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**Puppets* and the Emotional Development of Children –
an International Overview**

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*puppet = lútká; doll = púnčka (Slovenia)

My educational background concerning the theme of this lecture is worldwide. I have worked through puppetry, and lectured at universities and institutions that wanted to draw on my experience in puppet therapy, and puppetry in schools and institutions for disabled people. –

In different cultures there are different views on children and their social and psychological development. Sometimes it is hard to understand adult’s decisions on children’s lives and children’s requests. Children are the same all over the world as long as they are very young. But as soon as they are exposed to decisions about school and education the differences between cultures get larger, as do demands for social behaviour. Understanding in multicultural societies gets more and more difficult. Children with special needs are only a special case of communication between different people.

1. Why are puppets and dolls important for the emotional development of children?

As soon as a child gets out of its mother’s belly into the cold world, a separation begins that lasts all our life. A child uses dolls, cuddly cloth, Teddy, dummy, cuddly animals etc. to cope with separating from its

mother. These objects are called interim objects, because they are used as a representative of the reality („mother“) and are given all the love, all the hate and all the attempts at emotional argument with her. They are thrown into the corner, hugged, hit, sworn at, kissed etc. when the mother is not available as a partner **but also** in a figurative sense. At the age of about 5 years adults advise the child that now it is „too old“ for those beloved representatives and with the school a new part of life occurs. In the worst case the interim objects are destroyed by the adults (mostly parents). In the best case they are put into a nice box hidden at the attic. Mourning mostly is not allowed to the child or is not understood by the adults. And what we can not grieve for will follow us throughout our life.

This phase of great emotional intimacy with an object, whose loss we could not grieve for is the background for our emotional relationship to puppets and dolls in therapy and on stage. Both touch our emotional memory.

As soon as we are confronted with puppets or dolls the emotional situations of our childhood are reactivated – also when we are adults. Our emotional memory will be activated and we feel the same emotional certainty as when there is the possibility to try out our doing and feeling with the help of our interim objects. Because puppets and dolls are only giving answers through what is in ourselves (mind, heart and soul) we can be sure that we will not get an answer which demands too much or too less from us or which is not understandable for us. Objects have the fact of time on their side. They do not change but they change us. Nothing can go wrong because we only try out what we can assess without getting too near to the emotional abyss or fall down into it. In this quality all puppets and dolls are ahead of humans as a partner – and also of parents, teachers and therapists.

An other advantage puppets and dolls have: they do not speak. Our communication is so secret, so individual. No words are necessary if we miss them. This communication contain secrets which only exist between the puppet or doll – so to say a thing – and ourselves. We can try out a decision, an idea and its emotional effects on us one hundred times or more; it will never be final if we do not want it. We grow into the decision emotionally and finally decide without fear.

This is why emotional development in childhood matters. If we forbid our children to practice making decisions with „things“ – puppets or dolls – or if we do not make it possible at any level we generate immature adults, who later have to make up what they missed during their childhood.

There are two important influences which alienate us from our emotions:

- one is TV where we only experience the emotions of others in an absolutely suggestive way,
- the other is being put under pressure while learning and producing.

That traumata and bad family and social situations do harm to us we have known since before Sigmund Freud. All this harm can be worked on mostly – not always – through puppet therapy together with an empathic and sensitive therapist.

Puppets and dolls are among the few things we can manipulate without being punished for and by them. We can order them about all we want and we take the responsibility for what we have ordered. Puppets and dolls will do all we are asking for and we explore the emotional side of our demands: to be powerful, to be able to order, to be king, witch, animal, princess, devil, dragon or knight, but also to be Batman or to be one of the great powerful persons of the new media, is one of the great feelings that we can allow ourselves and enjoy by playing. Especially boys in particular need to fight against the dominance of female orientated teaching and have to experiment with male behaviour. In reality they mostly are not forced to do so.

To get emotional competence we need emotional certainty. Of course there are many situations where we can learn this. A special possibility for learning it, is the preparation of a puppet performance in a group (school, disabled, social groups etc.), that is: making puppets and building the stage, writing the text, rehearsals, inviting the audience and performing the play. You can watch the phenomenon: aggression in the group is reduced, social competence is activated and new social competence is learnt. The social fabric changes to a better one and the result of the work obviously is better than the sum of the individual performances of the participants. Social learning is most effective when an intense factual discussion is possible. Because working on a puppet play requires many different tasks - that means that everyone can find a „corner to work on“ and therefore finds emotional satisfaction - the participants do not only show their social competence but also observe and feel that of the others. This is a very important requirement for widening competition and the further development of emotions in group contexts such as: love, mourning, hate, friendship, trust, suspicion of, etc.

I have got many reports from various countries where this is described. Between North and South America, Asia, Africa, Australia and Europe are cultural differences but the results are always the same: working with

puppets gives a positive input to healing on many different levels. This you will find also in puppet therapy but then it relates to only one person and is appropriate only for them.

