

# The Valuable of Puppetry for Children with Special Needs

Loy Chee Luen

Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia

Corresponding Author Email: [loy.cl@fpm.upsi.edu.my](mailto:loy.cl@fpm.upsi.edu.my)

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## Abstract

This study explores the use of puppetry as a valuable tool for supporting the development of children with special needs. The importance of this study lies in its dedicated focus on the pivotal role that puppetry plays in positively influencing the well-being and development. As an innovative and transformative tool, puppetry is examined for its profound impact on crucial aspects such as emotional expression, communication, and cognitive development. This study addresses the challenge of a limited understanding regarding how puppetry influences the development of children with special needs. The lack of comprehensive research impedes the development of evidence-based strategies to enhance their overall well-being and learning experiences. The purpose of this research is to identify the value of puppetry for children with special needs who experience various problems, difficulties, special abilities, and talents. The methodology employed in this study involved a qualitative approach, utilizing in-depth interviews to gather information. The research respondents consisted of nine respondents, two of whom were special needs education teachers; three special needs caregivers; two special needs education centre administrators; and two parents of children with special needs. Data from the research were analysed based on a thematic basis. The major findings of the research highlight the positive impact of initiated puppetry on children with various disabilities. Children with intellectual and developmental disabilities demonstrated improved learning skills, attitude, behavior, and social skills through the creation and manipulation of puppets. Those with speech and language impairment benefited by enhancing vocabulary, active listening skills, and sound discrimination. Children with physical disabilities engaged in puppetry activities tailored to their body abilities. For children with deafness or hearing impairment, sensory-rich and colorful puppetry experiences were explored. The visually impaired and partially sighted children experimented with puppet movements accompanied by music. Children with psychiatric disabilities found enjoyment and relaxation through mindfulness and meditation with puppets. Lastly, talented and gifted children expressed their creativity by crafting stories, puppets, and shows. Proposed further research should focus on integrating puppetry activities into special education settings. This approach aims to enhance the knowledge and skills of children with special needs, foster positive attitude and behavior changes, and uncover their unique talents.

**Keywords:** Puppetry, Children, Special Needs

## Introduction

Puppetry as a medium of therapy addresses the need for effective and engaging methods of relieving stress and pain, as well as motivating and teaching individuals, particularly children with special needs. Traditional methods may not always be effective, and individuals may require more creative and interactive approaches to engage with learning and communication. Puppetry offers a unique and versatile solution to this problem, providing a safe and non-threatening space for self-expression, as well as opportunities for increased engagement and motivation. By using puppetry as a medium of therapy and learning, individuals can experience a more effective and fulfilling path towards personal growth and development.

Puppetry is one of the appropriate therapy, teaching, and learning mediums for children with special needs. Puppetry conveys knowledge, skills, and *experience* to *relieve*. The use of puppets can evoke motivation, interest, and excitement, create communication, increase engagement and change attitudes. Intervention programs that integrate puppetry can motivate children with special needs to learn and enhance their cognitive, emotional, and social development. The educator's teaching becomes clear, engaging, and interactive, and creates close personal relationships with children. Educators need to be equipped with the attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary to ensure children's active involvement in puppetry activities. Educators need to implement creative arts activities such as puppetry activities for inclusive training for children with special needs (Remer & Tzuriel, 2015; Karaolis, 2021; Chee Luen, 2021).

Children with special needs in terms of intellectual and developmental disability, speech and language, physical disability, deafness, and hearing impairment, visually impaired and partially sighted, psychiatric disability or mental impairment, talented and gifted have the same right to education and should be given a decent education quality to enable them to engage in society. Various parties in Malaysia such as the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, Non-Governmental Organizations, families, and communities, are working to update special education policies and practices for children with special needs to improve the quality of education specifically to shape their attitudes, behaviours, development, and skills (Shadiya et al., 2016; Legal Research Board, 2019; Fikri & Ezan, 2020). Children with special needs if given the opportunity, can overcome disabilities and barriers and develop their talents to take their rightful place in society and enjoy the well-being of life. The learning environment for them should be friendly, take into account the abilities of children, and protect their health and safety (WHO, 2011; UNICEF, 2013; UNESCO, 2020; Safani et al., 2016; Merajul et al., 2018). Children with special needs need to be placed in a conducive and enjoyable learning environment and given different learning approaches and mediums to improve academic achievement and better behaviour.

