

Pedagogy

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USE OF HAND PUPPETS AND THEATRICAL PLAY TECHNIQUES IN CORRECTIVE AND DEVELOPMENTAL WORK WITH CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

Summary. *This article explores the use of hand puppets and theatrical play techniques in educational and corrective–developmental work with children with autism spectrum disorders. The study analyses the psychoemotional and communicative characteristics of this group of children, as well as the limitations of traditional pedagogical approaches. A theatrical play–based approach is substantiated, in which the puppet character functions as a mediating tool that enables indirect pedagogical interaction. The paper outlines the methodological principles for organizing a theatrical play environment and describes the key stages of working with hand puppets. Observed outcomes of the practical application of the approach and the conditions supporting the sustainability of its effects in educational practice are also presented.*

Key words: *autism spectrum disorders, hand puppets, puppetry, theatrical play techniques, corrective and developmental practice, inclusive education.*

Introduction. Autism spectrum disorders are associated with persistent impairments in social communication and interaction that affect participation in educational contexts. These features require pedagogical approaches adapted to limited direct communicative engagement and specific psychoemotional

characteristics of learners with ASD [1]. Traditional instructional models based on direct verbal guidance and behavioral control do not always ensure sustained involvement or meaningful generalization of acquired skills.

Inclusive and special education practice therefore necessitates formats that restructure interaction rather than intensify direct instruction. Theatrical play techniques offer a framework for organizing educational activity through narrative roles and symbolic characters, enabling alternative modes of participation in shared activity.

The purpose of this study is to examine the pedagogical potential of hand puppets and theatrical play techniques in corrective and developmental practice with children with autism spectrum disorders. The scientific novelty lies in conceptualizing the hand puppet as a structured mediative pedagogical instrument within corrective and developmental practice, rather than solely as a play object.

Theoretical Foundations for the Use of Theatrical Techniques in Corrective and Developmental Practice.

The psychoemotional and communicative development of children with autism spectrum disorders demonstrates a range of persistent characteristics that directly influence their participation in educational contexts. These characteristics include difficulties in social interaction, limited initiation of communication, and challenges in understanding the emotional states of others. Interaction with the surrounding social environment is often fragmented and does not rely on spontaneous social responsiveness [2].

The emotional functioning of children with autism spectrum disorders is marked by uneven regulation. Emotional responses may be reduced or, conversely, excessively intense. Emotional states are frequently highly dependent on environmental stability and the predictability of events. Any changes in the structure of an activity or in the mode of interaction may lead to behavioral disorganization.

This limits the applicability of approaches that rely on variability and improvisation without prior preparation [3].

Communication difficulties are evident at both verbal and non-verbal levels. In some cases, speech use is stereotyped or functionally restricted. Non-verbal modes of communication, including facial expressions, gestures, and prosody, are often underutilized or interpreted inaccurately. The development of imitation skills and engagement in joint activity occurs at a slower pace, which complicates group-based learning and participation in collective educational activities [2].

Traditional pedagogical approaches are predominantly based on direct interaction between the educator and the learner. These approaches typically involve verbal instruction, task demands, and performance evaluation. When applied to children with autism spectrum disorders, such methods may not adequately account for differences in sensory processing and emotional regulation. Direct adult-led interaction is often perceived as a source of pressure and may provoke avoidant or oppositional behavior.

The limitations of traditional approaches are also reflected in their reduced capacity to support sustained learning motivation. The formal acquisition of discrete skills is not always accompanied by an understanding of their social relevance. Skills learned in structured instructional settings may fail to generalize to everyday contexts. This highlights the need for pedagogical practices that provide more flexible and context-sensitive learning experiences [4].

