the book and his/her actions. She also pointed out how the children's dramatic play included both reenactment of what literally happened in the story, as

well as their own personal improvisations. In respect to the toys provided during reading experiences, she decided that the children used the toys to draw connections between the book reading and the concrete world in which they lived. She also hypothesized that "...holding toys may have supported comprehension by creating a more concrete link to the child's world experiences" (Rowe, 1998, p. 23).

Reaching beyond the role of text interpretation, Rowe (1998) also noted kinds of dramatic play that demonstrated the children's literacy development in relation to the reading process. For example, she noted that when left to play with stuffed animals without adult presence, that some of the children put themselves in the role of teacher and used the animals as their students. One such scenario included children taking on the role of the teacher and leading book talks and pretending to read the books to the animal audience. She attributed these actions to the children using "...play as a medium for participating in book-related-reading events... because it provided a connection to their familiar, playful ways of understanding and interacting with the world" (Rowe, 1998, p. 24). In other words, the play was a developmentally appropriate practice which catered to the children's zone of proximal development. She also noted that the play gave children an outlet through which they could experiment with the connections they made with the books, their themes, and characters.

In terms of implications, Rowe (1998) asserted that the use of play as a response tool was developmentally appropriate method for children and gave them a safe means through which they could interact with books without feeling threatened.

She advocated the use of play especially in developmental literacy skills because it is developmentally appropriate and meets the students' needs as young learners. In addition, she suggested the need for further research pertaining to this area, not only with young children in the age group of 2-3 years old, but also in other age groups in order to delve deeper into the ways in which dramatic play may help children explore meanings in books. She also encouraged teachers to look into how the play taking place in their own classrooms is connected to reading instruction, and to look at this play from multiple perspectives in order to better assess how it is meeting the children's individual learning needs and catering to their zone of proximal development.

Paralleling the findings of the studies concerning ZPD, these creative drama studies showed how young learners are capable of learning complex and mature material. They provided clear examples of the benefits of using puppetry and acting out play. They also highlighted how children are able to perform higher thinking skills through play based instruction. In addition, these studies highlighted the clear connection between knowledge acquisition and play.

Play as an Instructional Strategy

According to Vygotsky (1978), play teaches children greater self control, and therefore allows them to learn more. Vygotsky felt that meaningful play was an effective instructional method that created learning experiences through which students could learn new information (Bodrova, 2008). Vygotsky specifically said that "...a child's greatest achievements are possible in play- achievements that

tomorrow will become his average level of real action and his morality” (1966, p. 13). He argued that teaching should revolve around the child’s newly emerging skills and that play allowed children to move forward in their learning and thinking, as well as to experiment with the behaviors and components of their every day lives (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). Through the use of play, children are able to reach beyond their normal ZPD to experiment with behaviors and characteristics that are present in their lives that they may otherwise not be able to understand.

A second study that highlighted catering to children’s ZPD’s through creative drama was conducted by State University of New York college professor Sharon Peck and classroom teacher Aubre Virkler (2006). This study explored the impact of the incorporation puppetry on students’ literacy learning. It took place in a rural classroom located in Pen Yan, New York. The classroom was composed of students with Individual Education Programs (IEP’s), average students, and above average students. The research took place over the course of three weeks, during which the students conducted research pertaining to national symbols such as the Liberty Bell and the Statue of Liberty.

For the study, Peck and Virkler (2006) had the participants work in small heterogeneous groups to conduct their research about their national symbol. After completing the research portion, they used their information to write a skit to teach the audience what they had learned. In conjunction with the student created script, the participants created their own shadow puppets which served as the characters in the

play. The groups worked closely, practicing their scripts on a daily basis before performing their skits at the school wide Flag Day ceremony.

Peck and Virklers' (2006) analysis showed that the use of puppetry had a positive effect on the students' overall learning experience. Analysis of running records conducted prior to and after completing the three-week unit showed that the students improved their reading fluency. The researchers attributed this to the repeated readings the students did each day while practicing their plays. Observations made by Peck and Virkler over the course of the study showed that the students had a better understanding of the social studies material they were responsible for presenting to the class. The observations and conversations that the researchers had with the students during the experience showed that the students had gained considerable knowledge about their own landmarks and about the landmarks of their peers during the process. This same idea was echoed in personal response journals the students kept during the experience.

In addition, the observations made by Peck and Virkler (2006) showed that the students improved their group work skills, particularly their conflict management and problem solving skills (2006). While this was not identified as an area in need of improvement prior to the study, the observation notes did show several cases where the students problem solved more effectively in their small groups than they did prior to the experience. The observations and student response journals also showed that the students put a great deal of effort into their projects and took pride in their work. This was considered by the researchers to be an added benefit of the use of puppetry.

These observations and findings supported Vygotsky's (1966) theory that children can learn complex material, in this case social studies curriculum, through play based instruction. It also supported Vygotsky's ideas of the uses of play. It provided evidence that play based teaching strategies helped students to reach beyond their zone of proximal development to acquire and fine tune their literacy skills, as well as comprehension skills of new social studies curriculum. In addition to supporting Vygotsky's theories, the findings of Peck and Virkler's study (2006) also aligned with Shaughnessy (1993) and Paley's (2005) research and demonstrated benefits of using play to enhance a student's learning. Going along with these two theories, this study also demonstrated the benefits of using developmentally appropriate teaching strategies. In addition, the study showed that the students took more ownership of what they were creating and also that they developed better problem solving skills. These additional observations turned out to be added benefits of the use of puppetry that were not initially anticipated.

The Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center created a theater project that implemented the use of puppets with reading instruction to assist in improving reading in elementary schools in Maryland. The study was created in response to the America Reads Challenge and focused primarily on the strategy of re-reading. The tutors involved with the program studied educational theories on reading instruction and combined what they considered to be key components of each individual theory into an Early Emergent Reader Plan (Fisler, 2003).

In 2001 the plan was joined with a “Puppetry Outreach” grant proposal (Fisler, 2003) and led to the development of a curriculum that focused on reading interest and fostering reading skills, while incorporating the use of puppets as a motivational tool. As stated, the primary focus was to create an interest in reading and aide in developing reading skills. The secondary focus was the exploitation of the benefits of using puppetry as an educational tool. At no time during the study was the quality of the performances a focal point. Rather, the study focused on incorporating the puppets as a means to increase motivation and interest in reading, as well as determine the impact of puppetry on fluency skills. Over the course of a week long period, the students worked closely in small groups with various fairy tales. After repeatedly reading through the fairy tale the first two days of the week, the students provided the teacher with a retelling of the book. Based on the retelling by the students, the teacher then wrote a readers theatre script and asked the students to construct their own puppets and use the puppets to tell their story. The students practiced and memorized their scripts on the third and fourth day, then presented their plays using the puppets as characters on the final day.

Using running record information from Marie Clay’s *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* assessments (Clay, 2002) conducted prior to and after completing this study showed that incorporating puppetry had a positive impact on students’ literacy skills. The study showed that the elementary schools in Maryland had an “...increase of two and one tenth reading levels in Maryland elementary schools” (Fisler, 2003, p. 34). Data also revealed that students who participated in the

program showed that after the puppetry reading experience, their schools had 40% or more of their students reading at what was considered to be a satisfactory level (Fisler, 2003). The research also showed that 70% of the students who took part in the experience were able to read new materials at double the speed they were able to prior to the study. These increased percentages were attributed to the programs use of repeated readings through the rehearsal process for the puppet show. In addition to completing the readings faster, the students used appropriate phrasing and added expression. These results showed that Puppet Theater proved to be a developmentally appropriate teaching strategy that was also effective with improving reading speed, expression, and phrasing while reading orally.

This study related back to the work of Vygotsky and the zone of proximal development. Like Peck and Virkler's study (2006), this study showed that puppetry improved student's literacy skills, and was a developmentally appropriate instructional technique. However, unlike Peck and Virkler's study, this study did not show an effect of puppetry on the acquisition of new material pertinent to another content area, but rather solely to literacy instruction. As Shaughnessy (1993) also stated in his study, this study supported Vygotsky's claims that play improves students learning (Vygotsky, 1978). In this study the improvement was directly measured by the percentages increase noted in the Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement, as well as on state reading assessments. These assessments clearly showed that the children who participated improved their reading speed, suggesting that there is a correlation between improving reading speed and the use of the puppetry. More

importantly, the study showed that the students involved were more interested and engaged in the reading process than they were prior to this experience. These findings were much the same as the findings that Peck and Virkler made in their study. The data support Vygotsky's theory and prove that play based learning strategies can help students improve their academic skills.

As shown by these studies, the use of puppetry provided students with many benefits. Some of these benefits included increased knowledge of subject matter, greater comprehension, improved fluency, and more motivation to read. These findings support Vygotsky's idea that play based instructional methods help students improve their academic skills.

Summary

As Vygotsky (1966) suggested, all of the previously mentioned studies demonstrated that play helps evaluate students to their maximum ZPD. The aforementioned studies highlighted how play allowed students to learn complex material, as well as to demonstrate an increased understanding of reading texts. Next I will describe how I crafted my own study in order to explore specifically how puppetry helps mediate students' meaning making.

Chapter 3

Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore the use of puppetry within independent student literacy centers. This study focused specifically on how puppetry might impact students' comprehension of texts when used with first graders in a rural school district. Being involved in Reading First mandated reading curriculum, I often interacted with students who were unmotivated by pencil and paper driven literacy centers. Therefore, this research study was designed to explore the use of more hands on and interactive learning strategies in order to encourage students to participate more enthusiastically. Data for this research were collected through a variety of measures including my own observations while students were participating in the puppetry center, observations and reflections taken from tape recorded sessions of the students at this center, as well as through student retellings and interviews conducted after the experience.