Not only does creating a puppet play liberate an enormous power of self healing but also a puppet play that an adult looks at, that touches him, makes him thoughtful, makes him laugh or cry. It functions in the same way as with children. It makes possible an emotional argument with the problems shown by the puppet's story and takes as a basis the life experience of every single person in the audience. In other words: every spectator sees his own story and lives it. Also for this we have breathtaking examples which we can be described as cathartic.

On a puppet stage – different from real life – solutions of problems are shown which mostly are outside reality. But the spectator looks at them and witnesses how problems are solved, how somebody suffers and finally triumphs over something or somebody. Neither the problems nor the stories are real to the audience. But the hope for suitable solutions, the informal context in which it is offered, the time the audience has to feel and to think during the puppet play and the chance to look at what is happening, is all part of the experiment which is made by others (by puppets), but we experience them in an active way as well.

2. The interrelation between the philosophy of education and children's play in different countries

I am referring to my experiences in all parts of the world – I have worked in more than 30 different countries. The philosophy of education differs very much. In North America and Asia you may find the same pressure for achievement and high standards but there are differences you can measure:

In the USA and in Europe a child has to grow up to be an independent person, that means everything is done to free it from the family and make it independent for living alone. Therefore high standards and achievements are demanded to make the child quicker, better, higher paid than children from other families. People are admired who get better than the others without help from others (e.g. „from dishwasher to millionaire“).

In Asia the one who honours his parents by achieving well is admirable.

Both philosophies of education are incompatible because there are no bigger differences than between an externally lead (Asia) and internally

lead (USA, Europe) motivation. Nowadays in Germany we are trying to implant the Asian system of education. This irritates many people.

These two different philosophies of education have immediate effects on the children's play – also on that with puppets and dolls. While in Africa rag advances to puppets and dolls – because the professionally made ones are not available or cannot be afforded - in Asia (Japan, South Korea, China) playing with puppets and dolls is raised to a pedagogical concept combined with learning effects.

In the **USA** puppets and dolls (as other articles for children) are standardised and made “secure” because of so many abstruse cases of liability.

In **Australia** puppets and dolls are extremely different because they come from different cultural sources, but they are covered up by Americanised products from China.

In **South America** children from poor families have advantage over those from the rich families, because the cheap imported plastic dolls with language and movements which can only be listened to and looked at, are broken very soon and then they are used in the traditional way if ever.

There are different ways to judge “good” and “bad” puppets. I want to judge puppets and dolls to show how strongly they support the emotional development of children.

In the **former socialist countries of the Soviet Union** the traditional culture – very often because of tourism – had a high reputation. This had – I think – a positive effect on the design of puppets and dolls.

In **Western Europe** traditional puppets and dolls have been turned into luxury items and collectables – I want to remind you of Käthe Kruse dolls and Steiff animals – and no family with a normal income can afford that. Products of China, licensed in America, were put onto the European market, but the quality was so bad that the Americanisation of toys only could start after standards of quality were introduced and expensive advertising was initiated.

In **North America** puppets and dolls are get-and-throw-away products, which have to be replaced immediately if only the battery is empty. The Media made a long lasting identification with ONE puppet or doll, with ONE Teddy, ONE cuddly animal etc. suspect. The adults are the target

group of the manufacturers and all advertising is done for them. Advertising suggests to adults that they cannot be sure always to do the right in educating their children. Advertising supports uncertainty and guilt. This guilt is fundamental in influencing parents.

Of course I can only describe my personal impressions gathered in many countries while working with teachers and other people related to children. With this background I want to point out: for playing with dolls and with puppets in groups – e.g. in schools – the philosophy or ideology of education is different in different countries.

a) Communist ideology preferred given and not asked about standards of quality, which had to be visible to others. There was competition but the comparable results were much more important. In the late Soviet republics this ideology is still working.

b) Capitalist ideology on one hand supports hard competition but on the other hand individuality and outstanding creativity and teamwork are wanted, supported and asked for.

c) In countries where are tremendous differences between poor and rich the ideology is split:

- The rich develop a culture of delegating - in playing also. Small children are allowed to have their dolls and cuddly animals but the older they get the more they are forced to watch - without being active - how others are playing. This playing is very near to theatre or watching TV.

- The poor must cultivate their culture of “having not”, that means they have to take what they have or can acquire. These children have to be very creative in order to survive on an emotional as well as every other level. That means: only those ones who are as creative and healthy as possible will survive.

d) In the Confucion ideology of education in Asia playing is subordinate to achievement. Pedagogically precious plays with learning effects, a perfect performance and the appreciation of people in higher positions (male, older family members, teachers etc.) are measures of a successful play. E.g. a woman who gives birth to a disabled child feels that it is a defect of her own. For her it is not possible to accept that the child needs to play without successful results. In South Korea therefore disabled children are very often marooned.

In Asia the development of emotionally mature behaviour can only be rudimentarily or does not exist. Perfection in puppetry you can meet in many Asian performances – above all in China.

