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## THE PUPPET AS MEDIATING TOOL BETWEEN A CHILD AND ARTWORK

*Abstract:* The role, importance and application of the puppet in child's education is multiple. The puppet is mainly used as a toy, but also as a means of socialization and communication that encourages and develops linguistic, social and emotional competences in children. With its motivating and creative role, the puppet puts the child in the center of attention as well as in the context of play, thus enabling spontaneous and divergent learning. By applying action research in institutional preschool education, this paper considers the possibility of using a puppet as a mediating tool among children, teachers and artwork. The initial value of the research is the preservation of cultural heritage and national identity by applying puppetry in preschool education. In addition, the research aims at strengthening children's competencies through the implementation of activities that encourage children's creativity and to improve the professional competencies of educators as co-researchers and agents of change. The research sample consisted of preschool children (four age groups) and eight preschool teachers. The goal of the research was to introduce children to the artworks of our famous painters by using a *Puppet-artist*, which represents the starting point for interaction and active observation. The analysis of the results done by the research team made it possible to point out the great possibilities and importance of using the puppet in preserving the national identity and improving the quality of educational process.

*Keywords:* preschool children, puppet, artwork, national identity.

## INTRODUCTION

Artistic activities, as part of preschool education, play an important role in the overall development of a child. Arts education provides a unique way of expression, and helps children develop sensitivity, imagination, emotion and aesthetic sensitivity to the world around them. Although arts activities in preschool educa-

tion are mainly based on productive artistic expression, they should be approached through a comprehensive, holistic approach in which children will, through art, be able to learn about the cultural heritage of their own and other nations. Heritage becomes national treasure: a set of values that stands at the foundation of a nation and represents its identity and legitimacy over the goods it possesses. In this context, heritage is nothing more than an instrument of implementing national ideas (Popadić 2014: 98).

Through the reception of works of art, children learn and adopt different ways of expressing, presenting and understanding ideas, feelings, values, emotions and cultural beliefs (Gibson 2003: 112). This is why it is necessary to allow children to meet and interact with works of art at the earliest age in order to develop the ability to use their creative potential and enthusiasm. By developing art culture, general culture is also being developed with the objective of determining and understanding the sense of belonging to a nation characterised by specific culture and identity. Culture strongly supports children's education, fosters social values and develops versatile, creative and humane personalities. Without culture, the historical development of a nation and society cannot be understood.

Belonging to and preserving national identity is a child's social welfare and should be promoted and improved at early age. Developing a positive cultural and social identity and a sense of pride, embracing different communities, such as peer, family, local, national and global community, is a long-term goal of preschool education and is seen in the context of the well-being of children. By learning about the culture and art of its nation, the child will be able to see the world around him/her and expand his/her views, experience and knowledge of other cultures and artefacts (Breneselović, Krnjaja 2021: 14). Awareness of their own cultural values should be developed among children at an early age because it develops their spirituality. Arts education should include getting children acquainted with works of art, visiting galleries, museums and cultural monuments. Encouraging students to observe and react to a work of art or a museum artifact affects their cognitive, affective and psychomotor development. When children are encouraged to observe a work of art and respond to it based on their knowledge and experience, they bring their feelings, emotions and imagination, as well as intellect, into the process. Thus, they become active participants in individual learning, not just silent observers (Selaković 2012: 252). Cultural heritage and education are interlinked. On the one hand, there is culture with its heritage and treasures, and on the other hand there is a child who understands culture with his/her cognitive powers, accepts its values and creates the new ones (Kuščević 2015: 481). Bruner also points out the belief that culture shapes the mind of the individual. He points out that "the mind cannot exist outside culture" and that "the creation of meaning implies a situation encounter with the world in their respective cultural contexts in order to know 'what it is about'. It does not matter if there are 'private meanings'; it is important that meanings provide the basis for cultural exchange" (Bruner 2000: 19).

