Classroom Observations Through the Eyes of a Puppet

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The Pennsylvania State University, in partnership with the State College Area School District, has given me the unique and amazing opportunity to be an intern in an exceptional kindergarten classroom. Throughout this experience I have had the opportunity to experiment with new techniques in a safe and encouraging environment.

My kindergarten classroom is comprised of 23 vibrant and unique personalities that creates a wonderful classroom dynamic. My classroom is made up of twelve girls and eleven boys. Though I am cautious to label students, I do have a wide range of achievement levels. I prefer to label students according to their achievement rather than ability, because achievement is measurable, where as ability is not. There are seven high achievers, five females and two males. Among the thirteen average achievers are five females and seven males. There are only four low achieving students, two females and two males.

There is one child who has Downs Syndrome, however he does not spend much time in the classroom. Even though he is not in our classroom much of the day, students accept him as part of the class. The newest addition to the classroom has also brought in a special need, ADHD. Classmates are not aware of this student’s need and it is not a noticeable problem in the classroom. Students have begun to accept this new addition with letters and offers to play.

There are no consistent leaders or followers in the classroom. During the course of the year I have witnesses many changes in roles and behaviors. The cliques have remained, however they are not so strongly bonded that it effects the classroom community.
Throughout the year we have had two new students join our classroom. Students were excited and welcoming to the new additions. Initially there was concern about how the classroom environment would change. Fortunately any changes that have occurred have been a positive ones.

On a typical day in my classroom, students are seen playing, talking and working with each other. There is a general feel of acceptance amongst the students. With the exception of one child, students work together to build towers, sound spell words and read books.

My previous experiences with children have left me feeling confident with my classroom management techniques, my interaction with students and creating a sense of community with in a classroom. However, I was looking for something new and innovative. Eventually I stumbled across the idea of utilizing a puppet.

I feel that it is important for teachers to continuously grow and take new risks. Bringing a puppet into the classroom is not only important for teachers development but for classroom/student growth in attending, engagement and writing.

**Why use a puppet?**

“…Using a classroom puppet is like team teaching. Children like the change of pace and variety that comes from using a puppet to introduce a lesson or help solve a classroom conflict. A puppet can add that special spark to motivate and capture the children’s attention that the ‘regular’ teacher can’t do.”(Dempsie) This idea is what truly motivated me to explore using a puppet. Television shows such as Fraggle Rock and Sesame Street capture the attention of children, but why? And how will using a puppet
benefit my students? Children are easily intrigued by fantasy and using a puppet is a fun and creative way to help the teacher interact with his or her students.

“Puppets appear to help children to coordinate their own experiences with language as well as teaching them to be an attentive audience and to overcome their egocentrism.” (Quisenberry, 1972) Puppets also have “the gift of making friends with children and this is especially valuable for children who may be subject to discrimination…Puppets can focus on the child rather than on the disability.” (McIntyre, 1979) With a classroom of diverse learners and diverse needs, research encouraged me to continue my journey with a puppet.

My Wonderings…

What are different ways that I can use puppets in a classroom?

- Can having a puppet friend help with writing practice and assessment?
- How can a puppet help with classroom management?
- Can a puppet help build and support classroom community?
The Inquiry Plan

Searching for the perfect puppet.

Once I decided to introduce a puppet in the classroom, I began to look for a compatible puppet. I began looking online to see what my options were, but I kept coming back to the same brand. The children puppets were 24 inches tall, had movable hands and looked like a small child. I then needed to consider the gender of the puppet. I decided that a female voice would be easier for me to create and keep consistent. I also felt that I would connect with a female puppet better than I would a male. The puppet I chose has a friendly face and is aesthetically appealing. I wanted the children to want to look at her but also not to be distracted by her clothing or other features.

Her name is…Betty

Once I received the puppet I needed to create a name and a profile. I needed a name that was not common in case a new child came in with the same name. I also remembered my mentor telling me that she usually has a child whose name ends with ‘y’. She uses the child’s name as an example for when words end with the long ‘e’ sound but
are spelled with a ‘y’, such as funny or silly. Taking all of this into consideration, I named her Betty.

