

UNIVERSITY OF EAST ANGLIA

NORWICH
PUPPET THEATRE'S
**THE RAGDOLL
PROJECT**
AN EVALUATION



“The arts empower children. Access to the arts and culture is access to our national life, and is the universal right of every child. Every child’s entitlement should be met. Cultural capital – the factual knowledge, intellectual skills and emotional intelligence that are gained through exposure to the arts – is acquired over time, as children are introduced to the ideas, images and values that constitute the culture of their families, their communities, and the wider world. Children and families who feel ownership of the arts and culture feel more confident in their ability to create, challenge and explore, to be a part of society and to make change happen. Children denied this access can feel locked out and left behind.”

CULTURAL LEARNING ALLIANCE, 2017, p. 7

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Teresa Smith | May 2020

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Prepared for Norwich Puppet Theatre

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Report presented to Norwich
Puppet Theatre August 2018



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Norwich Puppet Theatre. (photo: Wikicommons).



1

CONTEXT

Norwich Puppet Theatre (NPT) commissioned this report to evaluate the impact of a pilot schools outreach project carried out in primary schools in Norfolk during the autumn and spring terms of the academic year 2017–18.

This report has two core aims. In the first place, it examines the efficacy of The Ragdoll Project, considering the successes and highlights of its delivery in schools. Secondly, it is interested in what can be learned from the project experience to support Norwich Puppet Theatre in moving forward with its schools' education programme, with suggestions of possible 'next steps'.

The key questions that this evaluation report sets out to explore are:

- Has the project inspired a 'buzz for learning', creative thought and self-confidence among pupils taking part?
- Has the project helped teachers to integrate creative approaches into their everyday practice?
- How have the workshop sessions and resources provided by Norwich Puppet Theatre supported the needs of the National Curriculum at KS1 and KS2?

ABOUT NORWICH PUPPET THEATRE

Norwich Puppet Theatre is one of only three building-based puppet theatres in England. It is situated inside a converted medieval church on the outskirts of Norwich city centre and offers a wide range of shows for families and children, which both play in Norwich and tour in the UK and internationally. The theatre is home to a family of puppets spanning over thirty years, many of which are displayed in the entrance foyer and around the walls of the theatre. It is a unique small space that manages to connect with its visitors and audiences, and the magical character of the space adds an extra dimension for the audience members who attend shows and workshops there.



PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Ragdoll Project was a seven-month Ragdoll Foundation-supported project funded by a £21,100 grant awarded in December 2016. The overall aim of the project, as communicated by Norwich Puppet Theatre, was to extend access to their learning and artistic programmes to children and teachers who may otherwise have struggled to access their cultural offer. The funding allowed the programme to be offered to schools at a much-reduced price. Each school was offered four contact days with NPT consisting of:

Phase One (October 2017)

- An in-service training (INSET) day for teachers, at NPT, focused on preparation and planning of workshops.

Phase Two (January to April 2018)

- An initial 'inspirational' theatre visit
- Two days of puppet-making workshops in schools led by NPT education staff
- A celebration/showcasing event or activity.

THE RAGDOLL FOUNDATION

The Ragdoll Foundation is dedicated to supporting the creation, appreciation and awareness of imaginative and innovative content that reflects the world from a child's point of view.

Through a combination of grant giving and special initiatives the Foundation aims:

To provide a space for alternative thinking, voices and practices and to encourage self-confidence, innovation, risk-taking and the sharing of ideas.

To seek new creative solutions by combining perspectives, cultures and disciplines to promote new approaches to creativity and innovation.

To seek partners, collaborate and share knowledge by creating connections and being responsive to supporting co-operative ventures across sectors.

PROJECT PARTICIPANTS

THE CHILDREN

A total of 168 children aged between 4 and 9 years old, from seven classes in six schools, participated in the project. The schools chosen to participate were connected via a school cluster catchment area. Eight schools were approached and offered the opportunity to take part; six took up the offer (three infant schools and three primary schools). The schools and classes varied enormously in size and location, and therefore there was a wide variety of approaches to cater for, different levels of parental and child engagement to consider and huge variance in the prior cultural experiences of the children and class teachers themselves.

THE TEACHERS AND SCHOOL STAFF

There were seven teacher participants, plus further support staff in each classroom. Three teachers attended the INSET planning and preparation day.