The question this study attempted to answer was:

How might puppets help students mediate meaning construction?

Participant Selection and Research Environment

The school district this study was implemented in has a primary building containing grades pre-K- 2, an elementary building which holds grades 3-5, a middle school comprised of grades 6-8, and a high school which houses grades 9-12. The district currently has 1,850- 1,900 students total, and the primary building where the study took place has approximately 404 students total. School wide, 45 of the students

have Individualized Education Programs (IEP's) for a variety of disabilities (Polakiewicz, 2009). In addition nine of the students have 504 plans for test modifications, such as extended time, separate location, and directions being reworded (Doctor, D., personal communication, 10/6/09).

There are 140 first-grade students currently enrolled in the district. Of the 140 students, 20 are African American, two are Asian, six are Hispanic, and 112 are Caucasian (Waszak, A, personal communication, 10/6/09). Nineteen of the first-grade students were asked to participate in the study. The students were asked to participate based on the fact that they were currently enrolled in my first grade classroom. These students all live in a rural community in western New York State. Of the 19 students who were asked to participate one is Asian, two are African American, and 16 are Caucasian. 11 of the students are male and seven are female. From this pool, seven students were randomly selected to participate based on returned consent forms. Due to the uneven number of seven, I selected four girls and three boys. Of the nineteen asked, seven were selected for actual data collection purposes. At the start of the study the students received a letter to take home to their parents or guardians which explained the study, measures that were taken to ensure confidentiality, and a request for consent for their child to participate in the study. The children who had permission were also asked to sign an assent form which explained the study and the fact that they would not be penalized if they choose to not take part in the study. Once a pool of students was identified as having parental consent and has signed the assent forms the study group was selected at random, choosing four girls and three boys. I divided the

students into a boys group and a girls group, based on consent. From these groups I randomly selected the names of three boys and four girls from a hat.

As a teacher researcher I found myself in a unique position where I was able to interact with and apply my findings with the students I work with every day. As I implemented puppetry into my literacy centers, I was able to reflect on the experience daily, and use the feedback from these observations to enhance my literacy centers. I also developed insight into how my students learn best, specifically in terms of using hands on instructional techniques as opposed to more traditional pen and paper activities. In addition, I took the findings of this project and determined other ways these strategies could be implemented across other curricular areas within my classroom.

The students' abilities did differ. The reading levels of the participants ranged from the end of kindergarten to beginning of second grade based on running records, classroom teacher observations, and Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). The students also varied in terms of their decoding strategies and comprehension skills. The seven students were selected randomly, so the comprehension and reading skills within the focus group varied. All 19 students in the classroom participated in the puppetry center. However, observations, tape recorded sessions, and interviews were only conducted with the seven students.

Each of the participants involved in the study received a pseudonym. Pseudonyms were used on any scripts and observations made during the data collection. They were also used on interview forms in place of the child's real name.

The actual name of the school and district was also changed in order to maintain confidentiality. I am the only person who knows the real names of the participants. In addition, all signed consent forms and observational notes, as well as students interviews were kept in a locked classroom. Any student work samples that were collected had the students' names removed and pseudonyms put in their place immediately upon collection. Tapes from recorded sessions were also kept in a locked classroom. Upon the completion of the research, all data and consent forms were destroyed.

Instructional Methods

Prior to this study the students had experienced the use of puppetry, but not had the opportunity to use them for literacy activities. Up to this point they were only used for whole group activities, and their use was explicitly modeled by me. This was done to ensure that they were familiar with puppets, but not overly used them themselves which allowed me to watch how they grew throughout the process. They were also exposed to buddy reading during reading instruction before the study began. This was done to ensure that when the students worked collaboratively that they were productive and on task. However, they did not use this strategy in conjunction with puppets.

The students were assigned to their centers group based on gender and reading abilities. For the purpose of this study one of the groups contained the seven students from whom I collected my data. The other two groups contained the students from whom I did not collect data. These groups contained a split number of boys and girls.

The reading skills and abilities of the students in these groups were also varied. During centers time there were three independent learning centers set up, one of which was the puppetry center being used for this study. The children worked independently at each center for twenty minutes. Every twenty minutes the students rotated from one center to the next, based on a rotational schedule that was in place since September and that met the requirements of Reading First. As previously stated, data were only collected at the puppetry center on the one group of participations selected at random.

This study took place over the course of five weeks. For the first week the students worked with pre-made finger puppets. They were supplied with a variety of reader's theatre scripts at various reading levels and were encouraged to interact freely with the puppets. The puppets matched the characters that were in each script. The students interacted with the scripts and the puppets for 20 minutes each day.

For the second week the students worked in pairs with a variety of different trade books. The students buddy read the books with their partner and interacted with pre-made hand puppets while they read the story together. As in the previous week, the puppets matched the characters in the trade books being used. The students were also supplied with backgrounds that fit with the books they were interacting with. Once again they participated in this center for 20 minutes, five days a week.

During the third week of the study the students were provided with new reader's theatre scripts, along with materials to make their own puppets. The students were free to create their own puppets using crayons, straws, tape, and tag board. Once their puppets were created, the students were free to use them with the scripts however

they wanted. They were provided with additional time outside of centers to work on the actual creation of their puppets in order to allow them sufficient time to create their puppets, but also to use them in conjunction with their scripts during their 20 minute centers. In addition, they were provided with pop-up sets that fit with the reader's theatre scripts.

For the fourth week of the study the students were buddy reading with a partner again with new trade books. Instead of being provided with pre-made puppets, this time the students were able to make their own puppets as they did the previous week. Once again they worked outside of the 90 minute reading block to construct their puppets to allow them ample time to use the puppets with their trade books. They were also provided with crayons and poster board to use to make their own backdrops to go along with their trade books. As in the previous weeks they were given 20 minutes a day five days a week to use their puppets with their books.

The final week of the study put the students into the author's chair. For this week the students were given a variety of different books with which they were familiar. They then used the stories to write their own scripts in small groups of three or four. The students dictated their scripts to me while I sat at the computer and typed what they wanted incorporated. They were provided with both pre-made puppets, and materials with which to make puppets. The students chose to create their own puppets using tag board, crayons, straws, and tape. They were also provided with poster board and crayons to construct their own backgrounds. In addition, they were encouraged to use their writing time to work on their scripts so they were able to practice them

during their centers time with the puppets. As with prior weeks, they used the puppets however they wanted throughout the experience every day for 20 minutes.

Data Collection

Data were collected over the course of the five weeks of study. Live observations were conducted three times per week in the form of observational notes I kept, using a double entry style form. One column was designated for observations I made, with the other available for thoughts and questions I had. These observation sessions were tape recorded so that I could listen to the tapes after the observation and make any additions to my notes I may have missed the first time. This helped ensure my observations were detailed and allowed me to make sure I did not miss any vital information.

Tape recorded sessions also took place two times per week. Separate tape recorders were set up in the middle of each group along with a microphone. The tapes were labeled according to the day the data were collected and the group members present. I reflected on these tapes each night and took notes using the double entry form. From these tapes I looked specifically at reading behaviors such as intonation and inflection while reading, as well as extra animations and events added to the stories through the use of puppets. The tape recording allowed me to pick up on these finer details and allowed me to determine how puppetry might have impacted comprehension. In the event that a student I did not have consent for was recorded on a cassette tape, that portion of the tape was erased.

On the days I conducted live observations, I completed a comprehension check with the students after they left the center. Since I conducted live observations three times per week I completed the comprehension check three times per week, as well. During this check I looked for the students to do a retelling about the stories or plays they worked with that day. The retellings were judged using a comprehension rubric (see Appendix A) based on the DRA (Beaver & Carter, 2009) rubric. The retellings allowed me to tell if the students had an in-depth understanding of the stories or if they only had a basic understanding. They also showed me how puppetry mediated the students' comprehension skills. I also checked the information from the retellings with the information from my observations to see if the data matched or not.

Interviews (Appendix B) were used at the conclusion of this experience. They were based on the students' perceptions about the experience as a whole. The questions were modeled after the questions found on the Burke Reading Interview (Owocki & Goodman, 2002). The questions focused specifically on how the students felt about the experience, as well as how they thought it might have helped their reading skills, specifically their comprehension. These interviews were conducted one on one, with me acting as a scribe for the students. This was done to ensure that all responses were being recorded and that I was getting each individual student's feelings about the experience. The interview contained the following six questions: 1. Before this class, when have you seen or used puppets? 2. What did you like or dislike about using puppets? 3. How did using puppets make you feel about reading? 4. What was your favorite part about using the puppets? 5. Is there anything you didn't like

about using puppets? and 6. What else would you like to do with puppets?. These interviews took approximately 10-15 minutes to administer. Students were able to hear the questions multiple times when necessary. If the students were unsure of how to answer the question I reworded them appropriately. The information from these surveys was used to check my findings from the retelling as well as from my observations. The interviews were audio taped and conducted by me to ensure that the results were valid. The interviews took place in the classroom at my guided reading table.

