



Hands That Learn

Using Puppetry to Engage Students in Social-Emotional Learning

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The mood is calm, as the early childhood teacher lifts the veil that covers the table-top puppet show that she has labored over for her students. The children are filled with glee as the teacher brings the simple, doll-like puppets to life in a seasonal story that they will later retell and act out. The art of storytelling through puppetry is one that has been seen for countless generations, since ancient times (Hanford, 1976, p.13). In Waldorf schools, this gift of puppetry still remains a crucial part of the curriculum, but why must it be sequestered to the early grades? (McKay, 1998, p.10)

Throughout this paper, I will explore the uses of puppetry in and outside of Waldorf schools across the grade levels, as well as inquire into the skills our students can learn by actively engaging in puppetry. From its early days, puppetry has had a place in Waldorf education and in anthroposophical circles. According to Rudolf Steiner, “the marionette theatre was a remedy for civilization’s damages” (Vermehren, 1965, as cited in von Kügelgen, 1993, p.199). Though Steiner was speaking of the psychological damages bestowed onto children after the horrors of World War I, I believe that his words are still relevant to our 21st century children.

Although our recent COVID-19 crisis is nowhere as significant as global violence, this generation’s children have experienced something that has not happened on a world-wide scale since the Spanish Influenza pandemic in the early 1900s. School and business closures, lost lives, world-wide lockdowns, and massive supply issues have changed how our world operates now and for many years to come. Our children need healing now more than ever as they leave their online classrooms, step out into the world, and engage with other children and adults in person, some for the first time. These children need to learn skills to help them speak to others, engage in communal play, and to reflect upon themselves and others. I believe that puppetry is one way that we can reach children in order to engage them in all of these aspects of humanness (Downs, 2005, p.17).

In our age of instant gratification and stories on-demand, the act of watching a live puppet show is not as common

as in centuries past. Basil Twist, a puppeteer, said in an interview with NPR, “It’s (puppetry) not of this time. It’s not of the world we live in now” (Eschner, 2017). However, children do have access to puppetry and some could argue that they have more access to this art form than they ever had before. Due to the accessibility of television and the internet, most children in the United States and around the world have come into contact with some sort of puppetry during their early years through the media. *Lamb Chop’s Playalong* (O’Kun et al., 1992-1995), *Sesame Street* (Connell et al., 1969-present), *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood* (Rogers, 1968-2001), and *The Muppets* (Burns et al., 1976-1981), just to name a few, are all beloved television shows that engage puppetry to educate and reach the young child. These shows are easily accessible to today’s audiences through countless streaming services, the internet, and public access television.

Surprisingly, although puppetry is widely accessible—and many articles and books were written about why puppetry is engaging to young children (McKay, 1998, p.10)—there is still a gap in the amount of discussion, from a research standpoint, on the importance of engaging children themselves in the act of creating *live* puppetry. This is especially true about puppetry and its connection to developing social-emotional skills. I aim to research, and then do something about why puppetry is not used to reach older children, when we have all been touched by the joys of puppetry in some way.

Dr. Helmut von Kügelgen ends his article, “The Marionette Theatre: Posing a Task for Socially Oriented Education” (1993), with the following invitation to educators and puppeteers alike: “There is here a concrete task for all who want not merely to discuss pre-school education, but to do something about it with full consciousness” (p. 201). This statement reads as a call to action for educators to consider puppetry as more than just an entertainment for toddlers. He, like Rudolf Steiner, saw the benefit of puppetry for children of all ages by utilizing the art form for education, inspiration, and most of all, healing.

Origins of Research

As the world entered the second full year of pandemic teaching, I wanted to bring the healing nature of puppetry to one particular second grade class with whom I work. This class is a large cohort of 27 students from varying ethnic backgrounds, family structures, temperaments, and socio-economic levels. Although most of the students had been together since kindergarten, they had not bonded over the previous year of online learning. Instead of banding together as a team, they were fighting, name-calling, and stealing from each other. As their drama teacher, I wanted to bring these students together in a positive way that would give them a creative experience (and outlet) of which they could be proud. My anxious hope was that this experience, whatever it might end up being, would encourage them to form an ensemble and to find a common ground. I tried the usual ensemble-focused theatre games, creative drama experiences, and even the boxed social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum that our school is mandated to use by our privatized, umbrella network. Nothing was working to bring this class together until I threw caution to the wind, and in a complete about-face in terms of curriculum planning, I turned to my passion: puppetry. This experience has inspired the current research paper.