Once she had a name, she needed a profile- a family, likes, interests- students needed to be able to relate to her. While creating Betty’s profile I wanted to make sure that I was not creating gender specific roles. Betty has great shoes, so I thought that soccer was an appropriate sport for her. I also looked at my class profile and noticed that many students have parents who are divorced. Because of this trend, Betty has a mom, step dad and a dad. I also included grandparents and a brother.

In kindergarten, it seems that the simplest commonalties create a friendship, so I tried to keep it simple. I gave her a favorite color, pets and children’s book. Once I created her profile, I created her book.

**Betty’s Book**

Betty would be a special friend in the classroom, one that only I would have access to. I still wanted students to be curious about her and feel connected with her. I created a book using simple pictures that relate directly to the text (see appendix). For example, page three of Betty’s Book reads “My favorite color is red.” The page is illustrates with red crayons and a red ladybug. Once Betty was introduced to the class and student’s had looked at Betty’s Book, I created a classroom scrapbook (see appendix). It is a collection of student photographs, drawings and letters.

**Introducing Betty**

One week prior to Betty’s arrival, I began posting her name on a mailbox, an attendance strip, coat hook and lunch count pocket. As I did this, a buzz filled the classroom (journal 2/6/05). I had completed my first classroom goal…I created student
interest. Once Betty had become a ‘friend’ in our classroom she introduced her book, shared/read books and helped with some lessons and classroom management.

Approximately two weeks after Betty’s arrival, I sent home a parent survey about Betty. I wanted to see if students had ‘brought Betty home’. My idea was to capture their true feelings about Betty. If students shared stories about Betty, then I felt that she had created some type (positive or negative) interest. (see appendix)

It turns out that out of seventeen responses thirteen students had mentioned a ‘new friend’ in class. Fourteen out of 17 had mentioned the name ‘Betty’ at home. Parents also contributed great comments which really showed me that my students were excited about Betty. (see appendix for comments)

“Betty is funny” – student

“He made it sound as if Betty was just another new student in the class,”…”I don’t think he would have ever told us Betty’s a puppet.” –parent

“She would sing about Betty ‘Hey, Betty, would you come out to play?’” –parent

“She gets excited when talking about her” –parent

Data Collection, and how it was analyzed

* Evidence can be found in the appendix

Log/Journal - The log was used to record student comments and student reactions to Betty. I also used the log to record my observations and general feelings about what was happening in the classroom. This evidence was used to help me determine the effectiveness of my inquiry by determining student acceptance of Betty and her aids (Betty’s Book, and Betty’s Scrapbook). I was also able to determine what was useful practice. For example if I had good feedback when using Betty’s to capture student interest I would use that same practice again to create a similar effect. The journal entries
were used in a similar way, however they were more formal and detailed descriptions of events recorded in the log. These journals were analyzed in the same way.

**Student Interviews** were used to gain a better understanding of how student felt about Betty.

**Photographs and Letters** show how involved students are. Letters can be compared to other class work to determine student growth and/or confidence. Photographs document the events happening because of Betty.

**Parent Surveys** were used to see if students shared stories about Betty at home. If students did talk about Betty, parents often shared comments that their child had made. This evidence was used to determine how students felt about Betty and if they were accepting her as a member of our classroom.
What I have learned from having a puppet in the classroom.

Claim 1: Involving the classroom puppet into all areas of student learning creates a strong classroom community.

Evidence 1: Betty’s Book and Betty’s Scrapbook

To help Betty become a part of the classroom community I create a book about Betty. This book is located in the children’s library. When students have completed their work, they may spend time in the library. Students frequently pick up Betty’s Book and bring it to the carpet to read. On February 13th, I found two children sharing the book (image 1). This trend continued throughout the inquiry project. There are observations of students sharing Betty’s Book on several dates which I recorded in my log (2/15, 2/16, 3/17, 3/18). This shows that while I was trying to introduce Betty to our community, I was able to build on our classroom community. Students’ were sharing books, reading to
each other and talking to each other about Betty. This has helped to create a more open
and accepting community and create stronger friendships.