The development of cultural awareness is a competence that is fostered through children's games. Teachers have a special role in educating preschool children. They should find different ways to bring children closer to cultural heritage through creative expression and different artistic fields such as visual arts, music, literature, drama, dance and movement. The new preschool curriculum framework "Godine uzleta" pays particular attention to and equips the space to support aesthetic experience, while at the same time developing wonder in children (Breneselović, Krnjaja 2021: 15). As part of such settings and the insistence on playing, the puppet is a very important means of communication and a mediator for easy expression of emotion and experience in working with children.

## THE ROLE OF THE PUPPET AT THE PRESCHOOL AGE – THEORETICAL APPROACH

The importance and value of the puppet in children's education are the subject of various studies which confirm that play activities with the puppet can develop many abilities and competences in children. The possibility of using puppets in the educational process can be divided into three groups: puppet as a therapeutic agent, puppet as an incentive for creativity and puppet as an educational-didactic agent (Coffou 2004). The use of puppets in education is, in some countries, an official methodological practice, and the puppet also appears as a teaching tool in numerous research studies (Bernier, O'Hare 2005; Brėdikytė 2002; Majaron, Kroflin 2002; Majaron 2004; Kroflin 2011). These papers focus mainly on the puppet's visible and invisible components and how they influence interaction with children in a particular context. Visible components include the puppet's shape and color, movement and speech, while invisible components include associations, thoughts, feelings and intentions. The puppet evokes these invisible components in the child, mostly during interaction, but also after interaction, in the form of memories. Some studies (Korošec 2012) point out the need for puppets to become part of daily practice in education, especially in the context of learning through art, which includes the use of puppets.

Ida Hamre (Hamre 2004), a Danish researcher and one of the founders of the UNIMA<sup>1</sup>, highlights the influence of puppets on the formation of the child's personality on three levels: aesthetical, emotional and ethical, and at the same time points to the fact that playing with a puppet develops creative thinking in children. While the body and the construction of the puppet, in general,

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<sup>1</sup> UNIMA – Union Internationale de la Marionnette, a commission that deals with different ways of using puppets in education, development and therapy. It brings researchers and practitioners together, shares experiences and ideas, publishes books on the subject and organises various conferences.

are governed by technical rules, the content and purpose of the use of puppets in education are guided by didactic questions: *what, how, why* and *for whom* (Brown 2005; Hamre 2002, 2004). Therefore, the puppet can be used for different purposes and in different educational contexts, with the aim of more successful learning and education. The puppet's ability to connect the "real world" and possible fictional worlds means that what happens in front of the viewer at a certain point is and is not real – the puppet is not really alive, but what it does and says at a certain moment is real. This bridging between what is, what is not and what could be illustrates and represents the *duality of the puppet*; the basic characteristic and behaviour of the actor's puppet. The viewer is "unwillingly" drawn into various events that can touch and engage him.

The Lithuanian artist Milda Brėdikytė (Brėdikytė 2002) sees the dialogical puppet game as an important factor in stimulating children's self-expression and creativity in the area of children's verbal creativity. The method she proposes coincides with contemporary trends in sociological research, which, in order for an individual to focus on the child's identity and self-confidence, returns to narrative and dialogue as a means of revealing his/her problems. Children, however, are not always able to express their feelings and sensations in words, and the symbolic game with the puppet offers a good solution to the problem: it allows them to communicate with the environment indirectly and non-verbally.

Hicela Ivon (Ivon 2004) considers the puppet an excellent tool for constructing children's psychosocial knowledge and developing their psychosocial abilities. She points out that "the interactive actions that children use to construct coherent plays yield convincing results in terms of the design role of these joint imaginative games: Children negotiate, consider each other's opinions, explain their intentions, argue and justify their actions. This interpersonal coordination plays an important role in the child's overall mental development" (Ivon 2004: 9).