Student work samples, specifically student written scripts were also collected. These scripts, which were based on books the students read, allowed me to see how well the students understood the texts. The puppetry they did based on these scripts also showed me how well they understood the text they wrote and practiced using the puppets. This data collection was valid because the work samples were written by the students themselves, without any adult interference. They were also valuable to compare to the findings of the observations and the interviews to show how puppetry might have impacted their comprehension of texts.

Limitations

The data collected in this study were specific to the students in my classroom, specifically to a small number of students within my classroom and should not be generalized to a larger population. The sample size of the students taking part in the actual research and data analysis was small. More participants in this study may have provided a deeper insight and more information; however a larger sample size was not

feasible due to time constraints. The results of this study only gave an inkling of the possibilities of using this instructional strategy. I am also the teacher of these participants. This most likely affected the participant responses during the data collection process, specifically the student interviews. However, being in this position helped me home in on the student's progress because I had a unique perspective on where the students were prior to taking part in this study. Time constraints because of Reading First guidelines were also a limiting factor. Because of the rotational nature of centers and the expectation that three centers be in place each lasting approximately 20 minutes, the students had a limited time at the puppetry center every day. They were given additional time during the day to complete their work, specifically the puppet construction and script writing. However, this was at a different time of the day from their reading centers.

Data Analysis

The observations were analyzed for common themes and categories within the observations themselves. Observations were reflected on and coded every night. I specifically looked at intonation, animation, and embellishments the students added to their stories through the puppets. This allowed me to identify common themes and monitor the development of those themes throughout the process. I knew the themes may or may not include observations made about intonation changes and additional details students add while participating in the experience. These themes were color coded in my notes using highlighters and different color index cards. Color coding

and tracking these themes allowed me to identify other questions that arose during this experience and take a closer look at these questions.

The student retellings gave me insight into how well the students understood the texts they used. Using the rubric, I reflected on how well the students understood their texts and the depth to which they were able to describe their stories. The results of these retellings were color coded using highlighters and the themes found in the retellings and were connected to the findings of my observations. I made these connections by first analyzing the data from the rubrics and retellings for themes, and then looking at the observation data through the same lens to see if there were any similarities. Through this connection, I was able to gain insight into the students' overall comprehension, not just their retellings or how they interacted with the puppets.

The student work samples were also reflected on and analyzed according to the story details the students incorporated into their scripts. I looked specifically at the details the students included in their scripts based on the books they used. Throughout this process I looked for the details from the stories students included, but also any embellishments they added to their scripts based on their understanding of the text they worked with. I was looking specifically to see if these embellishments might possibly include extra lines from characters the students felt were appropriate to add based on how they interpreted the text. I also looked to see if they included connections the students made while reading, for example, connections with other texts they worked with or connections with their own lives. In addition, I focused on

how the students acted out their plays focusing once again on intonation, animation, and embellishments the students possibly added to their stories through the puppets. I compared the findings from my observational notes, to the retellings and to these student work samples in order to identify common themes, and help develop the themes I identified.

The student interviews were used to provide insight into the students' perceptions about the process. They specifically helped shed light on how the students felt using the puppets. The interviews were coded according to common responses and themes. These data were then compared to the themes and findings of my observations and the comprehension retellings. In addition to tracking common themes, I triangulated the data and my analysis to look at each individual child over the course of the study. I used my variety of data to see what kind of growth, if any, the students made over the course of the study. I also looked across all the participants to identify common themes and noted the differences between the individual students.

Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate how puppetry could be incorporated into curriculum driven literacy instruction. The students who participated in this study were first grade students in a rural school district who were part of my classroom. Fourteen of my nineteen students were given permission to take part in my study. Of these fourteen students, thirteen of them signed an assent form indicating that they wanted to take part in this study. From this group, four girls and three boys were randomly selected to take part in this study. The research question I explored in the study was: How might puppets help mediate students' meaning construction?

After analyzing the data I discovered multiple themes that emerged. The data were analyzed using a variety of methods. For example, I started out with my live observations, checked my initial findings with what I gained through review of audio tapes, and then compared these findings to the themes and ideas I discovered in the comprehension retellings, student interviews, and work samples. Then I put all the themes and ideas onto color coded flash cards and arranged them according to commonalities in themes and ideas.

While analyzing these data I discovered that the puppets helped students mediate their meaning construction in a variety of ways. The data reflected a variety of kinds of comprehension. Some of the kinds of comprehension uncovered included the students demonstrating literal comprehension, demonstrating their understanding

and embellishing texts, making corrections and reading for meaning, some of the benefits of repeated readings on student confidence, puppets providing the students with a positive reading experience, and the children's' interactions through the use of the puppets.

Demonstrating Literal Comprehension

One of the most prevalent kinds of comprehension I observed while conducting this research was a literal understanding of the texts the students worked with over the course of the five weeks. When referring to the students literally understanding I am talking about the participants understanding what is going on in the story or script they were reading each day. Through the use of the puppets all seven of the students who participated demonstrated literal understanding of the texts that they were reading on several occasions. For example, in the first week of the study, April, Johnny, Bobby, and Nate all expressed a literal understanding of the reader's theatre script with which they were working. In this first week, they were provided with three different plays they could practice. The first play was about four birds that were having a discussion about preparing to fly south for the winter. The second play was about four children who were all playing together on the playground. The third play was about the responsibilities of taking care of pets.

I observed a clear example of literal comprehension while the children worked with the second play. As part of this play, the characters, who were all children, talked about swinging on a swing set. After reading this line Nate and Bobby started pretending that their puppets were actually swinging, moving them back and forth in a

repetitive pattern until the script moved on to a new part of the playground. This demonstrated that the boys understood the actions the characters were discussing in their lines.

I observed this same kind of behavior while watching Amanda, Kate, and Ingrid working with their puppets in the first week of the study. The girls were provided with three different scripts for this experience. The first script was about three leaves that were carrying on a discussion about falling from the tree in autumn. The second script the girls were provided with was about three little frogs and their discussion about living around a particular pond. The third script was about a mother duck and her two ducklings.

I also observed another clear example of literal comprehension while the girls were reading the frog play. In this script, each of the frogs had a line that talked about how they hopped around a pond. After reading this line, all three of the girls took their frog puppets and had them pretend to hop on the floor. This action completed through the puppet demonstrated that the girls understood what they were reading, that they demonstrated a literal understanding of the actions taking place in the script.

In the second week of the research I invited the students to switch from using readers theatres scripts to buddy reading with trade books along with puppets and backgrounds that fit with the story line of the books. Ingrid, Kate, and Amanda had two different books to choose from for this experience. The first book was about a tiger who was attending a party. In the story, the tiger was very excited about attending the party. Because of his excitement the tiger ended up causing all kinds of

trouble at the party. One example of literal comprehension shown by Ingrid while she worked with her story was when the description in the book talked about the tiger jumping up and down. When this occurred in the text, Ingrid made the tiger puppet jump up and down, demonstrating her literal comprehension of the text. On a repeated read of the text Kate took a turn being the tiger puppet. She demonstrated that she understood the text when she pretended to have the tiger puppet pop the balloons on the backdrop of the play. This was an action talked about explicitly in the play, that Kate had her puppet act out thereby demonstrating her literal comprehension.

The second book Amanda, Kate, and Ingrid were presented with was about a young boy and his grandfather who were fishing by the sea. In the story, the boy and his grandfather struggled to bring in an octopus. Seeing the struggle of the boy and his grandfather, several other people on the beach jumped in to try and help them bring in their catch. While reading through the story, the girls understood the fact that multiple people were working together to pull in the octopus. As a result, they all grouped their puppets together and pretended to work as a group to pull in the octopus. This action demonstrated that they understood what was happening in the text and used their puppets to show their understanding.

I made similar observations with the second group that was taking part in the study. During the second week when the students were given trade books, Nate, Johnny, Bobby, and April were working with a non-fiction book about sting rays. While reading through the book the students acquired a wealth of new information pertaining to sting rays. After learning about how sting rays lay in the sand, Nate took

his puppet and pretended that it was lying in the sand. Following Nate's example, April started doing the same action with her puppet. Controlling the puppets in such a manner demonstrated that the students had a literal comprehension of what they were reading about. April and Nate also demonstrated a literal comprehension of the text when they were reading about sting rays swimming and made their puppets pretend to swim in the water drawn on the backdrop.

In the third week of the study the students were presented with new readers theatre scripts and were given the opportunity to make their own puppets that fit the scripts. Bobby, Johnny, April, and Nate worked with a play about an adventure in the jungle. In their play the four characters are sitting around very bored, and decided to liven up their day by crossing a river into an awaiting jungle on the other side. While in the jungle they found themselves being immersed in one adventure after another, ranging from being chased by snakes and tigers to swinging in the trees with monkeys. While reading through the script all four of the group members demonstrated literal comprehension of the text by having their puppets begin by swimming across the river. They continued to demonstrate their literal comprehension by having the puppets literally climb up the trees on the stage for their play. In the parts of the script when the characters were being chased, Nate, Bobby, April, and Johnny demonstrated a literal comprehension by having the puppets pretend to run through the trees on the stage. Similarly, when the characters were swinging through the trees with the monkeys, the children made their puppets pretend to swing from tree to tree. Nate also went so far as to have his puppet pretend to walk in the jungle. This action

showed that he understood the characters in the story were actually walking through the jungle.