Theatrical play techniques enable the organization of educational interaction through mediated communication. In this approach, pedagogical influence is delivered indirectly through play scenarios, roles, or characters rather than through direct instruction. Such mediation reduces the perceived authority of the adult as the primary source of demands and facilitates children's engagement in shared activity. Furthermore, theatrical techniques offer a structured and repeatable model of

interaction. Narrative frameworks and defined roles establish clear behavioral boundaries and enhance the predictability of events, which aligns with the need for stability commonly observed in children with autism spectrum disorders and contributes to the reduction of emotional tension. Within a play-based format, it becomes possible to model social situations that are challenging in everyday life. Theatrical play techniques provide a comprehensive influence on communicative, emotional, and behavioral domains. Visual and motor components of activity are integrated with elements of verbal expression and emotional response. The repetition of play scenarios supports the consolidation of learned behavioral patterns. As a result, theatrical techniques may be regarded as a theoretically and methodologically grounded means of corrective and developmental practice with children with autism spectrum disorders.

The Hand Puppet as a Mediator of Pedagogical Interaction.

In educational and corrective–developmental practice, the hand puppet functions as a tool of mediated pedagogical interaction. Unlike direct adult–child communication, the puppet character establishes an alternative interactional structure in which communicative demands are redistributed. Acting as an independent participant within the play framework, the puppet conveys instructions, questions, and emotional cues while modeling speech patterns and behavioral responses. Children tend to perceive the puppet as part of play rather than as a source of direct demands, which facilitates engagement in interaction.

The visual and motor expressiveness of the puppet supports attentional focus and comprehension [5]. At the same time, the educator maintains control over the pedagogical process while remaining outside the center of direct communicative contact, which is particularly relevant when working with children who experience difficulties in direct interaction with adults.

Within a structured play context, the puppet also performs a regulatory function. The repetition of verbal expressions, gestures, and interactional scenarios creates stable interactional patterns that support orientation within the activity. Such mediation enables the indirect expression of emotions and the enactment of socially significant situations in a controlled format [6]. Children are able to experiment with communicative and behavioral responses through the character, which contributes to the gradual development of dialogue, emotional regulation, and participation in joint activity [7].

Methodology for the Use of Hand Puppets and Theatrical Techniques

The methodology for applying hand puppets and theatrical play techniques in corrective and developmental work with children with autism spectrum disorders is based on the principles of structure, predictability, and gradual pedagogical engagement. The organization of activities is oriented toward creating conditions in which the child can participate in interaction without experiencing pressure or excessive sensory load. Theatrical play is employed as a means of structuring the educational process and reducing uncertainty.

The organization of a theatrical play environment in inclusive and special education contexts involves clear structuring of both space and time. The environment should be visually accessible and minimally overloaded with distracting stimuli. Objects and characters used during activities are placed in consistent locations, supporting the formation of stable expectations. The beginning and conclusion of each session are marked by repeated actions or rituals, which enhance the predictability of events. Within the theatrical play environment, the hand puppet is introduced as a constant element of interaction. Its appearance, voice, and behavioral style remain unchanged across a series of sessions [8]. This consistency allows the child to perceive the puppet as a stable and recognizable object. In inclusive group settings, the puppet may also function as a unifying element,

providing equal opportunities for participation among children with varying levels of communicative ability.

Work with the hand puppet is organized in sequential stages. During the initial stage, the child is introduced to the character without any demands for active participation. The primary goal at this stage is to foster interest and reduce apprehension. The educator demonstrates the puppet while accompanying actions with simple and repetitive verbal expressions. The child is given the opportunity to observe without the requirement of immediate engagement. At the subsequent stage, the puppet is used to establish mediated contact. The educator communicates with the child through the character, poses simple questions, or suggests elementary actions. Interaction at this stage is brief and highly structured. Gradually, both the duration of contact and the number of shared actions are increased. The pace of progression is determined by the individual characteristics of the child.

The final stage involves expanding forms of interaction and transferring acquired behavioral models to other types of activity. The puppet is used to enact familiar situations and reinforce previously learned skills. Throughout this process, the mediated nature of communication is maintained, supporting the child's emotional stability.

The theatrical techniques employed within the methodology are aimed at developing communication skills and the capacity for imitation. Repetitive actions, simple dialogues, and clearly defined roles are utilized. The child observes the actions of the character and gradually becomes involved in their reproduction. Imitation is regarded as a fundamental mechanism in the development of communication and joint activity. Verbal and motor elements of theatrical play are selected with consideration for accessibility and clarity. Gestures, intonation, and facial expressions of the puppet character are deliberately simplified, facilitating

perception and reproduction. The repetition of techniques supports skill consolidation and reduces uncertainty.