### A DISPLAY OF ACTION RESEARCH: A PUPPET – AN ARTIST IN THE KINDERGARTEN

According to the characteristics of the action research, the starting value of this research is the preservation of cultural heritage and national identity through the application of puppetry in preschool education. In addition, the aim of this research is to strengthen children's competences through the implementation of activities that stimulate children's creativity and improve the professional competences of preschool teachers as co-researchers and agents of change. The goal is to introduce children to the artworks of the greatest Serbian painters and the greats of

Serbian culture from the late 19th and early 20th centuries through *Puppet-artists*. The goal was operationalized through four research questions:

1. Can a puppet mediate between a child, an artist and a work of art?
2. Can dramatic and playful approaches contribute to the adoption of a people's cultural characteristics and realisation of cultural identity?
3. Does the use of puppets and structured activities in pre-school education nurture cultural heritage and encourage the development of a sense of national belonging among children?
4. Does the participation of teachers in the action research improve their professional competences?

A spiral model of active research has been applied, which includes the planning and preparation phase of active research, the action phase, the activity monitoring phase and the reflection phase (Kemmis, Wilkinson 1998, according to: Slunsky 2011). All stages of research are intertwined and cyclically implemented.

#### PLANNING AND PREPARING AN ACTION STUDY

We found the initial idea for our research in the work of a group of Croatian authors (Kardum, Kušević, Brajčić 2020). In fact, the aim of this research was to examine the preference of children of a younger school age for the works of art of the 20th century. One group of subjects worked with the help of a puppet. The results showed that the puppet encouraged students who had interacted with it to perceive the visual language in the works of art, but it also triggered them to communicate, to decipher artistic symbols and to practice introspection. It also gave them an insight into their personal and other people's emotions and opened the door to the phenomenon of the aesthetic experience of the 20th century art. The puppet created a positive atmosphere within the classroom, where they could discuss their feelings, moods and thoughts. The puppets were used as a means of communication, as a medium to motivate students to be spontaneous and to learn about art, making it clear that there were no wrong answers and that their observations were equally valid (Kardum, Kušević, Brajčić 2020: 5). Their research suggested that, with the help of the puppet, the multi-layered character and complexity of artistic works can be brought closer to the students, and that working with the puppet can even encourage a change in the preference of children in relation to the work of art.

For the purposes of the present research, puppets representing Serbian artists from the late 19th and early 20th centuries – Uroš Predić, Nadežda Petrović and Sava Šumanović – were designed. The *Puppet-artist* had all the insignia of these artists. The puppets were designed by pre-school students with the coordination of teachers and researchers. This way, the students of the Faculty of Education in Užice were also included, in accordance with the requirements and starting points of the new basics of the programme “Godine uzleta”. Future preschool

teachers have sought to create a specific puppet character with the characteristics that these artists had, such as moustache, glasses or hair in a bun. In the presentation of artists by way of puppets, the richness provided by the artistic and applied arts was respected. On the one hand, the teachers had to take care of the puppet's own art and their creation, and on the other, they had to come up with short dramatic texts, stories, anecdotes from the life of artists suitable for children of preschool age, which points to the fact that the theatre puppet represents a synthesis of the dramatic and artistic arts (Milovanović 2020). In addition to making puppets, the preparation phase involved the selection of a research sample and the preparation of preschool teachers who played a co-researcher role.

The survey was conducted from May to November 2022. The impetus for the realization of this project came from conversations with children and their daily activities. After a visit to an exhibition of paintings by the 20th-century academics which was donated to the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts art collection at the City Gallery of Užice, titled "In Large Format", children of preschool age became interested in the profession of a painter. Based on the children's interests and the fact that a work of art could be brought closer to children, the preschool teachers considered that the puppet, as an important creative method of working with children, would be a good mediating tool among the artist, the work of art and the educator. The project "Puppet-artist in the kindergarten" was created.

The main goal of this project with the *Puppet-artist* was to introduce the children to the most important works by Uroš Predić.<sup>2</sup> This artist was chosen because of his role in the Serbian cultural, artistic and social life in the late 19th and the first half of the 20th century, and also because he is remembered as one of the greatest Serbian painters, benefactors and cultural representatives – a regift of the highest values nurtured by Matica Srpska.<sup>3</sup> The intention was to encourage their creativity and develop emotions for preserving their traditions and national identity. By examining and looking at the images, listening to various stories and anecdotes by the Uncle Uroš's puppet, the children gradually became acquainted with Predić, realising the importance of this great Serbian artist.