NORWICH PUPPET THEATRE STAFF

The project was led and delivered by two Creative Learning Co-ordinators based at NPT.

PROJECT ACTIVITIES

PHASE 1

TEACHERS' INSET PLANNING AND PREPARATION DAY AT NORWICH PUPPET THEATRE, OCTOBER 2017

Teachers from the six schools taking part were invited to attend a planning and preparation day at Norwich Puppet Theatre, led by two staff from the creative learning team. Three out of the seven teachers attended this day.

The aims of the day were:

- To investigate/discuss the opportunities for learning within puppet making and performance
- To begin to collaboratively plan two days of puppet making and performance sessions
- To help teachers to feel confident and in control of the project.

PHASE 2

‘INSPIRATIONAL’ SCHOOL VISITS TO NORWICH PUPPET THEATRE, JANUARY 2018

In total, 168 children and 25 adults visited Norwich Puppet Theatre over three days. Each visit lasted three hours and each class watched a performance of a puppet show in the main theatre space. Following the show, each class also participated in a ‘show and tell’ session where the puppeteers shared puppets both from the show and from the collection permanently based at the theatre, and answered questions from the children.

PUPPET-MAKING WORKSHOPS IN SCHOOLS, JANUARY–APRIL 2018

Each participating class took part in two days of puppet-making and performance workshops in their school, led by one of NPT’s creative learning team. These workshops lasted for the duration of each school day (9am–3pm) and were individually planned according to the needs of each class and the teachers’ ideas and preferences.

All children made their own puppet, and some classes chose to design and make group puppet theatres to facilitate performing afterwards. Some classes focused on writing scripts and developing performances, others made use of much more free-choice time, with children learning particular puppeteering skills and then exploring their puppet possibilities either on their own or in a group with friends.

SHOWCASING OF WORK

The initial project application suggested a ‘showcase’ of work at Norwich Puppet Theatre at the end of the project. This aim altered as a result of discussions with participating class teachers and schools, owing to financial and organisational constraints. Instead, two schools chose to share work with parents in school at the end of their workshop days, in the form of sharing assemblies or puppet show performances.

A showcase exhibition was also organised at a local library, allowing for further dissemination of the whole project to the local community. The exhibition lasted for one month and consisted of some of the puppets created in the school workshops, photographs and written information about the project, and a free ‘drop-in’ puppet-making workshop held in the library during a school holiday week.

THE ARTS AND CREATIVITY IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

There are many arguments for the inclusion of a comprehensive arts education within the primary curriculum (Kear and Callaway, 2000; McArdle and Boldt, 2013): as an important learning area in its own right; for its intrinsic worth; and as an area that can effectively complement other aspects of learning. How we position children as learners within the arts curriculum is of paramount importance. ‘With all pupils, in all types of schools, the arts provide an expressive outlet, and a learning tool. By their very nature, they invite participation and response, they inspire and challenge’ (Kear and Callaway, 2000, p. 10).

McArdle and Boldt (2013) highlight the importance of the role of the school curriculum in arts education, recognising that in the contemporary era, when learning, curriculum and assessment are often narrowly standardised to what are commonly considered ‘academic’ subjects, the place of the arts in schools is often at risk. Given this, they argue that ‘it is more crucial than ever to insist that privileging the arts can lead to important ways of exploring, knowing and expressing the world and one’s place in it’ (p. 7). This view can be found echoed across the decades by those who have sought to explore the ever-changing nature of the arts in schools (Taylor and Andrews, 1993; Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1989; Kear and Callaway, 2000; Schmid, 2005).

There is also fierce debate over what is, or is not, ‘the arts’ or ‘art’, and it is often difficult to arrive at a common understanding of what can and cannot be included within these terms (Kear and Callaway, 2000). Some authors clearly set out those ‘arts disciplines’ included within their research: ‘creative writing (literature, poetry); visual arts; drama; music; movement and dance; new media (photography, film, television, computer art)’ (Kear and Callaway, 2000). McArdle and Boldt (2013), similarly, list the ‘five strands of the arts – visual, drama, music, dance and media’. The 2017 report by the Cultural Learning Alliance *ImagineNation: The Value of Cultural Learning*, states: ‘The “arts” is a broad term that includes a wide range of disciplines from theatre, dance, literature, storytelling, music, craft and visual arts to film, spoken word, digital media, photography and beyond.’ There is generally some level of consensus, but where puppetry fits into these lists is often difficult to ascertain.