Betty also has a scrapbook which children share at library. The scrapbook
contains student letters, student drawings and photographs of students. Students write
letters and draw pictures to Betty during free time or at home. Students are not obligated
to write Betty, it is their choice. I have documented in my log, students looking through
the book (2/14, 2/16, 2/22, 2/25). On March 17th, I observed two children talking to each
other while sharing Betty’s Scrapbook. This became a common sight in my classroom,
however, what was uncommon was the two children sitting together. While I feel that
our classroom has a close community, there are still members who choose not to sit next
to or play with each other. I had rarely, if ever, seen these two children voluntarily spend
time with each other. Because they had a common interest in Betty, they were now
sharing a book and having a conversation. Had this book not been available to them, they
may have not had this time to bond.

Evidence 2: Morning Greeting

To help promote student interest in Betty, I decided that she would randomly come out
and visit during opening. Part of our daily opening is a song where we shake each other’s
hands to say ‘good morning.’ On 3/17, 3/21 and 3/23 Betty joined the class in shaking
hands. Students rushed over to shake Betty’s hand. Students appeared to be excited
about Betty joining us at this time. During this informal greeting, students were shaking
hands with each other and many had smiles on their faces. This shows me that the class
has accepted Betty into their community and that they themselves, are accepting and feel
safe in their community.
Evidence 3: What is all the excitement about?

There is a birthday bulletin board in my classroom. Each student has a candle with his or her birthday date on it. I wanted to include Betty in this classroom celebration, so I made a candle and a birthday date for her. In image 2 students have written about Betty’s birthday in their kidwriting journals. When students came in and began writing about Betty’s birthday they were excited and talked amongst each other.

Later that afternoon the students asked if we could sing to Betty. This is routine that we do for each student’s birthday and when they wanted to include Betty in this tradition, I
felt that they had truly accepted her as a friend/classmate. Image 3 is a photograph of the students singing to Betty on her birthday.

It was important that students included Betty into their community so that I could successfully incorporate her into our daily lives. When students began writing her letters and drawing her pictures I felt that they were exploring the new addition to our room. However, when students included her in the birthday song and their writing, I felt that the students had officially accepted Betty. I had also conducted several student interviews which further proves student acceptance of Betty (see appendix).

Q- How do you feel about Betty joining our class?

Interview 1 –“I feel like she’s my friend”

Interview 2- “I’m glad she’s here”

Q- What do you think of our new friend Betty?

Interview 3- “She’s really nice, and she’s really interesting”
Q-Do you feel that she is a member of the classroom?

Interview 3- “Yes…because she’s a girl in our class. She’s not even different than the other girls, even though she’s a puppet.

Interview 4- “We have 23 kids in our class ‘cause Betty came!”

Though the main goal was to create a strong community among the student it was just as important for them to accept Betty into that community.

Claim 2: Using a puppet creates the opportunity for new and positive techniques for classroom management.

Evidence 1: Band-Aid for Betty

Picture 2 shows Betty with a large Band-Aid on her head. My mentor and I were noticing that our students were having difficulties remembering the ‘no running inside’ rule. That afternoon (3/24), Betty came out of her box with a Band-Aid on her head. She was very embarrassed about her accident, and shared what had happened with her friends. Students appeared shocked or in awe, many mouths had dropped and there was a silence in the classroom. I had hoped that they would be concerned. Betty talked to the students about how running is not safe and they agreed to walk when they were inside. The following week (3/28), Betty reminded the students to walk while inside. Since then, students have been doing a much better job at walking in the classroom and I attribute it to the few reminders about Betty’s boo-boo.
Having a puppet allowed me to talk to my students at their level. Betty was not reprimanding their behavior, and therefore was not seen as another adult telling them not to do something. Because of their attitude towards Betty, they appeared to be truly concerned. Without Betty there would have been a class discussion about walking but there would not have been a positive motivation to make them want to walk. “Puppets can add that special sparkle to a lesson and capture the children’s attention better than a human teacher can. They are more fun than a human and they add variety.” (Dempsie)

**Evidence 2: Quiet Openings**

I had been noticing that there had been some chatter during morning openings. This is an important time for them to listen and learn respect for the speaker so, I decided that Betty would be used to reinforce quiet behavior. On March 17th, students were told that if they were quiet during opening, Betty would come out and visit (log 3/17). “Students responded by sitting up, (and having) hands in laps,” “I feel that) students were

Betty ran and fell.
3/24/05
more quiet, less call outs, than usual.” (log 3/17) This positive behavior continued on the 18th, 21st and the 23rd of that same month. Betty comes out sporadically to encourage responsible opening time behavior, but I no longer offer reminders.