Practical Outcomes and Analysis of the Effectiveness of the Methodology

Elements of the methodology were piloted within theatre-based educational programs implemented at specialized cultural and educational platforms, including the Kolo Kukol workshops (Kyiv), where hand puppets are used in work with diverse groups of children. The practical application of the theatrical play approach using hand puppets was also carried out in preschool educational settings and primary school classrooms, including inclusive and special education groups. The methodology was implemented during regular sessions and integrated into everyday educational practice. Activities were conducted with groups of varying sizes and with children demonstrating different levels of communicative development. Theatrical play elements were used both as stand-alone sessions and as components of corrective and developmental programs.

In practical implementation, the hand puppet was used to structure greeting rituals, shared play episodes, and the enactment of typical social situations. The puppet character served to present simple instructions, initiate dialogue, and support children's actions. In some cases, the methodology was combined with the subsequent repetition of play elements by educators or parents in naturalistic settings, which facilitated additional consolidation of acquired skills.

Throughout the application of the theatrical play approach, changes in the communicative and emotional behavior of children with autism spectrum disorders were observed. An increase in the frequency of initiations directed toward the puppet character and, subsequently, toward adults was noted. Children more frequently engaged in joint activities and demonstrated a greater willingness to follow the proposed play scenarios. A reduction in avoidant behavior and a decrease in anxiety-related emotional responses were also observed. These findings suggest that the

approach may be regarded as a mechanism for engaging children in addressing learning and behavioral tasks through play-based interaction. The use of the hand puppet supported participation even among children who typically experience pronounced difficulties in establishing contact, while for other participants it contributed to increased attention, motivation, and emotional stability during sessions. The methodology showed particular relevance in work with children presenting difficulties in behavioral and communicative regulation, including autism spectrum disorders and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, as reflected in reduced avoidance and increased duration of shared activity.

Changes in the emotional domain were expressed through a more stable emotional state during sessions. Children maintained attention for longer periods and demonstrated fewer signs of fatigue. In some cases, an expansion of the range of expressed emotions and improved ability to recognize emotions within play situations were observed. The use of the hand puppet facilitated freer expression of emotional states in an indirect and mediated form.

The effectiveness of the methodology was largely dependent on adherence to specific conditions of implementation. Key conditions included stability of group composition, regularity of sessions, and consistency in the puppet's characteristics. Maintaining a unified narrative and behavioral style of interaction was also essential. Disruptions in predictability or abrupt changes in the format of sessions were associated with reduced effectiveness.

The reproducibility of the observed outcomes was supported by the adaptability of the methodology to different educational contexts without altering its core principles. The use of standardized play scenarios, repeated rituals, and a clearly defined sequence of stages enabled the approach to be applied across various groups and institutions. An additional factor contributing to sustainability was the involvement of educators and parents in reinforcing play-based models beyond

structured sessions. It should also be noted that the methodology is interdisciplinary in nature, situated at the intersection of theatre practice, psychology, and pedagogy. This integration supports flexibility in application and creates opportunities for further development and experimental research in educational and corrective practice.

Conclusion. This study examined the pedagogical potential of hand puppets and theatrical play techniques in corrective and developmental practice with children with autism spectrum disorders. The findings indicate that theatrical play enables mediated interaction aligned with the psychoemotional and communicative characteristics of this group of learners.

The hand puppet functions as a pedagogical mediator that supports communicative initiation, engagement in joint activity, and the development of imitation skills within a structured play context. The systematic use of theatrical scenarios facilitates the formation of communication patterns and participation in shared interaction.

The results confirm the relevance of theatrical play-based approaches in inclusive and special education settings. Observed outcomes demonstrate the applicability and reproducibility of the methodology under defined organizational and methodological conditions, supporting its use as an effective tool in corrective and developmental practice with children with autism spectrum disorders.

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