Alongside research on the arts as a vital tool to help children explore experiences and develop new forms of communication, there is a growing body of research that recognises how the arts in schools, alongside the teaching of creativity, play a significant role in health and wellbeing. Schmid (2005)

recognises that ‘educators are in a unique position of enabling and encouraging every individual within the whole population to activate this health- and pleasure-giving facet of their own nature’ (p. 1).

The position of puppetry in schools, perhaps as one of the arts, or perhaps as a vehicle for creativity, or simply for the sake of puppetry in its own right, will have impacted on this project and may have contributed to or detracted from it according to how each school or class teacher prioritises the arts in the classroom.

THE VALUE OF PUPPETRY

Puppetry is a form of theatre or performance that involves the manipulation of puppets. It is very ancient and takes many forms but they all share the process of animating objects to create a performance. Puppetry is used in almost all human societies both as an entertainment and in performance. Most puppetry involves some degree of storytelling. The impact of the puppetry depends on the transformation process, from puppets into characters with which we can interact. This can be a magical experience for children. Thus, puppetry can create complex and magical theatre with the use of simple, everyday materials.

(SpiralOrchard, n.d.)

As intimated above, puppetry occupies a rather elusive and precarious position within the primary school curriculum, being generally subsumed within other more distinct subject areas. Since puppetry is not explicitly specified anywhere within the National Curriculum documents, the production of puppets often sits haphazardly somewhere between Art and Design and Design and Technology activities, perhaps never quite fitting into either perfectly. When we consider the use of puppets beyond the act of the making of them, and add in the performance element of puppetry, the activity becomes even more difficult to pin down. Some authors note that puppetry is a language, a means of communicating ideas and feelings, and therefore has a place alongside other forms of communication. To give children skills in and understanding of this language enables them to open multiple kinds of communication channel (Astell-Burt, 2002; Currell, 1980). Furthermore, Astell-Burt (2002) argues that puppetry is, primarily, a language of movement, which places it somewhere alongside drama, music and dance.

So it appears that puppetry is an art form that occupies a ‘strangely dichotomous’ position in our culture (Currell, 1980, p. 8) and is often undervalued in both arts and education circles (Astell-Burt, 2002).

... it is highly popular, but often lowly regarded; it can be a serious art form, but is more often a child’s pastime; it is a performance art, but has long remained fixed at the level of a craft activity. In the educational context, its power and appeal are recognised but its potential seldom realized.

(Currell, 1980, p. 8)

The education team at NPT spoke of frustration at how puppetry is often overlooked, how the skill and craft of the puppeteer is often unrecognised and how the unknowing observer can, mistakenly, equate puppetry with ‘just’ play, children and novelty. The skilful expertise of the puppeteer is also rarely a focus for learning, and this is perhaps in part due to the very nature of puppeteering, in that the puppeteer tends to be secondary to the main puppet performer.

Yet in many schools there remains, despite pressures on teachers to return to the basics of the core subjects, a desire to ensure that pupils are given opportunities to explore and engage with a wide range of arts, within which puppetry is sometimes included. While it goes beyond the remit of this report, it is perhaps worth considering why the schools that took part in the project chose to do so and how they participated effectively, as well as why two of the schools in the cluster that were invited chose *not* to take part.



2

APPROACH

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY AND PROCESS

The evaluation began in October 2017 and was carried out by Teresa Smith, a Lecturer in Primary Education based in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of East Anglia, who was assisted by Michele Otway, also of the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of East Anglia.

A qualitative evaluation approach was designed to help capture participants' experiences and reflections as the project progressed. Data collection methods were specifically chosen to reflect the limited time that all participants had for reflection and offering responses, with particular consideration in this respect given to the teachers involved and the age of the child participants. UEA ethics guidelines were adhered to.

Key evaluation activities included:

- Meeting with NPT staff to ascertain the nature of the project and the requirements of the evaluation
- Completing a desktop literature review of evaluations of similar projects and the current literature on arts education projects
- Developing the evaluation approach and methodology, including ethical approval
- Selection of teachers/classes/schools on which to focus during the evaluation process: this was influenced primarily by teachers' attendance at the INSET day (three attended), where they met the principal evaluator, who explained the evaluation process and gained consent for data collection in schools
- Providing the information and ethical consent form to teachers, pupils and families of those taking part in the project
- Developing and distributing feedback forms

- Meeting with teachers and NPT staff to gather information about each class's learning and teaching aims and needs
- Making observation notes while attending workshop sessions in three participating schools
- Collecting and analysing data
- Writing the report and sharing results.