Puppetry can be embedded in the creativity and aesthetic components consisting of music, drama, and visual arts in the Special Education National Preschool Standard Curriculum. Educators can teach music, songs, and singing using puppets, use puppets for role play and make simple puppets such as applying the skills of colouring, cutting, and making puppets. In addition to the components of physical and aesthetic development, puppet activities can be integrated into the components of communication, humanity, spirituality, attitudes, and values, science, and technology (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017).

Despite the recognized educational value of puppets in the curriculum for children with special needs, various challenges persist, encompassing the readiness of educators, children, parents, and guardians. This study particularly addresses the challenge of a limited understanding of how puppetry influences the development of children with special needs. The lack of comprehensive research hampers the formulation of evidence-based strategies to enhance their overall well-being and learning experiences. Consequently, this research identifies the values of puppetry to support the development, skills, and knowledge, alleviating the stress experienced by children with special needs.

### **Literature Review**

Previous studies have shown that puppetry can help improve the knowledge, skills, and learning experience of children with special needs in therapy, and reduce stress and pain, playing, teaching, and learning sessions.

Anahita et al (2018) stated that children with intellectual disabilities have critical problems regarding learning skills, behaviour, and social skills. In the process of puppet play therapy, they try to mimic puppet behaviour, interact and collaborate in groups. The results of this research show that puppetry activities have a positive effect on the behaviour and social skills of children with intellectual disabilities. Puppetry activities guide children with intellectual disabilities to improve eccentric habits, antisocial behaviours, psychological disorders, rebellious behaviours, and violent behaviour due to neglect and stress. Puppetry activities have an important role in motivating them to communicate, and increasing the confidence and trust of other children. Puppet shows train children's behaviour and children's learning interest. The research of Aminimanesh et al (2019) was conducted to compare the effectiveness of puppet shows and storytelling methods for children in preschool. The findings of the research show that puppet show methods are more effective in improving children's behaviour problems. Puppet shows have a positive effect on children's behaviour and attitude.

Puppetry as a therapeutic tool for children with Autism. Trimmingham (2010) stated that Autism Children suffer from neurological disabilities that cause language, speech, and behavioural disorders. Puppetry is an effective object to help language development and train behaviour. Puppetry is a therapeutic tool that is safe to aid the learning of Autism children. Learning activities that use puppetry can be applied to the components of art and creativity as well as morality and spirituality. Children get to know global knowledge through the information and facts presented by the puppet shows as well as their more creative thinking. Involving children with ADHD in puppetry learning activities. The research of Pegah et al (2017) aimed to identify the effects of puppetry therapy on ADHD children with the hyperactive disorder and attention deficit in learning. They are unable to focus on one object and learning activity for a long period. The findings of the research show that puppetry therapy can reduce children's aggressive behaviour and emotions. Their attention span can be extended to optimize their learning. The research of Shalani and Azadimanesh (2016) stated that neuro-developmental disorders of ADHD children lead to problems in learning and social skills. They feel isolated, not accepted by others, and have difficulty forming relationships and friendships with others. The purpose of this puppetry therapy is implemented to improve the social skills of ADHD children. After the puppetry therapy treatment session, it was found that there was a significant improvement in the social skills of ADHD children. They can form better relationships and friendships than ever before.