The preschool teachers first went through a phase of preparation in gathering information about the artist himself and his creation. They were able to visit the retrospective exhibition of Uroš Predić at the Gallery of Matica Srpska in Novi Sad, titled "A Life Dedicated to Beauty and Art" (October 2022 – January 2023) online and to find numerous monographs, publications, catalogues and attend educational workshops for children dedicated to this painter. Then they made a puppet, trying to make it resemble Uroš Predić, and then they started to meet and present

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<sup>2</sup> Here we have chosen to describe a project for an artist, when in fact the story and the choice apply to every artist envisioned in the research.

<sup>3</sup> Matica srpska is the oldest Serbian language independent, non-profit, non-governmental and cultural-scientific Serbian national institution. It was founded on June 1, 1826, in today's Budapest and moved to Novi Sad in 1864. It is the oldest „matica” in the world.

this great artist to the children. This phase directly encouraged the development of professional competences of teachers, especially in the field of art and drama.

### ACTION PHASE

After the planning and preparation phase, we started to introduce actions into the existing educational practice. During the creation and implementation of the activity, the content, which was intended to introduce the children to the works of art of our important painters – Uroš Predić, Nadežda Petrović and Sava Šumanović – by means of a puppet as the starting point for interaction and active observation, was carefully chosen. The activities were created by researchers, but they were subject to change. Preschool teachers have been given the freedom to supplement the activity and to adapt it to the age of the children and the needs of the group in which the activity takes place because it is inherent in the action research that “all activities are carried out on the basis of a common agreement. The process of research (action) itself involves the constant harmonisation of activities undertaken in all segments, the modification of imagined changes, the incorporation of individual experience” (Bandur, Potkonjak 2004: 131).

In play activities with the *Puppet-artist*, the way in which activities were carried out with children of preschool age should be particularly highlighted. The methods were both dialogue and monologue, and at the same time motivational in the free research and creation process. Preschool teacher played a special role in the whole process because they became researchers, mediators and authentic partners between the children and the puppet-artist who follow the interests of the children. Through the stimulating climate created by the puppet-drama games, the teachers had the freedom to organise, expand and change the art and other activities of the child in the kindergarten. In the puppet-drama games, the preschool teacher was a guide through the artistic heritage and creation of artists, and the children were given the opportunity to learn, explore, think and draw conclusions through the game and build a positive attitude towards the culture of their nation and the artistic value of the creation of Uroš Predić, Nadežda Petrović and Sava Šumanović.

### TRACKING PHASE

This was followed by the tracking phase as an integral part of any action research that has the function of determining the flow and effects of the action. The activities carried out have been documented. For each of the planned activities, assessment criteria for the teachers have been established. During and after the implementation of activities based on the observation of children, teachers entered data on the effects of the activities in specially designed checklists. In addition to the criteria-based evaluation, they had the opportunity of making additional



observations, which were recorded in the form of notes and special notes/journals. The monitoring of activities gave teachers an insight into the effects of project implementation and a critical insight into their own experience.

## REFLECTION PHASE

At the level of the overall action research, the reflections were produced at several levels and in all stages of project implementation: the planning and preparation of the project was carried out on the basis of reflections of existing pedagogical practice and the experience of practitioners in the integration of artistic and dramatic activities; the self-reflection of preschool teachers based on the observation of children in project activities and the reflection and self-reflection of researchers.

Shortly before the plan of carrying out the action research was drawn up, the researcher conducted individual interviews with teachers who worked with preschool children. In the course of the interview, the teachers presented their assessments and experiences of the use of the project approach in educational work, the factors related to the context of the research, as well as the specificities of the educational groups in which the activities are planned. The data obtained was used to lay the foundation for the research and to draw up the project plan. In addition to monitoring activities, preschool teachers were encouraged to have continuous reflection and self-reflection, because the research was also aimed at strengthening their professional competences.