As with the Band-Aid, Betty allowed me to create an environment where I’m not constantly reminding my students to be quiet and behave. This allows me to focus on the task at hand, and waste less teaching time. Their desire to have Betty visit is their motivation to be responsible.

Claim 3: Puppets help the teacher learn to be spontaneous and flexible, open up to new, inventive ideas and techniques.

Evidence 1: Making a puppet

While planning for a unit on butterflies I wanted to add some creativity to my favorite book, The Very Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle. Up until this point, I had only used Betty when I was looking for something specific. I decided to make a puppet that represented a caterpillar, out of a long sock and some felt. I had visualized what I wanted to happen when I read the book. My idea was that ‘Hank’ the caterpillar, would read the story as if Hank were the caterpillar in the story. While reading, he would be mimicking the same actions such as eating and making a cocoon.

At the end he would go into a paper bag and come out as a butterfly. I made a separate puppet, which would represent Hank as the butterfly. This puppet would be placed in the paper bag/cocoon, and would be switched to show the change.

As I was making Hank I was thinking of voices and how I wanted to have the
children participate with the story. When I finished making Hank, I practiced and took photographs (image 5). On April 14th, Hank visited my classroom with much success. Students were attentive, participated and giggled. Students responded to the story by counting the foods that he ate and responding my questions and queues. The entire show went just as I had visualized it.

By bringing Betty into the classroom, I have found a new way to interact with my students. “Puppets can stimulate thinking, imagination, creativity and spontaneity”, (Leyser, 1984) and Betty had brought my creativity to the surface. As a teacher when I am passionate about something, my goal is for my students to be equally excited and I feel that puppetry is a wonderful way to convey that enthusiasm.

Evidence 2: A Skit?! (Water Cycle Skit script and log entry 4/18/05 in appendix)

After my positive experiences with Betty and Hank, I felt confident enough to try something new with my students. To create student interest in the current unit (Water Cycle), I began looking for new ways to use puppets in the classroom. I began by searching through readers theaters. Knowing that my students were not yet capable of
performing these skits on their own, I began to modify the readers theaters to meet the needs of my classroom.

After editing the skit, I created paper cutout figures in the shapes of the characters and added popsicle sticks so that the puppeteers could manipulate them (image 4). Using the other two teachers in my classroom and a puppet stage, I had created a simple play which captured the attention of my students. “Students were all engaged with all bodies facing forward (and) eyes on characters.” (Log 4/18) This skit was exactly what I was looking for, an engaging introduction to the water cycle which would create student interest.

Evidence 3: Impromptu (PDA’s observation/ 4/20/05)
The morning routine can lose its flair occasionally, and on this Wednesday morning, their (students) glazed expressions told me that they were feeling the same way. After our morning routine, I decided that Betty would visit. I had not prepared for her visit and was unsure of what would happen, but that’s part of the spontaneity that a puppet allows you. As soon as Betty came out “students perked up,” “all heads looking (looked) forward-(and there were) lots of smiles” (PDA observation, see appendix) This is exactly what we all needed to begin our day. After we sang the good morning song and greeted each other with a ‘pinky shake’ Betty began to introduce the following activity, letter stations. She “made a joke about letter stations” and the students “laughed appropriately.” (PDA observation, see appendix) Betty asked what they did at letter stations and when she misunderstood student laughed and offered more information. Betty soon said goodbye and letter stations began. As students were sent off to their stations, they appeared to have more spirit in their step than they did before Betty visited.

While using puppets, skits or readers theaters is not a new idea, it is a new experience for me. Because of the introduction of one puppet into the classroom, I feel more confident as a teacher and I am more willing to take new risks and be spontaneous. (Log 4/18)

Claim 4: A classroom puppet is an effective tool for teacher’s assessment of student writing and confidence with the writing process, as well as an aid to promote writing.