Puppets promote speech and language in active, fun, motivating, and interesting learning. Vina and Andrianty (2018) stated that children with special needs face difficulties in learning the English language. This research uses puppetry to increase interest, effort, and an easy way to learn the language. It is found that children's vocabulary, speaking skills, listening, reading, writing, and children's interest in learning the language with puppets can be improved. Puppets encourage active learning. In terms of attitudes and behaviours children appear to be more responsive in the learning process using puppets. They dared to ask some questions and give opinions on the lesson. Puppets bring fun learning. They better understand and enjoy learning activities with the use of puppets. Puppets as a teaching medium help children easily understand the content of the lesson and learning becomes fun. Puppets can motivate and inspire children in learning. Children were motivated very enthusiastically in language lessons using puppets. They try to memorize, spell words and express their answers and opinions with confidence. Engage children to learn. With the use of puppets, children are interested in learning the language. They use the English language to communicate and are interested in spelling, pronouncing, and memorizing words. By using puppet media, children's interest in learning a language has been enhanced.

Puppetry trains children with physical disabilities. Purcell-Gates and Fisher's (2017) writing on puppeteers with disabled bodies manipulating and making puppet shows. The purpose of this research is to change the perception of outsiders about the abilities of people with disabled bodies and prove that puppets are a potential tool to implement various methods of intervention in providing meaningful life experiences to puppeteers with disabled bodies. This research found that puppeteers with disabled bodies can also display certain movements by using their respective bodies. They explore body movement abilities and discover alternative ways to move and manipulate puppets in their performance spaces and surrounding spaces. Puppetry guided children with deafness and hearing impairment through performances. The research of Sakai et al (2016) designed puppet shows for hearing-impaired children. The purpose of this research was to guide children with hearing impairment to collaborate in producing puppet shows. Their listening skills have been improved. They can interact and learn more effectively and understand the characters, storyline, and solve body movement problems in the show.

Puppetry trains and investigated children with visually impaired and partially sighted. Reimer et al (2008) used puppets as one of the methods to investigate movement aimed at visually impaired children. All children began with a training session to create balance and move the puppet to the target location. They learn to handle objects such as puppets. They experimented with the puppet's movements, made an estimate of the distance between the puppets, and felt the puppet's movements with aimed movements. This research developed basic movement training, position, and spatial-visual skills in puppet shows.

Puppetry helps children with a psychiatric disability or mental impairment to relieve stress and pain. Pitre et al (2009) researched the effects of the puppet show on children with mental illness. Children in this group have stigmatizing attitudes. They have mental, emotional, or psychological disorders. They experience panic, phobia, stress, depression, and personality problems such as antisocial resulting in learning disabilities. The puppet show is used in diagnosis in children's mental health services. They were treated with puppet shows depicting individuals with schizophrenia, depression, and dementia. They were observed and measured based on the scale of mental illness. It was found that puppet shows can reduce children's mental problems for aspects of separatism, restrictiveness, and stigmatization. Therefore, puppet shows should be considered therapy for children with mental problems.

Puppetry guides children with talent and giftedness. Neihart and Teo (2013) research addresses the needs of gifted individuals. Researchers suggested that talented children should participate in art programs such as puppetry, drama, music, and visual art. They need to get appropriate and quality art education because art is a global trend in the future. In addition, arts programs can also be integrated into the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). The art pedagogy used involves experimentation, expression, engagement, discovery, and an interdisciplinary approach to training talented and gifted children in the field of art. It is hoped that they have leadership qualities, excellent character, mastery of intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, critical thinking skills, creativity, and vision, and have an outstanding world-class performance.

Based on a review of previous studies, it can be concluded that puppetry is a form of therapy that can relieve stress and pain by providing a creative outlet for expression. Playing, teaching, and learning with puppets can motivate individuals and increase interest in various subjects. Puppetry can also create a platform for communication, increase engagement, and change the attitudes of children with special needs. This medium allows for a safe and non-threatening space for individuals to explore their emotions and experiences, allowing for increased self-awareness and a deeper understanding of oneself and others. Overall, puppetry is a versatile and effective tool for personal growth and development.