In Asia puppet therapy is seen as indecent because emotions are set free and are shown. This is a breaking of taboo and makes it nearly impossible to spread puppet therapy in Asia.

Worldwide puppetry for children is something between laissez-faire and absolute perfectionism. My impression is, that countries in which children are more free to play with puppets and dolls and are given more possibilities to mature emotionally with puppet play, have greater creative potential which later can be activated in works of science. Worldwide there is a tendency in education towards learning by rote. If children play they lose track of time and society doesn't like this.

3. The interrelation between television, puppetry and emotional development of children

Many children sit in front of the TV daily for more than 6 hours and look mostly aimlessly at what TV has to offer: short sections of thought out lives, music and dance, documentation and news. All these shows are trimmed to be quick, short and intense. None of the sequences is longer than 20 seconds (you can count this!). Most of them are between 2 and 12 sec. Because of the speed of the presentation you cannot decide consciously if you want this information or not. Most of the information has a content of fear, aggression and emotional domination which is mostly underlined with music. This information with its emotional potential is taken in through the eyes – we can absorb no more than 20 to 24 pictures per sec – into our subconscious, where the feeling of being taken over by something and not being sure by what, is settled. With every exciting scene we get a small adrenalin shock. Because adrenalin is an addictive drug, looking at TV gets people addicted to adrenalin. It is NOT TV that makes us addicted but the small adrenalin shock that is given through the dramaturgical tricks of TV.

In puppetry the quickness of TV is not possible because it is a live event and humans have a humanlike speed and not a technical one. A puppet play shows processes – as they are in the play of children with dolls – which we can follow easily. This gives the audience the ability to add information out of their own fantasy and their own life experience to complete the story which is seen. With this a puppet play – different from TV – is a genuine school of education and emotions. The little and very often abstract information on the puppet stage (puppets are only

THINGS and not real life!) have to be added to by the spectator's own life experience. If not, the puppet play will stay as a far away and not understandable picture and needs pedagogical preparation.

In other words:

TV shows fragments at high speed which are not digestible for the recipient's brain. Most of the films have many mini problems which are not or insufficiently solved at the end. In documentaries the original sounds are not heard, but music instead; water-, rock-, meadow- and forest-music etc. Music has an emotional content which can be measured and therefore it is already an interpretation of what the spectator sees. An individualized interpretation is no longer possible. This is a high grade of manipulation.

The story of a puppet play shows emotional processes which can be understood, interpreted and judged. Depending on life experience and ability the audience can reconstruct these processes or the spectators feel or articulate different concepts of what they see. Puppet plays stimulate acting experiments. They only illustrate reality and always have place for alternatives.

Emotional development is easier to support by looking at a puppet play than by watching a Video or a TV show.

4. Special children – Special needs

Disabled children need special attention. But remember: every child needs attention! Children interpret the world through the adults, because they depend on them. Therefore my opinion is that there is only a gradual difference between disabled and not disabled children. Of course children with special disability have to be supported specially. It is stupid to think a dumb child could understand us if we speak long and very loud to it.

Puppetry has a quality that no other medium shows: puppets are catalysers of communication. Even if a person is traumatised and cannot speak about what he/she went through and can not trust in an other person, a puppet will make communication possible. In therapy patients show us their problems in the first 45 minutes through puppets. But mostly many months will pass until they carefully try out how to solve their problems.

Normal demands on disabled people are mostly too much for them. They love puppets and dolls because puppets and dolls answer on a level they

can understand. Puppets do not threaten anyone – only if they are played by thoughtless adults who force solutions of problems or abuse puppets for pedagogical purpose. Puppets only answer what the disabled can stand. There are remarkable descriptions of how children, youngsters and adults after a catastrophe could laugh during a puppet show or when making puppets and playing their own show.

Puppets and dolls are incomplete. They do not have a personality which can be overwhelming, demanding or judging. They do not have a history of life and are waiting for the one we create with them. They only live if we put them to life. To all therapists, teachers and parents they are superior. They support communication on every intellectual level. They stay neutral when others ask for demands and results. They never ask for more attention but they ask us to act socially and emotionally. They make processes of learning possible that are not possible in other circumstances. They have a special language which everyone can understand. They have only expressions we project onto them. They always understand us. They laugh and cry with us, they let us complain and only contradict when we let them and they carry us over emotional abysses. This phenomenon is independent of culture, age, ability to speak and life experience, intelligence and creativity.

5. Perspectives:

About 20 years ago I worked in the USA. One of the puppeteers said: “Every child should go through a puppet stage!” Maybe. What I want to point out is that puppetry is one of the most diverse tools for communication and expression of emotions. It does not depend on the language, or manual dexterity, or intellectual competence of the participants, at schools or other institutions of education. It is working FOR people’s emotional health in both cases: both when they are doing puppetry by themselves and when they are looking at a good puppet show.

It is a wonderful tool for therapy, education and special needs.

Barbara Scheel, June 2011