Kate, Ingrid, and Amanda also demonstrated several examples of literal comprehension while working with their reader's theatre script. For their play, the girls were three characters in a fictional school setting, a teacher, a girl in the class, and a secret classroom fairy. In the story, the fairy turned the teacher and the little girl into fairies and took them on an adventure in the courtyard of the school. While working with this script, all three of the girls demonstrated literal comprehension when they made their puppets pretend to fly in the flowerbed. This was a line explicitly spoken by Ingrid's character. They also showed they understood how excited the characters were about their adventure when they had the puppets jump up and down excitedly during the cheering lines in their script. Kate, Ingrid, and Amanda also demonstrated literal comprehension when they pretended that their puppets became lost in the flowers on the scenery of their stage. This was appropriate because it matched the lines in their individual parts. Most prevalent was the girls' action of having the puppets pretend to fly in the air. Throughout the entire play the characters were flying around in the air according to the lines in the script. By completing this action they demonstrated that they understood what they were reading and were able to use the puppets to convey their literal understanding.

In the fourth week of the study both groups went back to working with books and created their own puppets to match the books. Johnny, Bobby, April, and Nate all worked together with the book "The Elves and the Shoemaker". The puppets they

designed depicted the characters in the book and included the shoemaker, his wife, and two elves. The students used the pictures from the book to model the appearance of their own puppets. For example, April, who was taking on the role of the wife in the story, made her puppet look like an old woman with white curly hair who wore long dresses and a special apron. This matched the way the woman in the book looked. Nate and Johnny also used the pictures as a model for their puppets. When they made the elf puppets they made sure the puppets were smaller than real people. They also dressed their puppets in brown work pants with aprons, just as the characters in the pictures. The puppets the students chose to create demonstrated that they knew who the main characters in the story were.

After creating the puppets for the story, the students began using them to act out the events in the story. While working with the story itself Nate demonstrated literal comprehension of the text by having his puppet pretend to cut and sew together the pieces of leather when the story talked about the elves and the shoemaker making the shoes. He physically moved the puppet so that it looked as though he were actually cutting the pieces of leather and sewing them together. Johnny also demonstrated a literal comprehension of the text when he had the elves hide from the shoemaker so the shoemaker did not see the elves helping to make the shoes. To show this action he moved the puppet around on the scenery and made the puppet pretend to crouch underneath the table drawn on the backdrop.

Amanda, Kate, and Ingrid also resumed work with a book. Their story was about a class snack that went missing in the classroom, and how the characters had to

solve the mystery of where the snack went. The girls constructed their puppets, selecting the teacher and two girls in the class to be models for their puppets. They did decide to make the two students girls and modeled the way they looked after they way they themselves look. This showed that they understood that the characters in the book were children, but also that they were able to make a connection between the book and their own personal lives, showing that they had literal comprehension but that they were able to extend that comprehension to a more worldly example, their own personal lives. In this example, they drew on their own lives in order to comprehend the text.

While working with this book, Amanda and Kate demonstrated a literal comprehension of the text when they pretended to have their puppets search around on the background for the missing snack. They physically took their puppets and moved them around the various areas on the backdrop and had them lean over in order to show that they were looking for the missing snack. This demonstrated that they understood that the characters were looking for something. Through the use of the puppets they were able to convey this understanding through the puppets' actions.

In the final week of the study, the students used the books from the fourth week of the study and wrote their own script of their stories and used the puppets and backgrounds they created for the previous week. The students worked with one another, reviewing the stories they had read the week before and carefully choosing the important elements to include in their scripts. After identifying the pieces they

wanted to incorporate, they carefully crafted their scripts, making sure everyone had a character role and that the parts were evenly distributed among group members.

By writing the plays, the students demonstrated how much literal comprehension they had of their stories from the week before. The script that Bobby, April, Nate, and Johnny wrote was the story of “The Elves and the Shoemaker”. In their script they included all the characters from the story, as well as the main story line and actions that were included in the original book. In addition they talked about how the Shoemaker and his wife were struggling to keep up with their shoe orders, and that it was the elves who came in at night and secretly worked to finish making all the shoes and complete the orders. While acting out the play, Bobby, Johnny, April, and Nate showed that they understood what was happening in their scripts by having the puppets pretend to cut the leather and stitch it together into shoes. As previously mentioned in a prior week of study, they physically moved their puppets to show that they were cutting and stitching the leather.

Kate, Ingrid, and Amanda continued to work with their book about the missing snack. In their script they showed literal comprehension of the original text by including the main characters of the teacher and two students. They continued on to include the main problem, the fact that the class snack was missing, as well as how they solved the problem by looking for and finding the snack. Their script was detailed and had all the main characters from the original story with which they worked. It also covered the main story line from the original text. Their acting of the

script demonstrated their literal understanding when they once again had their puppets pretend to look for the missing snacks in the classroom.

As mentioned in some of the examples above, the actual actions the students had their puppets complete also demonstrated their literal comprehension of the texts. These actions not only demonstrated the children's literal comprehension of the texts, but allowed the children to physically show what they understood from the texts. The puppets were the physical means through which the students were able to show what they understood. It provided me, the teacher, with a visual and hands on assessment to see how deeply the students understood the texts with which they worked. Were it not for the students using the puppets they may not have been able to show what they understood and I would not have observed these behaviors

As demonstrated in the examples listed above, through the use of puppetry the students demonstrated their literal comprehension of texts on several occasions. The students used their puppets in conjunction with scripts as well as trade books and demonstrated their literal comprehension of the texts by having the puppets complete the actions explicitly laid out in the readings. The puppets served as the mediational means through which the students could express their comprehension.

Understanding and Embellishing Texts

In addition to demonstrating a literal comprehension of texts through the use of puppetry, the students involved in the project demonstrated that they were able to use their literal comprehension of the texts and were able to add appropriately to embellish the stories and plays with which they were working. When discussing

embellishments, I am referring specifically to actions that the students added while reading that were not explicitly mentioned in the text. For example, one of the most common embellishment actions the students used was having their puppets address one another when conversations were taking place. In all of the texts used for this study there were conversations taking place between the various characters involved. The students would take their puppets and have them face one another and complete subtle movements to show that the puppets were talking to one another. This conveyed their literal understanding of this idea by making the puppets act like they were talking to one another. While initially this may not seem like an embellishment, it was because it was a physical action the students had the puppets complete that was implied but not specifically addressed in the text. This action showed that in every case they understood that the characters were talking to one another and that the conversation had some kind of purpose. Were it not for the puppets they would not have been able to physically show that they understood this conversational relationship.

In addition to having the puppets talk to one another, the students made their voices sound more conversational during parts in the texts when the characters were directly speaking to one another. While having the puppets face one another to talk, they would also add inflection and expression to their voices during the talking parts. For example, if the puppet was asking a question the students would appropriately raise the intonation in voices at the end of the sentence to clearly show they were asking a question. If the conversation in the text was relaxed, the students would read

times when the students drew upon their background knowledge and added extra parts and pieces to their plays and stories. For example, in the first week of the study when working with the bird play, Nate embellished the play by having his bird puppet pretend to peck at the ground. At no point in the play did it discuss the fact that birds peck at the ground to find food. This was an action he completed totally on his own. When I asked why he performed this action, Nate replied “Because that’s what birds do. They peck at the ground to find their food.” This clearly demonstrated that he was applying his prior knowledge about the real world and real world situations to the play he was reading.

Kate and Ingrid completed similar actions when they were working with their frog play in the first week of the study. After saying several of their lines, the girls would finish with “ribbit, ribbit” representing the sound a real frog would make. Adding this sound was not part of any of the lines in the script. This embellishment demonstrated that the girls were using their prior knowledge about the real world to add to the play. Kate also took an opportunity to embellish on the play about the mother duck and her two ducklings. Taking on the role of a duckling, Kate started reading her part in a pretend childish voice. Following Kate’s example, Ingrid performed the same action with her duckling puppet as well. This elaboration showed that the girls understood the role of their characters in the story and used their prior knowledge to enhance those roles. It also showed that they were working cooperatively, a concept that will be addressed later on.

I saw similar examples in the second week of the study when Nate was reading the story about the snake. During this experience he added his own embellishment by having the snake hiss and pretend to slither towards and away from objects on the backdrop as a snake in real life would do. He also had the snake make pretend hissing noises and act like it was hunting the other characters. Once again, these actions demonstrated that he was using his prior knowledge or real world animal behavior to enhance his experience working with the script.

April added her own embellishments in the second week when she was working with the sting ray book. While acting and reading with her puppet, she had the puppet swim in the water and pretend to eat the plants found on the backdrop. These actions were not discussed in the text, but rather, she used her prior knowledge of fish and aquatic animals in the real world and added these actions. Nate also used prior knowledge from real world experiences when he added embellishments with his sting ray puppet by having the puppet swim and pretend to hunt in the weeds. Ingrid performed a similar embellishment when her group had the opportunity to work with the sting ray text and she pretended to have the sting ray puppet hide in the weeds on the backdrop. This was not an action talked about in the text, which suggests that Ingrid used her prior knowledge of real world aquatic life and the puppet to embellish the story.

In the third week of the study Amanda, Kate, and Ingrid did a great deal of embellishing on their play about the fairy adventure. For example, when Ingrid was acting as the fairy and her character was casting spells, she concluded each spell by

adding “poof”. This was not in the actual text and showed that Ingrid was making connections between other texts she had previously read and the play she was working with. In addition, when Ingrid was working her magic as the fairy, not only did she add the extra word to the line, but she also had the fairy flying around while she cast her spells. This embellishment suggested that she had seen the action completed by a fairy in another piece she had been exposed to prior to this experience.