### **Purpose of Research**

The purpose of this research is to investigate the potential benefits of using puppetry as a therapeutic tool for children who have special needs and experience a range of challenges, including developmental delays, communication difficulties, behavioral issues, and physical disabilities. Additionally, the study aims to explore how puppetry can support and enhance the unique abilities and talents of these children.

### **Methodology**

This research applied a qualitative method in nature using in-depth interviews. The research respondents consisted of nine respondents. Respondent A (RST1) was a 33-year-old male special need education teacher; Respondent B (RST2) was a 42-year-old female special need education teacher; Respondent C (RSC1) was a 30-year-old male special needs caregiver; Respondent D (RSC2) was a 43-year-old female special needs caregiver; Respondent E (RSC3) was a 54-year-old female special needs caregiver; Respondent F (RSA3) was a 45-year-old male special need education centre administrator; Respondent G (RSA4) was a 52-year-old female special need education centre administrator; Respondent H (RP5) was a 40-year-old female parent of children with special needs; Respondent I (RP6) was a 38-year-old female parent of children with special needs. Research data were analyzed based on a theme to avoid repetition in the discussion of research data on the value of puppetry for children with special needs. To convey the theme, the researcher ensures that the theme presented can achieve the objectives and is relevant to the scope of the research. To adhere to the research ethics, the special needs education teacher, special needs education administrator and parents of children with special needs respondents' actual names were kept confidential.

### **Finding**

The finding of the research on the value of puppetry for children with special needs is presented and discussed in this section. Through interviews with nine respondents, themes obtained about the value of puppetry include (i) Puppetry helps the growth, development,



and behaviour of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities; (ii) Puppetry improves the language skills of children with speech and language impaired; (iii) Puppetry trains the psychomotor skills of children with a physical disability; (iv) Puppetry improves the hearing skills of children with deafness and hearing impairment; (v) Puppetry provides hearing and the sense of *touch* experience to children with visually impaired and partially sighted; (vi) Puppetry conveys mindfulness and meditation to children with a psychiatric disability or mental impairment, and (vii) Puppetry trains the intellectual ability and function of talented and gifted children.

(i) Puppetry helps the growth, development, and behaviour of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities

Children with intellectual disabilities have critical problems regarding learning, behavioural and social skills. Puppetry activities for them include puppet-making activities, and manipulating puppets to develop motor skills, communication, social, emotional, behavioural, self-esteem, and interest in learning. Children love to imitate the character and behaviour of puppets. Puppet activities encourage them to interact and collaborate in groups, increasing confidence and trust in other children. Interview data from respondents are listed as follows

*Children show interest in puppets... make puppets...play with puppets... they move puppets, helps their motor skills... puppet support children's social, emotional and communication skills... they show good behavioural....They love the puppet character and behaviour of puppets in the show. (RST1) Children work together with other's children, talk and play puppets... children have the confidence to talk... they share puppets with other children. (RST2)*

Autism children have language, speech, and behaviour disorders. Puppet as a therapeutic tool helps their language and behaviour skills. Educators conduct puppet activities by guiding children to make puppets and puppet shows. At home, parents or guardians can play together with the children using puppets. Interview data from respondents are listed as follows:

*I give him a stick puppet...I gain his attention... I encourage him... he shows a good response... makes dialog... using a puppet to sing. (RSC2). He plays puppets under the table while I work at home... he talks about himself to puppets...he wants to play puppets with me. (RP5)*

Children with ADHD suffer from hyperactive disorder, lack of attention, and inability to concentrate on one object in the learning process. Playing with puppets can reduce their aggressive behaviour and emotions. Puppets train their social skills. They can make friends with other children. Interview data from respondents are listed as follows:

*Their concentration is short ... don't pay attention. They often make the same mistake...they did not follow the instructions...I tell a story using a puppet. They listen to my story for a while and run away. (RSC2)*