INTERVIEWS AND QUESTIONNAIRES

In Phase 1 of the project the principal evaluator attended the class teachers' INSET day at NPT. This enabled her to meet the three teachers that attended and to gain consent to collect data in workshops held at those teachers' schools. Note-taking, photographs, informal discussion and evaluation forms all provided data from this day.

After the Inspirational visits to NPT, the NPT staff were asked to complete a questionnaire to record their thoughts and reflections on the visits.

After the school workshops were completed, an informal interview was held with the two NPT staff who facilitated workshops in schools.

LETTERS AND EMAILS

There was some correspondence between class teachers and NPT during the project, as well as letters written by children to NPT after participating in the project.

IN-SCHOOL WORKSHOP OBSERVATION

The evaluators attended one day of a two-day workshop in each of three separate schools, taking observation notes and photographs. It was also possible to talk with some of the children and

additional adults in the classes, as well as have informal discussion with the NPT education staff and the class teacher as each workshop day progressed.

NPT INTERNAL REPORT

NPT produced their own short internal evaluation report in April 2018, which has contributed to this final evaluation report.

LIMITATIONS OF THE EVALUATION

TIME CONSTRAINTS

Despite enthusiasm and willingness, it was difficult for teachers to find time to meet and speak further about the project and its outcomes. The methods of data collection – observation and questionnaires – were therefore chosen to limit the amount of time required of teachers.

SAMPLE SIZE

Data was collected from three classes taking part, which represents approximately 50 per cent of the overall participation in the project. The results from the other three schools might have differed considerably, although it may be possible to assume some similarities based on conversations with NPT staff.

PRIORITIES IN SCHOOL TERMS AND CURRICULUM

The three teachers who attended the INSET day were all keen to take part and to be available to support the evaluation process, but they also highlighted the pressure they felt to make additional opportunities such as this project align with the priorities of the school, which are often core subject-based. The project took place within the Spring term and, once the workshops and showcasing events had taken place, the impetus to reflect further passed with the end of that term.

DATA COLLECTION

One of the key evaluation questions that NPT would have liked to have answered was ‘Has the project supported teachers to integrate creative approaches into their everyday practice?’ To collect data for this would have required access to the teachers and schools beyond that possible for this evaluation, in terms both of timescale and of study size, and therefore any suggestions we might make regarding this question would lack the necessary rigour and certainty. Despite this, it is possible to consider this question in relation to the immediate period of the project.



3

FINDINGS, EMERGING THEMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

NOTABLE FEATURES OF THE PROJECT

THE VALUE OF NEW EXPERIENCES

The project included many new experiences for many of the children, including visiting a puppet theatre, seeing a puppet show and creating a puppet themselves. The positive impact of these new experiences on the children became clear in their discussions of them afterwards. Some children spoke of the building itself and its memorable features: 'I loved it, but it was a bit scary because of all of the puppets hanging down [in the entrance foyer].' Others spoke of their favourite moments, such as holding the puppets at the puppet theatre or watching the performance (within which particular elements were memorable for each individual, such as 'the funny little worm in the show!'); and several children spoke of their wonder that only one puppeteer was able to bring so many different characters and voices to life in the show. It was evident that some children subsequently drew on these new experiences in successfully creating their own shows: for example, one girl turned the lights off 'because that's what you do for a show!'

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAYFULNESS

Children are expert thinkers. In play, they test out their ideas and theories; they recreate what they know of the world, from their own experiences They test out what it is like to think inside many alternative worlds of reality and fantasy. They step into the shoes of others and think as they might think. ... In their play children make sense of the world.

(Rich et al., 2006)

Playfulness was a key feature in all of the observed sessions, regardless of the age of the children participating. It was most noticeable in one infant class workshop (children aged between 4 and 7), where children began to play with their puppets as soon as they had finished creating them. For example, one boy moved confidently across to the scenery in the classroom's role-play area, peeking his puppet through a window and saying hello to everyone who walked past. He was followed by a girl, who moved to the other side of the window with her puppet, whereupon both puppets began interacting with each other. Another child in the same workshop approached an adult and said 'my puppet can shake hands', creating a flurry of handshaking around the room. The use of a quieter classroom space was also beneficial in allowing children to freely explore the possibilities of their puppets without being watched or assessed by teachers or other adults. This separate room very naturally became the performance room, where children engaged playfully and performed with their puppets without hesitation.