Johnny, Bobby, Nate, and April also demonstrated their own embellishments in the third week of the study when they were working with the jungle adventure script. At certain points in the script the characters were being chased by wild animals in the jungle. At these places in the script, the students decided to make their puppets run and yell in fear from the wild animals. These actions were not written into the script and showed that the students were using their prior knowledge of people’s real world reactions to a similar situation to create an emotional response from the characters that fit with what was happening in the story. Nate also individually embellished the script when his character was faced with a wild snake. When his character read the exclamation concerning the snake, Nate made his puppet run frantically through the trees on the backdrop of the play. This was added using only prior knowledge of human reactions to such an event and was not discussed in the script.

The fourth week of the study was mostly characterized by the above mentioned elaborations of engaging the puppets in conversational behavior and appropriate movement around the stage. However, the fifth week of the study did have additional

examples of embellishment. In this final week Johnny, Bobby, April, and Nate were working with a script version of the story “The Elves and the Shoemaker”. At the part of the play when the elves were working on the shoes, Bobby took his elf puppet and started singing a song he invented. His song consisted of the following lyrics: “Cut and sew, cut and sew, take the leather cut and sew”. The he continued to hum the tune while his puppet pretended to keep working on the shoes. This embellishment suggested that he was using prior knowledge and had seen someone in some other context singing while they work.

All four of the students added their own embellishment at the end of the play when they made their puppets jump up and down cheering because they had finished sewing the shoes. At this point Johnny, Bobby, April, and Nate made their puppets shout “Hurray! Hurray! We finished the shoes and saved the day!” While this did show that the students were inferring how the characters would react (a concept that will be discussed later on), it also used their prior knowledge of the life experience of completing a difficult task to enhance the play.

Through the use of puppets in the examples above, the students clearly showed their literal comprehension of the texts they were working with, and used that comprehension to embellish the texts. These embellishments included different kinds of actions such as actions that showed the inferences they made while reading, and actions that demonstrated the students using prior knowledge. The also demonstrated that they drew connections between other texts and the one they were working with for this experience, and used their prior knowledge to extend their texts further. These

observations clearly demonstrated how puppets helped students mediate meaning making.

Making Corrections to Read for Meaning

Another trend I identified through close analysis of the data was how frequently the students self monitored their reading. Over the course of five weeks, I observed every student at some point monitor his or her own oral reading. For example in the first week of the study Amanda was reading her line as one of the three little monkeys and instead of saying “So the three little monkey’s romped” she read “So the three little monkeys rump- rumped- romped.” Noticing her mistake and the fact that it did not make sense she went back and corrected her miscue. Nate showed similar behavior when he was reading his line in the script about the birds flying south. When reading the line “I need a clean cage, fresh water, bird food, and lots of love” instead he read “I need a clean cag, fresh water, bird food, and lots of love.” Upon reading the line he realized it did not make sense and he went back and corrected his miscue using the word in the text. Ingrid also corrected her own miscue while reading the monkey play. While reading the line “and ate lots of bugs” Ingrid miscued and read “and at lots of bugs” instead. After she completed the line she realized it did not make sense and went back and read it correctly. This action showed that she realized her initial reading contained a miscue and did not make sense with the text. When the students would substitute another word for the actual word in the text in other examples, they would typically realize the miscue and go back and try reading again.

I also observed on several different occasions April and Kate monitoring the other students' reading. For example, in the first week of the study when Johnny was reading the play about the birds flying south, he read the line "Time to go where?" Johnny read "when" instead of "where". April picked up on this immediately and corrected his miscue telling him the right word to use. She also corrected a miscue Nate made while reading his line "That sounds great! Let's stay there forever." Instead of reading "great" he said the word "grat". April picked up on the miscue immediately and told him the correct word. Kate corrected Ingrid in the first week of the study when she was reading her line "We decided to run and see who would win." Instead of reading "decided" Ingrid started to sound the word and then skipped over it. Kate picked up on this miscue and corrected Ingrid before they went on with the play. Kate also helped Amanda fix a miscue when she read her line "So my sneaky monkey brother would do anything to win." Instead of reading the word "sneaky" Amanda read "sneak, snaeek". Kate noticed the miscue and told Amanda the correct word. This monitoring showed that the students understood that you must read for meaning and if a miscue is made that does not make sense with the story, in order to maintain comprehension that miscue needs to be corrected.

In addition to monitoring for miscues, the students also monitored each other in order to ensure that they were reading the correct lines at the proper times. For example, while reading the fairy play in the third week of the study, Ingrid lost her place in the text and read one of her lines earlier than she should have. Noticing this miscue, Kate redirected Ingrid as to where they were in the script so she could read the

correct line and the proper sequence of the story would be maintained. April helped redirect Bobby in the third week of the study for the same reason. While reading the script Johnny became sidetracked and became lost in the text. When the other students told him it was his turn to read, he jumped back in the text to the last line he had read previously. Noticing his miscue, April redirected him to the correct place in the text so that they could continue reading and the play would make sense. This was an important observation because it showed that the children were paying close attention to the text, even when it was not their turn to read. It also showed that they understood if the text was not read in the correct order that it would not make sense.

As highlighted in the examples above, the use of puppets and more importantly the repeated readings involved in this study, helped the students monitor their own and their group members' reading. As noted above the students watched their own reading and corrected their own miscues that did not make sense with the text. They also closely watched each others' reading to make sure that what was being read made sense with the text with which they were working. This showed that the repeated practice that came from using the puppets helped the students pay close attention to what was being read and make sure that what was read out loud made sense with the text itself.

The Benefits of Repeated Readings on Fluency

As previously mentioned for the purpose of this study the term fluency pertains to more than the actual speed of reading taking place. Rather, the term fluency refers to a number of different reading behaviors. These behaviors include students reading

with a smooth pace, adding appropriate inflection and intonation, pausing in appropriate places, and changing their voices to reflect the emotions in the texts they are orally reading.

In relation to fluency, this study revealed a number of different trends, the most notable being how the use of puppets encouraged the students to read smoothly, using appropriate pauses and inflection to portray the characters' emotions through their reading. While listening to the audio tapes of the students reading, I noticed that on the repeated reads of one text that the students paused at commas and periods more frequently than they did in their first read. I also noticed that on the repeated reads they changed the tones of their voices to show the characters' emotions. For example, as mentioned earlier, when the children were worried about the missing snack, Ingrid and Amanda made their voices sound worried. The repeated readings that took place on a daily basis provided the students with ample practice with the texts. This in turn led to smooth paced reading, that also had a great deal of inflection and expression added which enhanced the believability of the scripts and stories. For example, as mentioned before when reading "The Elves and the Shoemaker" April and Johnny made the voices of the Shoemaker and his wife sound worried when they were talking about not making all the shoes they need to. My analysis of observations and tape recordings also showed that through the repeated readings the children's pace and expression while reading improved. Their reading became less robotic and sounded more and more conversational. The students also made far fewer miscues involving

words that did not make sense with what was happening in the story, such as the earlier mentioned examples.

The student interviews I conducted also supported this finding. When I asked the students how using the puppets helped their reading Amanda specifically noted that “It helped me practice reading the scripts.” When I questioned her further about what she meant, she said, “I got to work on the same script every day, so I got lots of practice with the part.” This supported what I noticed in the observations and audiotapes. Kate made a similar comment when she said “I could practice my parts more to be a good reader.” I asked her what she meant and she replied “I knew the words better and didn’t make as many mistakes.” When I reflected on the audiotapes and my notes, I noticed that Kate made fewer miscues on her repeated reads, showing that her comment was correct. Ingrid also had a similar response when she said, “Using the puppets made me happy to practice my parts.” When I asked her to explain why she was happy she explained that “It was fun.” This showed that the puppets and repeated readings not only improved Ingrid’s fluency, but also provided her with more motivation to read, a concept that will be discussed later on.

My analysis of the data above showed that puppets aided the children with how they orally read the text. The puppets gave the students a means through which to convey the emotions they believed the characters in the texts were conveying. In addition, the puppets helped the students add expression and appropriate pauses to their reading in order to show that conversations were taking place and that these conversations contained emotions. While this is a behavior that can easily be seen

when working with readers theatre scripts, it is often less present when students are reading a trade book. However, when using the puppet as a mediational tool, the students exhibited these behaviors when orally reading both readers theatre scripts and trade books. The puppets gave the students a physical means through which they could practice their oral reading skills with any text. The puppets also provided the students with a motivating force that drove them to keep reading and practicing their parts.

The Benefits of Repeated Readings on Student Confidence

What I found to be more notable was the impact the repeated exposure gave the students in regard to their confidence while reading. After reading the texts several times through the students all became confident enough to read their parts with expression. For example, in the first week of the study when Johnny read his characters' lines, his oral reading was very robotic and did not use appropriate phrasing or have any inflection. However, after several readings of the text he became more relaxed, paused where appropriate, and added expression to his voice. I observed the same behavior from Amanda in the first week of the study as well. On the first day she was presented with a text, her reading was very straightforward and mechanical. However, after she was able to practice the part a couple of times she relaxed and added expression to her voice.