I have to admit that puppetry has not “saved” my students as of yet. However, it has put them on the right path of personal growth and unleashed their creativity in ways that the typical drama class and the standardized SEL curriculum was not able to do for them. This experience has made gains in balancing my students’ temperaments in a way that has allowed them to band together and create. Through puppetry, they have been able to find latent confidence and harness it; they have learned how to work together and to express their opinions without quarreling. These outcomes have given me hope about the prospects of such work being done with other classes, both in and outside of the Waldorf school setting. Though this method may not work for every classroom, I would like to offer this as a new outlook on the uses of puppetry in the classroom, in the hopes that by sharing it with others it will be beneficial to future student groups.

Puppetry in Education and its Benefits

Educational puppetry has a long history across the globe (McKay, 1998, p. 10). In his book, *The Complete*

Book of Puppets and Puppeteering, Robert Ten Eyck Hanford makes the claim that puppetry was used for education even in ancient times: “The ancient shadow shows taught popular folk tales to the illiterate masses. Even rowdy Mr. Punch made his audience think about social and political ills of the day” (1976, p. 23). Though the two references made by Hanford still involve puppetry as a perceived performance, I believe that puppetry can and should be used to educate through students interacting with puppets themselves.

Because puppets are naturally engaging objects for children (Whittier, 2017), children are very willing to speak to the puppets as though they were real, living crea-

tures. Students want to listen to these creatures, even if the puppet is just an old sock with googly eyes! Fred Rogers once said that, “Pretending through puppets is often a safe way for children to talk about things that really concern them” (Sharapan, 2016). This idea has directed not only teachers but also therapists to employ puppets as a means to encourage a child to speak. Because the puppet is made to say what is

in fact bothering the child, the puppet acts like a mediator that allows the child to feel safe speaking his or her mind (McIlroy, 2021). This is an excellent tool for children who may be shy and are not confident in letting their own voice be heard (Whittier, 2017).

This means of providing the child with a voice lends itself to so many developmental areas. By engaging with and speaking to a puppet, the child can begin to expand their language development in a safe way (McIlroy, 2021). By using a puppet in the classroom, students can engage in a deeper understanding of literature and storytelling, allowing the puppets to retell stories that they may have heard before or even stories that the child has created herself (Whittier, 2017). This act of performing with a puppet also builds children’s self-confidence, as they perform before an audience of their peers or their families (McIlroy, 2021).

From a physical development perspective, by engaging in puppetry, a student can make large gains in the development of fine motor skills. Beginning with the creation of the puppets themselves, students engage in folding, cutting, drawing, and even sewing. These activities require a strong pincer grasp, nimble fingers, keen eyes, and the use of tools (scissors, needles, etc.). By using finger puppets, hand puppets, or even simple marionettes, students’ finger dexterity will increase as

they make the puppets come alive. Rudolf Steiner recommended that marionette puppets' strings should be tied directly onto the puppeteer's hands rather than attached to a control for manipulation (Vermehren, 1965, as cited in von Kügelgen, 1993, p. 199). Having the puppet strings so integrated into the child's own being would be a wonderful way to increase their dexterity and also strengthen the bond between puppet and child-puppeteer.

Puppetry in Waldorf Schools

One can find puppetry to this very day in Waldorf early childhood classrooms around the world. Most popularly, puppetry is used in early childhood classrooms as a performance by the teacher for the students. Depending on the comfort level of the teacher, puppetry can take many forms from table-top puppet shows, to simple marionettes, to story aprons. Puppet shows are generally used as a method to convey or retell a seasonal story, but sometimes these puppet shows are created as events open to the public and performed at community gatherings.

Schools that embrace such models sometimes have puppetry companies that operate out of them, such as the San Francisco Waldorf School's Magic Lantern Marionette Troupe (2018). Unfortunately, this company is no longer in operation. It was made up of the Early Childhood teachers of the school, along with volunteers, which is reminiscent of the puppet shows discussed by von Kügelgen in "The Marionette Theatre" (1993). Like those original puppeteers, the puppeteers of the Magic Lantern Marionette Troupe performed for the school community at large (in order to provide thoughtful entertainment for local children and their families).