(ii) Puppetry improves the language skills of children with speech and language impaired  
Children with speech and language impairments join puppet activities to build vocabulary. Puppets train active listening skills and voice discrimination. Puppets bring fun and interest in learning. Puppets also encourage active learning. Attitudes and behaviours children appear to be more responsive in the learning process using puppets. Interview data from respondents are listed as follows:

*Puppets can motivate and inspire children in learning... building vocabulary, listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Children are very enthusiastically motivated in lessons using puppets. They ask some questions... give opinions on the lesson. (RST2) After puppet activities. They try to memorize...spell words...answers question...talk opinions with*

*confidence. They use puppets to communicate... they are interested in spelling, pronouncing, and memorizing words. (RST1)*

(iii) Puppetry trains the psychomotor skills of children with a physical disability

Children with physical disabilities are encouraged to play with puppets in wheelchairs. Use puppets based on their body's ability to promote psychomotor skills. They play certain movements using the body parts. They seek to explore body movement abilities and find alternative ways to move and manipulate puppets. Interview data from respondents are listed as follows:

*Ah Boy has a leg deformity. He is sitting in a wheelchair...he can play puppets in the wheelchair. When playing, he gains a more active experience with the finger, hand, and arms movement... he can interact with the visitors... puppets increase his motor skills. (RSC1)*

(iv) Puppetry improves the hearing skills of children with deafness and hearing impairment

Children with deafness and hearing impairment can watch puppet stories from YouTube channels. They mimic the movements and stories of puppets. They collaborate and play puppets with other friends. They can engage, interact and learn more effectively about understanding the characters in the story. Puppet show improved comprehension and communication skills. Children become talkative, understanding, and accepted by other children. Interview data from respondents are listed as follows:

*They find it difficult to follow instructions...verbal expression. They need hearing aids to improve comprehension and communication. They like to watch puppets program on YouTube... they talk ... sing ... laugh...They imitate performances. Play puppets with other friends... playing and accepting with other children. (RSC3)*

(v) Puppetry provides hearing and the sense of touch experience to children with visually impaired and partially sighted

Children with visually impaired and partially sighted can move puppets with music. They use puppets to experiment with a variety of materials and textures. Puppet trains their listening and sensory skills. Puppets train their psychomotor skills through the movements of the hands, arms, and fingers. They also learn to estimate the distance between the puppet and the puppet. interview data from respondents are listed as follows:

*They difficult to perform tasks such as reading or writing... but they can touch objects like puppets... feel-to-touch puppets... puppet shapes... puppet textures...move puppets follow to the music. (RSC3) They have fun playing...play hand puppets...stick puppets...finger puppets. (RSA3)*

(vi) Puppetry conveys an impression of mindfulness and meditation to children with a psychiatric disability or mental impairment

Children with a psychiatric disability or mental impairment have mental disorders. They experience depression, panic problems, phobias, and stress. Stories, action, music, and movement in puppet shows convey the effects of attention and meditation. Children with mental illness overcome learning problems and self-management. Puppet shows serve as a diagnosis of children's mental health. Puppet shows convey the message of how to cope with antisocial, mood swings, and negative personal habits. With puppet shows as psycho-treatment, they learn ways to cope with emotional and psychological disorders. Interview data from respondents are listed as follows:

*These children have traumatic stress and phobias. He feels calm when playing puppets with music... conveys his concerns through puppets. (RSA4) He watches puppet shows on YouTube... he gives attention to the show. He talks about the problem, mood, and habit. (RP6)*

(vii) Puppetry trains the intellectual ability and function of talented and gifted children

Talented and gifted children strive to create stories and puppets. They can plan and make presentations. They can memorize dialogues and play the roles of their respective characters. They can manipulate all kinds of puppets. They give ideas and show their creativity in the process of puppet play. They can work in groups, communicate, and express their opinions and feelings. Interview data from respondents are listed as follows:

*They have a high IQ and... high level of intelligence quotient...They make their own stories...memorize dialogues...manipulate different puppets...play different characters. (RST1)*  
*They are very creative ...decorate...make stage...make puppets. They discuss... collaborate with other friends... give opinions and express their feelings. (RST2)*

Analysis data of interviews with nine respondents' points of view identify seven major themes for the value of puppetry for children with special.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

It can be concluded that puppetry has a high value and are suitable for children with special needs to run the puppet craft, show, sing, storytelling, role play, and finger play with puppets. Puppetry helps to develop motor, communication, social, emotional, behavioural, and self-esteem skills among children with special needs. Importantly, they can overcome disabilities and obstacles as well as develop their talents.

Research findings were consistent with the research report by the research of Anahita, Mohammad, and Samira (2018) and Aminimanesh, Ghazavi, and Mehrabi (2019) stated that puppetry activities change children with intellectual disabilities' learning skills, attitude, behavior, and social skills. For children with Autism, research findings were consistent with the research report by Trimmingham (2010) stated that puppetry activities change children's language, speech, and behavioural disorders. For children with ADHD, research findings were consistent with the research by Pegah et al (2017) and Shalani and Azadimanesh (2016) stated that puppetry activities reduce children's aggressive behaviour and emotions, improve the learning and social skills, they can form better relationships and friendships. Children with speech and language impairment can build vocabulary, active listening skills, and sound discrimination through puppetry. This finding in line with the research by Vina and Andrianty (2018) stated that children's vocabulary, speaking skills, listening, reading, writing, and children's interest in learning have been improved. Children with physical disabilities can improve their physical disabilities. This finding in line with the research by Purcell-Gates and Fisher (2017) proves that puppeteers with disabled bodies can explore body movement abilities, and discover alternative ways to move and manipulate puppets.

Children with deafness and hearing impairment can experience puppetry activities based on colourful and sensory puppets. This finding is in line with the research by Sakai et al. (2016) stated that puppet shows children able to engage, interact, and learn effectively through stories and solving problems by using body movements. Children with visually impaired and partially sighted can experiment and move puppets with music. This finding is in line with the research by Reimer et al (2008) stated that puppets train the movement, balance, and manipulated objects. Children with psychiatric disabilities enjoy mindfulness and meditation with puppets. This finding is in line with the research by Pitre et al (2009) stated that puppetry is therapy for children with mental problems. Puppetry helps them to experience panic, phobia, stress, depression, and personality problems. Talented and gifted children strive to create stories, puppets, and shows. This finding is in line with the research by Neihart and Teo (2013) puppetry art including visual and performing art involves experimentation, expression,



engagement, discovery, and an interdisciplinary approach to training children in the field of art.

Studies have shown that puppetry can be a valuable tool for children with special needs, including those with communication difficulties, emotional, physical and movement, behavioral challenges, and developmental disabilities. Puppetry can improve social skills, emotional expression, and cognitive functioning. It can also provide a safe and non-threatening way for children to explore and express their feelings and experiences. Additionally, puppetry can be adapted to meet the unique needs and abilities of each child, making it a versatile and effective intervention for a wide range of special needs.

To the special needs education teacher, caregiver, administrator, and parents of children with special needs, puppetry for children with special needs allowed them to experience various problems, difficulties, special abilities, and talents. Furthermore, puppetry is an important part of therapy, playing, teaching, and learning for children with special needs. Accordingly, this paper has provided a clearer picture of the value of puppetry for children with different special needs. Special needs teachers, caregivers, administrators, curriculum planners, parents, guardians, and the community should support the use of puppetry to overcome children with special needs disabilities and develop their talents. Puppetry as a therapeutic and pedagogical tool should be integrated into special education to enhance knowledge and skills, change attitudes and behaviours as well as unearth the talents of children with special needs.

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