The puppets provided the students with a medium through which they were able to portray the characters' emotions, rather than only through their voices. For example, as previously stated, in the fourth week of the study when working with the

text about the missing snack, Kate, Ingrid, and Amanda all used their puppets to show the characters' excitement when they found the missing snack. I made a similar observation in the third week of the study when Johnny, Bobby, April, and Nate were working with the play about the jungle adventure. They used their puppets to physically show how excited and distressed the characters were as the story was being told. In these instances, the puppets seemed to act as a kind of safety blanket which empowered the students to step outside of their normal zone of comfort in order to truly take on the role of their characters and act out their parts through the puppets. As previously stated, when the characters in a book or script were scared, the students made their voices sound panicky. In contrast when the characters were very excited or angry about something, the students changed their voices to match what they interpreted the characters emotions to be. More importantly, they made the puppet's body language match the emotions they were putting into their voices.

My data analysis of my observations clearly showed me that puppets helped the students with their confidence while reading. The manner in which each student read her or his part changed as the week progressed, starting as a robotic and mechanical reading at the beginning of the week, and ending as a smooth and expressive, conversational reading by the end of the week. The student interviews revealed that the students were comfortable taking these risks when they were working with the puppets.

The Benefits of Repeated Readings on Retellings

Besides the impact on students' fluency, the repeated readings and use of puppets also demonstrated an increased understanding of the events in the text. Over the course of the five weeks, I met with the students to have them do a retelling of the text with which they worked. I conducted the retellings three times per week on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. This was done to establish a solid beginning, middle, end mark of the students' retelling progress. The retellings showed that over the course of the week, the students' comprehension of the texts increased.

At the beginning of the week, the retellings were basic and only included the most important details of the story. For example, when asked to do a retelling of "Ready to Fly" after the first reading, Johnny, Bobby, April, and Nate provided the following retelling:

Teacher: Can you tell me what this play was about?

Nate: Birds.

Bobby: The birds were flying.

April: They were talking about bugs.

Johnny: That's about it.

Teacher: What else happened in the story?

Nate: I don't know.

April: That's about it.

This retelling was very basic only included three of the most important pieces of information from the story. When asked to do a retelling on the same text at the end of the session, the group said:

Teacher: Can you tell me now that you've read the play a few times, what was the play about?

Nate: There were birds. It was teaching us about birds and why they fly south.

April: The birds go south because winter is coming.

Johnny: When winter is coming they have to fly to where it's warm because it gets cold.

Bobby: They have to go where there's food. They go to eat the bugs.

April: They find the trees where it's warm to live in.

The end of the session retellings showed just how much the students' comprehension increased from when they first read the text, to the last read of the day. As shown by this example, the retellings which took place after repeated exposure to the text were detailed and contained very few if any mistakes in retelling details. During the final retellings the students also did more in-depth analysis of the texts and were not afraid to make inferences and draw their own conclusions. One such example could be seen when April added on her comment about the birds finding trees down south to live in. This was not a concept that was discussed in the script, but rather emerged as a result of April's inferencing. It demonstrates that comprehension had increased and that deeper level thinking was going on.

This increased comprehension was also revealed in the student written scripts. As previously mentioned, in the final week of the study the children were able to choose between two of the books they had used the week before and re-write that script as a play. The students did work together with a team to write the script, and they were able to use the books while they did their writing. However, acting as a typist for the children as they wrote their scripts, I noticed that they very seldom used the books to write their scripts. For example, when working on their script for “The Elves and the Shoemaker” Johnny, Bobby, April, and Nate made sure that their play had the main characters the Shoemaker, his wife, and the elves. In their dialogue they had the shoemaker and his wife talk about how they had to make a great deal of shoes in order to make money, but that they were struggling to complete the work. When the Shoemaker and his wife went to bed, they had the elves come in and talk about what they could do to help out. They also added lines from the elves about all the different jobs they had to do in order to make the shoes. At the conclusion of the play, they had the elves and the Shoemaker and his wife celebrate that they were finished making the shoes. Their retellings in script form showed that they had a thorough understanding of the texts they had worked with previously.

In addition to paying attention to what happened in the story, I also noticed that the students were very concerned about the punctuation that went into their lines in order to show the emotions the characters in the stories were feeling when they were delivering their lines. When working with Johnny, Bobby, April, and Nate on “The Elves and the Shoemaker” script, whenever the Shoemaker and his wife were asking

questions or were upset about something, the students stressed to me which lines needed to end with question marks and which ones needed exclamation marks. I found this interesting because it demonstrated that they were drawing connections between print and meaning, and that they understood that certain text features had the power to impact the emotions and messages delivered in a text.

As discussed above, my data analysis showed that the use of puppets and the repeated readings aided the students in their retellings of the stories, as well as in their script construction in the final week of the study. Through reading the scripts every day and using the puppets, the students had multiple exposures to the same texts, and were allowed to freely interact with those texts through the puppets. In the retellings I noted that the students' comprehension from the beginning of the week to the end of the week improved and reflected additional evidence of inferring taking place.

Changes in the Use of Puppets

The use of the puppets from the beginning of the week to the end of the week also demonstrated changes in the students' levels of comprehension. At the beginning of the week, the students' focus was mostly on the text in front of them and making sure that they were reading the words correctly, and not replacing the words on the page with nonsense words that did not make sense in the story. During the first few readings of the texts, the students sat in a circle with the puppets on their fingers while reading their parts in the scripts. While they were reading they did not have the puppets making any kinds of motions or doing any acting. Instead their sole focus was on the text and making sure they were reading the parts correctly. My

observations showed that the majority of the miscue corrections that took place happened during these first few readings, which explained to me why the students were not using the puppets. After the first few readings however, the students did start to loosen up and have their puppets move slightly, making them address other puppets while taking part in conversations.

On the second and third days of working with the same texts, the students started to incorporate their puppets and have them move to act out what was happening in the play. For example, instead of just having the puppets move to talk to one another, they had the puppets complete some of the actions in the play, such as Nate, Johnny, Bobby and April having the puppets swinging in the trees during the jungle play in the first week of the study. They stopped worrying so much about reading all the words correctly and instead relaxed and started showing the actions with their puppets. Another example I observed was in the second week of the study when Ingrid started making the tiger jumping up and down when he was excited. Because of having the opportunity to practice the previous day, she was comfortable with her part and stopped focusing solely on the words and allowed herself to use the puppet more in conjunction with the text.

On the fourth and fifth day of the week the puppets transformed from being more of an accessory to being the center of attention. At this point in the process the students were heavily involved with the puppets, acting out the actions in the text as well as adding appropriate actions based on prior knowledge. For example, on the last day of working with the fairy script, Ingrid, Amanda, and Kate added in a great deal

of action to their reading, having their puppets, fly through the air, moving them to hide among the flowers, and making them physically quiver when they were scared. These were actions that did not take place until the last two days of the week. Johnny, Bobby, April, and Nate also did a great deal of acting with their puppets on the last two days of working with their script about the great jungle adventure. When they were reading this script on the last two days, their puppets were swimming in the water, climbing up and swinging from the trees, and running through the forest. The actions of the puppets moved from demonstrating a literal comprehension of the texts to elaborating on to what was already happening in the story.

My observations clearly showed how the use of the actual puppets changed from the first day of each week to the last day. These observations showed how the puppets went from being inconsequential, to being one of the most important pieces. The students went from not using them at all at the beginning of the week, to relying heavily on them at the end of week in order to act out and add on to their texts.

Puppets Provide a Positive Reading Experience

There were a couple of unexpected benefits of working with the puppets. The student interviews revealed that using the puppets increased the students' motivation for reading. I asked the students what they did not like about using the puppets and they all had the same response, there were no dislikes. When conducting the interviews, several of the students commented that using the puppets made reading more enjoyable. When asked how working with the puppets made them feel, all seven of the students noted that using the puppets made them feel happy and made reading

fun. For example, Amanda said “Using the puppets made me feel good. It made me happy and it helped me practice my parts.” Kate also echoed this idea when she said “It made me happy because it was fun. It made it funner to read.” Johnny also agreed during his interview and said “It made me like reading. I could talk with the puppets.”

I was able to confirm this with my observations and tape recordings because the students would often express a great deal of excitement prior to going to the puppetry center. While I was not formally observing or audio taping the group when they were switching from center to center, I did informally see the students jump up and down and talk to each other excitedly about getting to go and work with the puppets. Therefore, when this comment was made during the student interviews I was not surprised because I had seen how much the students looked forward to going to that center. Kate and Ingrid both specifically stated that they enjoyed acting out the parts with the puppets and completing the actual motions with the puppets. This helped me confirm my thought that the puppets increased their motivation and enjoyment of reading. When I questioned the students about their favorite part of using the puppets, they all commented on the fact that they enjoyed working with the reader’s theatre scripts and liked acting out the plays with the puppets. Amanda and Johnny also added that they liked working with their friends.

As shown in the student interviews, puppets had the added benefit of making reading a more enjoyable experience. Through the use of the puppets, the students were typically active participants in the reading process. The puppets helped increase

the students' motivation by giving them a safe and comfortable medium through which they could convey the events and emotions of their respective texts.

Child Interactions Through Puppetry

Fitting with Amanda and Johnny's comments about enjoying working with friends, I also noticed that using the puppets improved the student's teamwork skills. When the students started out at the center, they understood that everyone needed to take a part and a puppet. Before beginning work with a play, the group members made sure that everyone had a play and puppet to work with. Naturally, there were times when two students wanted the same puppet. For example, when working with the play about the birds flying south in the first week of the study, Nate wanted to be the green bird, but April had already chosen that puppet. When Nate became upset April said "Why don't we take turns, I'll use the red bird this time so you can use the green one, and we can just keep switching every time we start over." I was pleased to observe that this conflict, and others like it were quickly resolved. On more than one occasion I observed a student giving up a puppet he/she originally wanted to use in order to allow one of the other children to use that puppet. Just as April did in the previous example, I watched Bobby do the same thing in the third week when Nate wanted to be the Shoemaker, but Bobby had already chosen the puppet. Bobby simply handed the puppet to Nate and said "You can be the Shoemaker, I don't mind being an elf." I also watched the students trade off and take turns using the puppets in order to make sure everyone had a fair chance at working with the puppets, and that no one had any hurt feelings.