Some Waldorf schools have taken the lead from the founding years of the Rudolf Steiner School in New York (Livingston & Mitchell, 2016, pp. 61-62) by employing puppetry within their curriculum across the grades. One such example is the Sierra Waldorf School in Jamestown, California, where each grade level has a puppetry block wherein the students learn about a different form of puppetry, craft their own puppets, and present a play based on one of their curriculum tales (Sierra Waldorf School, 2018). These performances are geared towards their families and are performed before the whole school. Needless to say, seeing this program gave me hope that the acceptance of puppetry as a

tool to educate across the grade levels is beginning to take root within the Waldorf movement. Whatever the method of puppet interaction, I believe that both settings are following the original intent that Rudolf Steiner had when it came to puppetry: to engender within the students a love for stories, creativity, and a sense of wonder (Harwood, 2001, p. 68).

What is Social-Emotional Learning?

This sense of wonder and creativity also supports a child's well-being far beyond the satisfaction in watching an "entertainment." Through being creatively stimulated, children ignite many of their emotional and cognitive intelligences. Through the communal activity—of watching or participating in puppet play—they are strengthening their social intelligence as well. In the second half of this research paper, we will explore the topic of social-emotional learning (SEL), its role in education, and how it relates to modern educational theories and the Waldorf curriculum.

Although the idea that humans are both social and emotional beings is well known, it did not gain real grounds in traditional education until the 1980s, with the publication of Howard Gardner's revolutionary book, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (2011 [originally published 1983]). Gardner detailed seven "autonomous" cognitive intelligences that a single person utilizes on a daily basis (Gardner, 2011). These intelligences are: "linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal intelligences" (Smerechansky-Metzger, 1995, p. 12). Through inter- and intrapersonal intelligences, we experience what we now call social and emotional intelligences (Mayer & Salovey, 1993).

Much like Rudolf Steiner, Gardner believed that although all humans have the same faculties or "intelligences," some people are more fluent in certain areas than others (Smerechansky-Metzger, 1995, p. 13). He also believed that the education of children should consider all of the intelligences that are within the individual (Blythe & Gardner, 1990). Gardner suggested that teachers should be encouraged to include a variety of educational strategies to reach each child according to their intellectual strengths and weaknesses, particularly through experiential education methods utilizing the arts (Blythe & Gardner, 1990). Though these ideas were known to Rudolf Steiner and his colleagues in the early 1900s

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(Sloan, 2001, p. ix), when Gardner made these claims they were groundbreaking in mainstream academia!

Even though this research is widely available, intelligence-based curriculum has been slow to catch on in mainstream education. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, educators, administrators, and politicians in the United States are now beginning to take notice of such alternative concepts once more. As students were visibly struggling with their own mental health throughout the pandemic, educators and administrators have made the connection that a student's mental and social well-being directly affects their academic life, as has been well-known in Waldorf education from its inception (see Mitchell, 2009, p. 36), and they are eager to solve these issues. This has sparked a re-emergence of conversation about promoting social-emotional learning curriculum in schools. However, there are many misconceptions of what SEL education is and what role schools have in perpetuating its values to their communities.

According to Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), the five social-emotional competencies are: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2021b). These "soft skills" (Claxton, Costa, & Kallick, 2016) are broken down into subcategories that fit within each competence. Skills such as empathy, assertiveness, self-regulation, communication abilities, and intrapersonal awareness are all nestled within these categories (CASEL, 2021b). CASEL has been spreading the word about social-emotional learning since 1994 (CASEL, 2021a), while Waldorf schools have been focused on students' social and emotional growth since the first Waldorf School was founded in 1919 (Association of Waldorf Schools of North America, 2021).

AWSNA, the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America, states the first Core Principle of Waldorf education as "The image of the human being as a spiritual being informs every aspect of the school" (AWSNA, 2021). The AWSNA platform further notes that, "Waldorf education enlivens the physical, emotional, intellectual, social, artistic, and spiritual capacities of the human being as the individual moves through the phases of this life" (AWSNA, 2021). Because of its foundational view that human beings need to be nurtured spiritually, socially, and intellectually, Waldorf

education has been making social-emotional learning integral to its curriculum from the start.

Rudolf Steiner instructed the original Waldorf teachers to appeal to a child's social, emotional, and spiritual capacities from their beginning days in Waldorf schools (Schmitt-Stegmann, 2000). By experiencing an education that appeals to the whole child, students, so Steiner believed, would experience a greater sense of freedom, not only in their educational lives, but also in their future lives as adults (Schmitt-Stegmann, 2000). These indications have led educators in Waldorf schools to utilize the arts in all curriculum areas in order to make sure

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that the child is learning in a developmentally appropriate method and also in a way that "draws out the child's inherent capacities" (Syringa Mountain School, 2021).