Evidence: Difficulty with backward letters
There is a student in my classroom that struggles with backward letters. She is now aware of this problem and appears to be frustrated with herself sometimes.

It is important to me that children know that they are not alone and that others have difficulties too. One afternoon during free time, Betty wrote this child a letter with many backward letters in it. The letter asked this child for help, to find and circle the backward letters. This child was so excited not only to have received a letter but that Betty was asking her for help. She chose to help Betty and complete the task before joining her friends during playtime (Image 7).

Using this tool helped me to do two things: help boost a child’s confidence and see if she was able to identify the difference between Betty’s letters and the letters on the chart beside her. I was able to determine that she can identify the difference between the letters. I now know that I can continue to encourage her to use a letter chart to check her work before she turns it in. I can also say that this child no longer needs to feel alone in her challenge and that I can continue to use Betty to encourage and praise her efforts.
Evidence 2: Scribble vs. print: A window into a students’ confidence in writing.

“You can use a classroom puppet to encourage the children’s writing” (Dempsie). By doing this one can see how their students feel about writing, where they are in their writing and their self-confidence with writing.

As I was collecting Betty’s mail and putting it in her scrapbook, I came across a peculiar letter. I see many letters written to Betty (appendix) and often do not think twice, but in this letter the student chose to scribble lines instead of letters or words. I know that the student struggles with her writing, however, she can identify all of the letters and letter sounds. Image 8 is a sample of the child’s writing, and image 9 is a photograph of the letter that she wrote.
If I had been given these two images and asked to examine them, I would not have guessed that they were from the same child. I began to question why. Why would she choose to make scribble over text? After a discussion with my mentor, we came to the conclusion that this child still does not feel confident in the writing process. This let me know that I needed to spend more time encouraging her during kid writing *. She still writes in scribble sometimes however had it not been for Betty I would not have recognized her need for encouragement for writing text.

*Kidwriting is a writing/phonics program developed for kindergarten through second grade. Students draw pictures and then write a story telling about the picture. The teacher then goes over the student’s work with them, putting the ‘adult’ spelling below the child’s writing.

Kid Writing: A Systematic Approach to Phonics, Journals, and Writing Workshop by Eileen Feldgus and Isabell Cardonick

Evidence 3: Student letters to Betty

Many students have written Betty letters and she has been a wonderful tool to help me encourage student writing. In image A, a student is using her kidwriting journal to find a word to help her spell a word correctly. This student had learned to use her resources and also practicing her writing. By choosing to write to Betty, it shows me that her confidence with writing is good and that she feels comfortable using writing as a form of communication.
Image 10 is a photograph of two students who are writing a letter to each other. Writing a letter to a pretend friend is safer than writing to someone who may judge or correct you. As in evidence 2 in this section, the child who scribbles, she may write in scribble to Betty because she feels that it is safe. The two students who are writing to each other have moved to the next risk level, writing a peer. This is evidence that Betty has not only encouraged writing, but in effect has boosted student confidence.

**Conclusions and Future Directions**

Using Betty has had many implications for my future practice as a teacher. I intend to continue using Betty in the classroom. I hope to find new ways to incorporate her into the school day. I also plan to expand my repertoire of puppets. I have bought another puppet that I hope to use in an upcoming unit on frogs. I hope to find ways to incorporate puppets into the curriculum. In my future classroom, I hope to encourage student use of their own puppets and to let students interact with each other through the use of puppets.

I have developed many new wonderings since I began using Betty in the classroom. I noticed that the girls in my classroom were more interested in writing letters to Betty, would this be true if I used a male puppet instead? Would a male puppet
increase the male students interest? What if I used an animal puppet as a classroom mascot; would there be a gender difference there as well?

I also wonder, what are other ways that I can use Betty in the classroom? How can I incorporate her into a school day that is already so full? And lastly, at what age are students no longer intrigued by puppets? While Betty has given me answers to my initial questions she has created so many more which I hope to explore in my career as an elementary teacher.
References:
Dempsie, George. Date Unknown. “A Puppetry Strategy for Primary Teachers.” State College Area School District: Pg.2-11