In addition, I saw where using the puppets encouraged the students to work together and follow each other's elaborations. For example, in the first week of the study when Amanda made her frog puppet say "ribbit ribbit" and start hopping up and down, initially she was the only group member completing this action. Upon watching her example, Kate and Ingrid started doing the same thing with their puppets. A similar example was seen in Bobby, Johnny, April, and Nate's group when they were working with the jungle adventure script in the third week of the study. Initially, Nate was the first student who had his puppet climb the trees to reflect what was happening in the script. However, after watching Nate, Johnny, Bobby, and April had their puppets follow his example and complete the same action. These examples show that in both cases the students were working together as a group, even in terms of their elaborations and how they used the puppets.

In addition to giving everyone a turn, I realized that by trading off puppets and parts, the students were gaining even more experience with working with different texts and therefore were able to utilize their literacy skills on a wider variety of texts. For example, on the third day of the first week of the study Amanda, Kate, and Ingrid switched their puppets and parts. In doing so, when the girls went to read the new parts they were able to practice reading for meaning and adding appropriate expression to their reading to support the text. There were also a few days of the study where members of the focus group were absent. On these days the students redistributed themselves evenly so that the groups were as close to the same size as possible and so that everyone had another friend to work with. For example, when

Kate and Amanda realized that Ingrid was absent, April stood up from her group and said “I’ll come join you guys so the groups are even. Then the boys can work as a group and the girls can work as a group.” They made this change entirely on their own and worked together to regroup themselves. None of the students argued over who would switch groups, but rather students volunteered to change over in order to make things as fair as possible.

As shown in the examples above, the use of puppets changed the ways the students worked with one another. Through working together in a group with the puppets, the students demonstrated good teamwork skills and showed they were capable of compromising. In addition, working with the puppets also showed how flexible the students could be when working with each other, making sure that groups were even and that everyone was happy working together. Working with the puppets also allowed the students to see how others used the puppets to mediate their meaning making, and they were able to build off of one another’s actions to gain more from the experience individually.

Summary

Overall, my analysis of the data showed that the puppets helped students construct and demonstrate their literal comprehension of the texts with which they were working. My analysis also revealed that through the use of the puppets, as well as their real world experiences, the students were able to elaborate on their texts through puppet actions. In addition, my analysis showed that the puppets helped the students focus specifically on the reading they were doing and make it smooth, with

appropriate pauses and expression being added to show what they interpreted the characters reactions to be. My data analysis also showed that the puppets helped the students work together as a cohesive group, not only in terms of how they interacted with one another personally, but also how they elaborated on the texts, using elaborations they saw from other group members that made sense with the text.

Chapter 5

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Summary and Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that students in a rural first grade classroom were able to construct and extend their meaning of texts through puppets. I was able to make this conclusion after conducting thorough analysis of the data that I collected over the course of the five weeks of this study. Data included field notes with reflections taken during live observations, audio tape recorded sessions accompanied by field notes, student interviews, student work samples of composed scripts, and retelling rubrics of the stories with which the students worked.

The findings of this study are consistent with the literature surrounding the use of play and specifically puppetry as instructional techniques that help students reach their zones of proximal development. As Vygotsky said, “In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior: in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102). As Vygotsky stated, through play children are capable of reaching beyond their age level learning expectations and can perform actions and learn material that otherwise would be deemed too difficult. As Rowe (1998) found in her study, children are able to reach beyond their literal understandings of a text through the use of a play item. This was something I saw the students doing in my own study when they used the puppets to convey not only the literal meaning of the texts they were working with, but also when they drew connections with other aspects of their lives and elaborated on their texts

through actions they carried out using their puppets. In addition, when the students composed their own scripts based off their trade books, they demonstrated their literal comprehension of the texts. However, they showed that by using the puppets they were able to extend beyond their literal understanding and were able to use the puppets to actually mediate their meaning construction. This was evident when the students extended their literal comprehension of the text and used the puppets to physically act out the plays and add appropriate embellishments, and action they were able to do because they were using the puppets.

Connecting to Vygotsky's views of zone of proximal development, Randy Bomer (2003) found through his research on students extending meaning through every day objects, that students were able to extend their learning and use the tools in non-conventional ways that showed that they understood more than would typically be considered age appropriate. This was something I found in my own study when the students used their puppets to extend the meaning of their texts. Ellen Appleby's (2005) study also demonstrated that children are capable of reaching and performing at a new zone of proximal development through the use of puppets. As demonstrated in her study, the students used puppets to understand a concept that was advanced for their age group. While the students in my study were not being asked to understand any advanced concepts, they did demonstrate advanced reading skills with the way they used all their reading skills and physically demonstrated their comprehension of the texts through movements carried out through the puppets. Peck and Virklers' (2006) study showed that using puppets had a positive effect on the students' learning

experience. This is something I myself observed as my students worked with puppets and that was reiterated in my students' interviews.

In answering my research questions, the first-grade students in my classroom responded positively when interacting with the puppets. I came to this conclusion based on the behaviors I observed as well as on the verbal responses I obtained during the student interviews. In addition, the audio taped sessions provided me with insight from the students' perspective about their feelings and involvement in the process as a whole. In several of the tape recorded sessions the students expressed their excitement through active participation including a great deal of effort on their part, especially when working with the readers theatre scripts. These findings coincided with the findings Peck and Virkler (2006) found in their study involving the use of puppetry. Peck and Virkler noted that the children were excited about the project and were highly involved with the entire process. I found the same to be true in my own study when I compared my observations to the results of my student interviews. When I conducted the interviews with the students I found that they all enjoyed the process and liked working with the puppets. This supported my previous observations and also matched what Peck and Virklers' study found.

In accordance with Peck and Virklers' (2006) findings, my students also demonstrated high involvement when interacting as a group. I noted on several occasions in my analysis that the students were highly involved with not only their own parts, but also with the parts for which their peers were responsible. As discussed in chapter 4, I noted on several occasions how the students corrected each others

miscues, and how when one student would have their puppet perform a certain action, that the others would mimic that move. These behaviors showed that the students had a high level of engagement with the texts they were working with and with incorporating their puppets into those texts, and are discussed in depth in the recommendations for future instructional purposes.

My analysis did show that on a couple of occasions the students were off task, particularly when they were working with the trade books. This off task behavior only occurred in one of the two groups of research participants, and on both occasions it occurred during a session when trade books were being used. Analysis of my observations and audio tapes of these sessions showed that on these two occasions, the students were concerned with other things that were going on in the classroom on that particular day, and not what they were supposed to be doing at their center. As previously stated, this only occurred in one group and on both occasions happened on days when trade books were being used. It did make me wonder if perhaps the use of puppetry was more productive when used with scripts as opposed to trade books, a point I will discuss in my considerations for future uses.

Paralleling the findings of Fisler (2003) and the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center puppetry project, my research also indicated that puppetry positively impacted the students' fluency. Fislers' study showed that the students who took part from the beginning to the end of the study showed a strong improvement in their reading speed. While the focus of my study was not fluency, I did discover this to be a surprise added benefit. As discussed in chapter 4, fluency in this case referred to the students'

expression, intonation, pausing, and lastly speed while orally reading the texts.

Analysis of my observations and audio taped sessions showed that through the repeated readings involved with this process, that the students added more expression, varied their pace appropriately, and paused in appropriate places while reading. This was also noted by three of the seven students during their interviews, and is a point of consideration I will discuss later in the instructional recommendations.

Limitations

This study had a few limitations that could have had an impact on the results and must be addressed. Although it was the purpose of this study, I was the only researcher taking part in this study and therefore allows for some limitations. For example, the students were able to watch me recording their work sessions every day and taking my own observation notes. While I do take notes on my students on a weekly basis while they are reading with me, I typically do not do it while they are at an independent reading center, and I never tape record them. Therefore, this needs to be recognized as a possible limiting factor. Also, since the students involved in the study were my own, it is possible that their participation and their answers to interview questions were all done in an attempt to please me. It is possible that the students did not want to disappoint me and were trying to generate the answers they thought I wanted to hear. This is something I will not be able to uncover the truth of because I was the only researcher involved in this study.

Another limitation to this study was the fact that it was completed over a short period of time, both in terms of the length of the study and the amount of time the

students had to work each day. The study itself only took place for five weeks, and during those five weeks the students only had twenty minutes each day to interact with the puppets. This was due to the fact that the study took place in a Reading First district and the school had the expectation that the children would rotate through three different centers for approximately every twenty minutes. Despite this fact, the students were given a limited amount of time to interact with the puppets which may have had an impact on what they felt they had time to do.

In addition, I would also consider another limitation of the study to be my survey questions. The reason I felt they were a limitation is because they proved to be too difficult for my students to answer. After asking the questions, I found myself rephrasing some of the questions because the students looked at me with blank stares sitting silently for several minutes, or they simply answered "I don't know." When either of these behaviors occurred I asked the students if they understood the question. In both situations they answered "No" and I proceeded to reword the questions, sticking as close as possible to the original question, but also trying to put them in terms the children would comprehend. In addition, as previously mentioned because I was the one conducting the interviews and they were knowingly being taped, it is possible that the students did not respond honestly because they were shy or worried about saying something that would upset me. Because of these limitations it is possible that the results of the survey were impacted.