Though many psychologists and educational practitioners know that social and emotional intelligences should be supported in schools, there are major players that oppose integrating SEL curriculum. Aristotle himself said in his treatise, *The Politics*, that "not all people have the same opinion about what youth should learn in order to develop a good character or to enable them to lead the best life" (1981). Though Aristotle made this remark over 2,300 years ago, this could not be more accurate in regards to integrating SEL curriculum in classrooms. According to Evie Bland, a writer for *Education Week*, the greatest complaints that schools receive when they begin implementing an SEL curriculum are that such skills should be taught by the students' families and not by their school districts (Bland, 2020). Their great worry is that a student will receive indications that do not align with the student's family values. In addition, some argue that schools should not be put in the position to teach children "values" or character-based teaching at all (Greene, 2019). Still, who will teach the new generation these skills if they do not have a strong family unit or community to encourage them towards personal growth? (Mitchell, 2009, p. 35)

Critics of SEL claim the field is vaguely defined and the applications are not entirely clear. Finally, they ask, where does the curriculum come from and who generates it? In his article, "Does Social and Emotional Learning Belong in the Classroom?" Peter Greene asks the question: "Can the teachable moment about human emotions, empathy, or self-awareness be formally constructed?" (Greene, 2019). He alludes to

the idea that SEL needs to happen “on the job,” in an individualized manner, not in a written, prescribed curriculum. Like Greene, I, too, ask whether a one-size-fits-all curriculum is the best solution to social-emotional learning in our schools. However, I do see the benefit of getting these systems into the hands of educators or community leaders that need a guide or may not have resources to invest in individualized plans.

No matter one’s view on social-emotional learning, one thing remains clear: without a knowledge of self, empathy for others, the ability to regulate emotions, and the capacity for thoughtful decision-making, the children of today will not be able to become the great leaders of tomorrow that we need them to be. It is a moot point discussing whether social-emotional learning should come from the parent or a school-based program if the children of today are left without having the life skills they need in order to lead fulfilling lives in and beyond the classroom.

Puppetry and Social-Emotional Learning

With these thoughts on social-emotional learning in and outside of the Waldorf education setting, and the history sketch on educational puppetry, you may clearly see the connection between puppetry and SEL. Through puppetry, students hit all four zones of social and emotional areas as set out by CASEL and many of the intelligences discussed by Howard Gardner (2011). Hedda Sharapan, a Senior fellow with PNC Bank’s “Grow Up Great” programming, which collaborates with Fred Rogers Productions and the Sesame Workshop, states that children “readily... identify with puppets, so they’re more open to learning social-emotional skills from them. That’s why many teachers use puppet stories” (Sharapan, 2016). The utilization of puppet stories could not be more integral to Waldorf education, as we have discussed. However, let’s now peel back the veneer of the performance and really look into social and emotional skills a student can learn when they engage with puppetry.

Self-Management

When students are participating in the act of watching a puppet show, they are engaged with the story behind a “fourth wall.” This theatrical term means that there is an invisible, imagined “wall” that separates the audience from the performance, allowing the

audience to serve as a spectator (Merriam-Webster, 2021). In dramatic education and before most field trips in elementary school, we spend time discussing audience behavior with our students. They learn that to be a “good” audience member they need to sit still in their seats as best as they can. Their feet need to be on the floor and not on the backs or tops of the chair in front of them. They also need to refrain from speaking while the performance is taking place. This act of audience education is harder than one would think when children are not used to attending live performances. Most of their audience preparation happens at home with their families, typically in front of the television. At home parents are able to talk over the entertainment, get up and move around, sit with their feet up on the couch, or even eat a meal during the show. These activities are not proper audience behavior during a live show, so children are asked to manage their behavior while attending a live performance.

Self-Awareness

If you take it a step further and consider the idea of the students creating their own puppet show, the bonds between human development and puppetry are further strengthened. Rudolf Steiner says in *Practical Advice to Teachers* that “children should not just know that they have hands but become aware of their hands” (2000, Lecture 4). In creating a puppet show, students will not only become aware of their hands, they will do this by building both fine and gross motor skills through the act of creating, sewing, and manipulating their own puppet.