The implementation and content of the activities took place according to the specific plan that the teachers and children created together. Initial activities in the form of plays and drama with the puppet were started by preschool teachers, but during the realisation of the activities, the children were involved in creating stories and questions for the artist. They could make themselves into puppets and imagine what it would be like to meet the artist, or what they would ask him. This research showed that there were many creative possibilities, from developing communication skills to cultivating tradition and preserving cultural heritage.

The activities that were carried out are: Let me introduce myself – I am Uroš Predić – the painter; My family; The children in my paintings (*Sulking girl*, *A girl with the puppet* and *The portrait of Anica Simić*, *A boy in front of the window*, *An orphan at mother's grave*). Each activity is devoted to one painting or portrait; Uroš Predić and Jovan Jovanović Zmaj – what connects them – an illustration of the nursery rhyme; An invitation to Uroš's and children's exhibition (where children's works and reproductions of Uroš's paintings are exhibited).



## REFLECTION ON THE ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN

Apart from the fact that the research was intended to bring the creation of Uroš Predić closer to the children through a puppet, to point out the existence of paintings as an example of the artistic heritage of a nation and to teach through the creation of artists that they belong to a nation, the children had the opportunity to express themselves after each activity with the puppet. In doing so, the participants did something worthwhile, they adopted certain knowledge and had a sense of satisfaction, while doing so in a non-standard and playful way. The children's artworks that have been produced during the project are significant creative products.

Also, the activities were intended to highlight the importance of the family as the greatest value that every human being has. The family has a very strong influence on a growing child. They can influence the development of their attitudes, beliefs, abilities, habits and personality traits. The family is important as a support in the upbringing and education of each child, and all of this is shown through the artistic works of an artist. This indicates a sense of belonging and safety a child should have, and then belonging to a nation that has its own culture, art and tradition. At the end of the project, an exhibition of children's works was planned as a form of (self-)evaluation where parents and the local community were able to see the works created during the project "Puppet-artist in the kindergarten".

**PRESCHOOL TEACHER'S REFLECTION** (preschool group, "Bambi" kindergarten): During my conversations with the children, I've noticed that they were extremely motivated and eager to talk to the Uroš-puppet about their experiences related to the family and works of art which were actively observed with the help of teachers' questions. The children first looked at the work, saw what the picture showed, included imagination when it came to imagining something about the lectures in the pictures, and finally said how they had experienced the picture. We were able to trigger emotions and feelings towards the portraits of the children. Through activities, the children became attached to the Uroš-puppet and the puppet became an integral part of other activities related to speech development, music, tradition, and physical activity. For example, when reciting the poems by Jovan Jovanović Zmaj, Uroš-puppet is there because Uroš Predić was his contemporary and his friend. When songs are sung, the Uroš-puppet also leads them because he was a contemporary of Stevan Mokranjac and there were interesting activities and connections with the music of our people. Uroš's drawings of children playing, sledging, ice skating (the drawing of Tocilanja) were also an inspiration for children to learn games now and then.

**PRESCHOOL TEACHER'S REFLECTION** (preschool group, "Poletarac" kindergarten): At the end of every activity, the children would always write or draw their own evaluation and share it with us and the parents, and then put their own work on the board. Observing them, talking to them, their involvement, engagement, curiosity led us to conclude that they liked it, that they were looking forward to the next meeting with our new friend – Puppet – the artist. When they went home, we noticed that almost all the children took their parents to the board, to show them their work and explain who they had painted. For us and the children, these were

new challenges, excitement and joy in artistic creation and learning something new through the eyes of the artist.