Despite the limitations of this study, I have concluded that the students who were involved were engaged and motivated by the puppets, and that the puppets

helped them express their understanding of the text, as well as embellish on their understanding through the actual puppet manipulation.

Recommendations for the Classroom

The results of this study show that the students who participated were actively engaged and motivated by the puppets and that the puppets helped them express their understanding of the text as well as embellish on their understanding through manipulative movements of the puppets. Therefore as a teacher-researcher who researched my own choice of instructional techniques, I would use this information for future instructional purposes.

Prior to conducting this study, my students were demonstrating primarily literal comprehension of the texts they were working with and were being given only traditional instructional techniques from which to learn. I did scaffold and teach them extension skills such as inferencing and making connections, but they still relied heavily on their literal understanding of texts. After conducting my research project, as well as researching other work and seeing the findings of other studies such as the puppetry study conducted by Peck and Virkler (2006), and work by other researchers such as Rowe (1998), and Fislser (2003), I would begin by developing more play based instructional techniques that could be used in my classroom. The week after I concluded my study, I removed the puppets from the independent learning centers and replaced them with a book and worksheet activity. Upon arriving at the center only to find the puppets gone, the students started complaining and asking me if they could have them back. While I did not return them to the center, I did begin incorporating

the puppets into math lessons. Each day the children were asked to complete a worksheet consisting of three word problems. I encouraged the students to work in pairs and use puppets that I provided to act out the word problems. While this was not part of the initial study, it was another way I was able to transfer the use of puppetry into another subject area along with reading. This is one example of how I was able to use the findings of my research and apply them to future instruction.

In the up-coming school year I will use the results from this study to plan not only more play based reading centers, but also more play based activities in other subject areas, particularly math, grammar, and spelling. From the beginning of the school year I will start by observing what kinds of play my students take part in at play time, and see what from their own free play could be adapted to fit with instruction of curriculum. Following Vivian Paley's (2005) example, I will continue to encourage my children to use their free play, only I will aim it towards classroom curriculum. For example, in my current classroom I have observed my students on several occasions playing school with one another. Following with their own desire to use play, I encouraged the students to practice the math skills we had learned that day with one another. This is just one example of how I will incorporate the children's free play with academics. After all, as Vygotsky stated, "a child's greatest achievements are possible in play-achievements..." (1966, p. 13).

I will also incorporate puppetry into the process of writing. Reflecting on the ways that Paley (2005) used puppets to encourage her kindergarten students to write, and given my unexpected finding during this research that puppetry gave children the

freedom to express themselves through the puppets, I have also decided to incorporate puppetry into writing projects. After completing this project a student came to me one day complaining he didn't know what to write about. I responded by taking two puppets from the counter, giving one to the confused writer and keeping the other for myself. Upon putting the puppet on my hand, I struck up an imaginary conversation with the boys' puppet. After we finished the play scene, I suggested he use the puppets to help himself come up with ideas of what to write. Taking my suggestion, he returned to his seat with the puppets and began composing what turned into a three page long story. This is one example of how I will incorporate puppetry into my writing instruction.

In addition to using puppetry in other subjects I will continue to use it as an independent reading center, and as a whole class activity, focusing on using it specifically in conjunction with readers' theatre scripts. After completing this project I started doing more readers' theatre work with my whole class. Given how much the students taking part in the study enjoyed using puppetry, I decided to try having the whole class work with one large script and their own puppets made to depict the characters they were portraying. The whole class experience yielded the same results as the small group research project. As happened in Fislens' (2003) study, the students' fluency improved as a result of the repeated reading experience. Therefore, given the success of this strategy not only in my own study but also in the case of the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, I decided this would be one way I could implement puppetry into the up-coming school year.

In addition to using puppetry as an academic teaching tool, I also plan on using it as a social skills teaching tool in the up-coming school year. As Peck and Virklers' (2006) study and my own study showed, students worked together and were able to solve problems when working with puppets. After concluding my research, an argument broke out between two students in my classroom one day. When the two students ran up to me to tell on one another, I stopped them and handed each of them a puppet and explained that I wanted them to talk through the problem using their puppets. Initially, the students were taken aback and tried to launch into their explanations to me, but I stopped them and explained once again what I wanted them to do. Realizing they were not going to win, they started using the puppets to talk to one another and how they felt. Through the puppets, they were able to express themselves and work through their argument. This is another way I would like to continue to use puppets in my classroom room next year.

Besides using puppets as an instructional tool, I also plan on using them as an assessment tool in the upcoming school year. After conducting this research I learned how the puppets help the students mediate their meaning making process, and in turn provide me the teacher with a clear way of observing how much they understand about the texts with which they work. It also forced me as a teacher to look deeper into the actions the students were doing with the puppets in order to better understand their meaning making. Throughout this entire project I was able to observe what the students understood about their texts and as a result judge whether the text was appropriate for them to be working with or not. I was able to hear and see them

convey the emotions of the characters through their puppets by adding body movements. I was also able to see that they understood relationships between characters, such as conversations that were taking place because they showed these actions through the puppets. I think this was useful because it provided me another means through which to assess the students' comprehension without providing them with a pencil and paper assignment or assessment to see what they understood. I also thought it was useful because it forced me to look deeper, through a different lens at what the students were actually doing and how it reflected their understanding. Instead of just using traditional questioning the puppets were a developmentally appropriate and hands on approach to learning. Because of this finding, I plan to continue to use the puppets as an assessment tool in my classroom next year.

Recommendations for Future Research

Through my study, I was able to answer the question I set out with in the beginning which was an investigation into how puppetry might help mediate students meaning construction while reading. However, the results of this study have led me to wonder about other benefits and uses of puppetry that could be further explored, as well as wonder how this particular study would change if it were conducted in ability groups or at a different grade level.

In continuing with this study, I would like to see if the reading skills of the participants would have any kind of real impact on the results or not. For this study the participants in the group read at low, average, and gifted levels. Due to this mixed grouping I was unable to see if the students' reading abilities had any impact on how

they used the puppets or not. I would be interested to see if this study was conducted with a group of all low, average, or gifted students if the uses of puppets would vary from group to group, or if the findings would still be the same.

In addition to continuing this study with ability grouped participants, I would recommend conducting the same research I did for this study with an older age group such as fourth graders. Seeing the things that my first grade students did in this study made me wonder what the results would look like if the study was conducted with older children. Seeing how my own students teetered between the literal interpretation and uses of the puppets and the imaginative uses, I think it would be very interesting to see if older students relied only on literal uses, or if they still expanded into more imaginative uses.

One theme that emerged from this study and from Fislens' (2003) study that could be looked into further was the impact the use of puppetry had on the students' fluency while orally reading. This could include using a variety of different texts such as narrative and expository and seeing if the kind of text being used with the puppets had any impact on how the puppets did or did not help with fluency. It could also include looking closely at how puppets help with fluency specifically with readers' theatre.

Following with the findings of Peck and Virklers' (2006) study as well as this study, the theme of using puppetry to promote team work could also be further explored. As suggested by Peck and Virklers' study and by own findings it is clear that puppets allowed students to freely express themselves and their feelings. A study

of this nature could be done by focusing specifically problem solving and teamwork skills involving puppets as a means through which students could express their emotions.

Fitting with Shaughnessy's (1993) ideas of using different means of assessments for students, the idea of using puppets as an assessment tool is another concept that could further be explored. As Shaughnessy recommended, other assessment tools besides pencil and paper activities can provide the teacher with a clearer picture of what the students really understand. This idea could be explored by comparing the information gathered from observations of students using puppets to the results of written assessments based on the texts with which the students worked.

A final theme that could be explored further would be the use of puppets as a motivational tool for reading instruction. As this study suggested and Appleby's (2005) study suggested puppets motivate students to become more active participants in the learning process. In expanding on my own as well as Appleby's study, the use of puppets as a motivational tool for reading or any other classroom instruction for that matter, is a topic that could be explored further.

Based on my analysis, the use of puppetry during independent reading instruction helped the first grade students in a rural school district convey their literal comprehension of the texts they were working with, as well as extend their comprehension through elaborative actions involving the puppets provided.

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Comprehension Rubric

Very Good Comprehension 4	Adequate Comprehension 3	Some Comprehension 3	Very Little Comprehension 1
Tells most events in sequence or tells most key facts	Tells many events, in sequence for most part, or tells many key facts	Tells some events or key facts	Tells 1 or 2 key facts
Includes most important details and key language or vocabulary from text	Includes many important details and key language or vocabulary from text	Includes some important details from text	Includes few or no important details from text
Refers to all characters or topics by names	Refers to many characters or topics by name	Refers to 1 or 2 characters or topics by generic names	Refers to 1 or 2 characters or topics using pronouns
Responds with higher level thinking	Responds with literal interpretation	Responds with some misinterpretation	Responds with incorrect information
Provides insightful responses to teacher questions	Provides adequate responses to teacher questions	Provides response to teacher questions	Provides limited or not response to teacher questions

Appendix B

Student Pseudonym _____

Date _____

1. Before this class, when have you seen or used puppets?

2. What did you like or dislike about using puppets?

3. How did using puppets make you feel about reading?

4. What was your favorite part about using puppets?

5. What else would you like to do with the puppets?