In their book, *Will-Developed Intelligence: Handwork and Practical Arts in the Waldorf School Elementary through High School* (2016 [1999]), Patricia Livingston and David Mitchell write, “The brain discovers what the fingers explore” (p. 10). This dedicated “will work” is even acknowledged by the California Department of Education in their Arts Education Framework. The CDE states in their chapter on theatre education:

Utilizing puppets or masks can be a useful strategy for students to create through an external means, rather than with their body. Students often find new and different ways to express themselves when they create characters using masks or puppets. (CDE, 2020, p. 81)

My students quickly figured out after our first rehearsal that one cannot just stand in front of an audience, move

a puppet around, and call this a puppet show! As Hobey Ford says in his article, “Teacher Education Through the Kennedy Center,” published in the book, *Puppetry in Education and Therapy*, “The heart of puppetry is action and animation” (2005, p. 22). Learning how to convey emotion through a simple piece of material is a difficult task even for adults, but for children this skill comes with greater rewards. In the exploration of emotion through the puppet, the child is able to learn how to distinguish the different ways to move the puppet to make it show a certain emotion. This emotion experimentation teaches the child about his or her own body language and how to read the body language of others. Both of these concepts unlock self- and social awareness according to the CASEL Framework (CASEL, 2021b).

Social Awareness

Watching a puppet show, a child sees the puppet go through a variety of trials and conflicts. This journey can inspire the child to make connections to her own life, thereby strengthening her social awareness. Social awareness primarily has to do with how one relates to others. Empathy is one of the main skills that CASEL’s SEL Framework discusses and one that is integral to Waldorf education as well. A. C. Harwood states: “to enter into the experience of others requires not only understanding but imaginative sympathy as well” (2001 [1958], p. 4).

Through puppetry, students are able to have more than the empathetic experience of the spectator when they participate in the show also as its creators. In addition, the child is also learning how to work with others when creating the show—taking into consideration how their teammates feel and what they bring to the project. Even in writing the script for the show, the child has an opportunity to explore the different characters in the play. This allows children to explore characters that have different perspectives from their own, showing them that it is acceptable for others to see things differently and employ different perspectives, thereby widening the children’s world view.

Responsible Decision-Making

Decision-making guides a human’s life from its early days. Though some studies by cognitive psychologists show the child’s ability to make informed decisions directly relates to brain development and its successive

stages (Blakemore & Robbins, 2012), it is important for children to see from a very young age that their decisions have consequences. Through the telling of a story, children are able to learn that every action has consequences as demonstrated by the trials that characters face within the tale. In addition, when engaging in the creation of a puppet show, the child learns that there are steps to creating a performance and that each step is reliant on the one before it.

Puppetry, SEL, and the Temperaments

The more I explored the relationship between SEL and puppetry, the more I became aware of the relevance of another topic to this relationship: the temperaments. I wondered how puppetry could be healing for each of the four temperaments: the choleric, sanguine, phlegmatic, and melancholic (Harwood, 2001, p. 154). To my surprise, very little had been written about puppetry and the temperaments so far.

One interesting study by a company called INSIGHTS Intervention revealed itself through my research. The practitioners at INSIGHTS led a program that used four adorable and accessible puppets to help children understand their own temperament, strengthening their self-awareness (Insights Intervention, 2019). It seems that this is the only official study of this issue conducted so far. I decided, there-

fore, to explore on my own the relationship between puppetry, SEL, and the temperaments, as the latter are described by Rudolf Steiner and A. C. Harwood.

The Sanguine

Described by Harwood as someone who has “much interest in many things,” and who is generally eager (2001, pp. 155-156) and cheerful (Heibel, 1941), the sanguine child would greatly benefit from creating a puppet show. Because the sanguine enjoys a variety of tasks, playmaking and creating is an ideal pastime. From set creation, puppet making, to writing the stories to be performed, the sanguine would be able to dabble in a variety of activities that require not only the use of the hands, but also the intellect and a vast amount of creativity.

In terms of social and emotional learning, creating a puppet show would teach the sanguine child about responsible decision-making and time management. Because the sanguine would have to focus on getting all of the elements finished, this would force sanguine

children to pace themselves and to see tasks through to completion. They would also be natural at teamwork due to their disposition and would probably be able to create a pleasant work environment for the group.