## CONCLUSION

From an insight into all the activities carried out, the monitoring of the flow and the effects of their implementation, as well as the reflection and self-reflection of the teachers, it can be concluded that the implementation of the project “Puppet-artist in kindergarten” has had a positive effect on the preservation of cultural heritage and the development of a sense of national identity among children. For children, the work with the puppet was interesting, and the teachers gave them a very pleasant, relaxed and stimulating atmosphere because the children expressed themselves with joy and free verbal, artistic and creative expression. The emphasis was on developing imagination and stimulating communication and free expression of personal impression about the painting, so that their spontaneous reactions to the puppet talking about itself and asking questions about the paintings of Uroš Predić were precious. Children asking questions was a sign that communication had been successfully established, that it was free and fearless. In addition, the implementation of activities has also had a positive impact on the teachers who saw the well-being of children and themselves in this project in terms of professional improvement, which will also have an impact on improving the quality of educational practice.

Research has shown that this kind of artistic activity, using the puppet as a mediating tool between artists, art and children, has contributed to preschool children's identifying with the artist and to a better understanding of his art. Getting to know the art with the help of the puppet can be seen in the context of a different and creative methodological approach in the project planning in the preschool institution because the puppet, thanks to its ability to communicate through metaphors, has made it possible to establish mutual cooperation between children and preschool teachers, i.e., adults.

Through the experience of learning and establishing communication with the puppet, the children felt free to express themselves, to dream and to imagine some other, distant time. They were given the opportunity to be curious and motivated to learn through play and adopt new content from the area of national historical and cultural heritage. This kind of work wiped out the walls between adults and children, between the enclosed kindergarten area and life. At the same time, the puppet was someone who gave and received information confirming its *duality*, and all that in order for children to accept the national artistic and cultural heritage.

Each artistic activity contained clear and concrete requirements that guide one's own engagement and the creation of personal experience. The children, with the help of the puppet and the establishment of communication with it, have been

helped to learn how to meet an artist, how to observe his creativity, to know the art language, and to perceive the artistic elements. Each method and approach was flexible enough to accommodate the different individual characteristics of the child observing the work of art. Finally, the symbolic game with puppets has created an atmosphere of relaxation, granting a non-verbal communication to children and independent creation, through which their creativity is nurtured and stimulated.

The present research confirmed the puppet as a powerful mediating tool in upbringing and education in the field of art culture and artistic heritage. Apart from the mentioned research (Kardum, Kuščević and Brajčić 2020), we have not yet come across the kind of art education that uses a puppet in its approach to art. So, the present research could be a stimulus for some future research with a similar goal. The puppet should certainly find its place not only in projects related to art activities in preschool institutions, but also in primary school and contemporary teaching of art culture to children of different age groups.

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## ЛУТКА КАО ПОСРЕДНИК ИЗМЕЂУ ДЕТЕТА И УМЕТНИЧКОГ ДЕЛА

*Айспиракџи:* Улога, значај и примена лутке у васпитању и образовању детета је вишеструка. Лутка се углавном користи као играчка, али и као средство социјализације и комуникације која подстиче и развија језичке, социјалне и емоционалне компетенције код деце. Својим мотивишућим и креативним деловањем лутка ставља дете у центар пажње и игровни контекст, омогућавајући тиме спонтано и дивергентно учење. Применом акционог истраживања у институционалном предшколском васпитању, овај рад разматра могућност примене лутке као посредника између детета, васпитача и уметничког дела. Полазна вредност истраживања је очување културне баштине и националног идентитета применом луткарства у предшколском васпитању и образовању. Поред тога, намера овог истраживања је јачање дечјих компетенција кроз реализацију активности које подстичу дечје стваралаштво и побољшање професионалних компетенција васпитача као суистраживача и носиоца промена. Узорак истраживања чинила су деца предшколског узраста (четири васпитне групе), као и осам васпитача. Циљ је био да посредством *Лутке-уметника*, која представља полазну основу за интеракцију и активно посматрање, упознамо децу са уметничким делима наших познатих сликара. Анализа резултата истраживачког тима омогућила је да се укаже на велике могућности и значај употребе лутке у очувању националног идентитета и побољшању квалитета васпитно образовног процеса.

*Кључне речи:* деца предшколског узраста, лутка, уметничко дело, национални идентитет.