The Choleric

Always the bold one, the choleric child would do well being front and center (Harwood, 2001, p. 156) as the director of the puppet play or the lead player of the puppeteers. Known to be a good leader, the choleric is always ready to lead the group by slaying any dragon or saving any princess in distress. Harwood suggests that the teacher should give this child a “very active and magnificent part [in a play], and in general he should be given difficult work and left to cope with the difficulties himself” (p. 155). This would not only show the choleric child that he can do the tasks set before him, but give him pride of a job well done. Harwood says that this sense of achievement is the one thing that the choleric wants most in life (p. 156).

In terms of SEL, the choleric child would make the most gains in self-regulation in learning to work with other people while managing his or her own emotions. Because the choleric children typically get frustrated when things do not go their way, working in a group would help them understand how to balance those strong emotions while working with others. This would also increase their understanding of how to maintain a good relationship with their peers and a healthy process of decision-making. One can hope that the choleric child would also come to understand a deeper social awareness through this experience.

The Melancholic

Described as the teacher’s favorite student (Harwood, 2001, p. 157), the melancholic child is shy and cautious. This student would benefit from writing and seeing puppet plays that are tales of individuals overcoming trying situations (p. 158). Actually playing the role of the lead character could be a cathartic experience for melancholic students, as they would be actively engaged in the storyline that unfolds through obstacles and triumphs.

Emotional intelligence gains would come into play for melancholic students. They would gain a greater understanding of how to cope with their own emotions by seeing the triumphs of the characters in the puppet plays. They would also experience a “drawing out” through

the process of creating the play, as they would need to utilize the skills that they keep so insular in order to create a product with the group. This group work would be an ideal way to teach the melancholic student how to create and maintain friendships with others, which could be a life-saving lesson later on in life.

The Phlegmatic

The phlegmatic child would probably receive the most healing experience by seeing the show come together in front of them. I think it would be best to assign to such a child the role of a stage manager, an assistant director, or even as an audience member. Harwood describes the phlegmatic student as one that cares deeply for the other students in the class and that can behave almost like a “mother hen” to the group (Harwood, 2001, p. 159).

The nurturing qualities of the phlegmatic would do very well in the advisory position of the stage manager or assistant director, as the student would be actively in charge of organizing the group under the guiding force of the teacher-director. In this role, the phlegmatic student is also removed enough from the show that he or she can watch the action and enjoy the whole class experience (p. 158).

Taking initiative and motivation will be a big theme for the phlegmatic student when it comes to social-emotional learning. This aligns with the CASEL Framework competence named Responsible Decision-Making (CASEL, 2021b). Because the phlegmatic wants to be comfortable (Harwood, 2001, p. 154), stepping out of their comfort zone is a scary, yet important step for the phlegmatic to take. Having a role that is both integral and advisory in nature would help the phlegmatic both cross the bridge into leadership and offer comfort in the role of spectator.

Conclusion

Let us now return to the scene that began our journey through this topic of puppetry and social-emotional learning. We are back in the early childhood classroom with twenty youngsters seated in front of a simple puppet stage. They are raptly watching a performance that is based on the seasonal story that they are exploring this month. However, this show is different; this show has been created and is being performed by students in their own school’s upper grade level.

Through the act of storytelling, the students involved in both the giving and receiving of the tale are gaining

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so much more than just the sharing of a story. Not only are the students experiencing a communal activity, strengthening their sense of community and belonging to their class and to the school as a whole, the students are also strengthening social-emotional skills that will be with them far past their time in elementary school. They are participating in an empathetic experience where they are subconsciously learning that all people have emotions and can triumph over the obstacles in their path. They might even make connections to themselves and see themselves reflected in the characters in front of them. The students watching the show, by following the rules of the classroom and of respectful spectatorship are also establishing a strong understanding of social norms and reverence for the spoken word of others.

The young puppeteers presenting the show are experiencing the cyclical nature of a live performance. They are giving content and receiving feedback through the laughter, gasps, and hushed whispers of the students in the audience. By experiencing this feedback loop, these young performers are understanding what it means to communicate positively with others. The students that created the puppet show can be proud that they were able to use their thinking, feeling, and willing lives to create something that they are now able to give back to their school community.

This image of social-emotional learning taking place through puppetry is one that I hope can be achieved not only in my own classroom, but in the classrooms of other educators that are committed to providing an experiential, art-filled learning environment for their students to learn fundamental social and emotional life skills. By engaging in social-emotional learning, a student will be prepared to positively engage with others long past their time in primary and secondary school. Utilizing puppetry to learn these skills, children will be able to experience the type of education that Rudolf Steiner espoused: one that is “imaginative, living, colorful... engaging” (Schmitt-Stegmann, 2000).

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