THE VALUE OF IMPROVISATION

One key, and perhaps also new, aspect of learning for some children was the ability to improvise and use their imagination freely with their puppets. The use of movement featured strongly in many children's play – so, for example, one child found obvious delight in the movement of his dragon. He moved around the classroom swishing the fabric body around other children, saying, 'it moves like a Chinese dragon!' Another boy was keen to demonstrate how his 'person' puppet, with human features, could move in an unusual twisting motion. The physicality of these puppets was important and immediately engaged both boys.

The improvisation of scripts was most apparent within an infants' classroom, where children freely invented their own characters, names and voices without indecision or self-consciousness:

*Once upon a time there was a little unicorn who lived all alone and next door there was an evil snake. Then one day along came a cat and she wasn't alone anymore ...
One day a superhero came to a farm.
Do you want to live here? The princess says 'yes!' ...*

THE ROLE OF THE ADULT

Levels of adult participation and engagement differed within the various school workshops, although we can perhaps assume that each school and/or class teacher placed some value on the project simply because they had chosen to take part. Yet there was also clear observational evidence that children valued the times when the class teacher actively engaged with the puppet-making process. One teacher found it useful to share with the children a puppet that she had previously made at the class teachers' INSET meeting at NPT. In enthusiastically bringing this puppet 'out to play' alongside the children's puppets, she validated the children's activities and modelled to the children the potential of their own puppets: so, for example, she showed how the puppets might talk to one another, and took part in a game of 'it' with three other children's puppets, thus extending the puppetry beyond the confines of the cardboard box puppet theatres that had also been produced.

Consideration should also be given to those adults who do not participate quite so fully. One teacher felt confident enough to leave the NPT workshop leader by herself with the class for the majority of the puppet-making time. In another workshop two teaching assistants returned to the classroom at lunchtime to create their own puppets, yet chose not to participate in the puppetry techniques activity that the NPT workshop leader engaged the children and their puppets in afterwards. Pertinent here, perhaps, are adults' preconceived ideas about puppetry and embarrassment about performing in front of others. In addition, the benefits and drawbacks of the teacher being present or absent in workshops scenarios should be recognised, as should the importance of the teacher's modelling valuing the learning.

CONFIDENCE IN THE CHILDREN'S ABILITIES AND COMPETENCIES

There was a clear emphasis within workshops on enabling pupils to achieve highly. When children struggled they were encouraged to persevere, and, as shown by their actions and conversations as the workshops progressed, the NPT team were keen for all children to be able to take home a finished puppet. The puppet-making method was simple and accessible to children of all ages. This enabled success for all, and for children to feel proud of what they had produced.

THE EXPLICITNESS OF THE LEARNING

A critical moment arose within one workshop when a child queried the learning with his teacher. 'Are we going to do any learning today? ... but I like this [implying it is not learning], I like art.' Another child in that workshop asked his teacher about her expectations for the performance: 'are you going to tell us what to say? ... but I don't want to be a baddie'; the teacher subsequently explained that 'you don't have to be a baddie. That's what's great about today, you can do whatever you want!'

The changing expectations of what is and is not learning, the implication that learning is not fun and the ambiguous fit that puppetry has within the National Curriculum led to a sense now and again throughout the project that learning might in fact be lacking.

However, the enthusiasm shown by teachers was key in engaging children further. It also showed the children that the teachers valued the learning experiences that they were all participating in:

*What an amazing morning we've had!
We're so lucky, aren't we? So many children would love to be doing what we're doing today!*
(Class teacher comment to her class mid-way through workshop)

There were some moments within workshops when a teacher or a member of the NPT creative learning staff made a deliberate effort to focus the children on the learning, but these seemed to be afterthoughts rather than embedded teaching techniques designed to help children recognise the value of the learning experiences they were participating in.

THE SKILLS OF THE WORKSHOP LEADER

The feedback from the evaluation established that the schools workshops were delivered in a conscientious and professional manner. The professionalism and sensitive approach of the NPT workshop leaders facilitated the successful outcomes and positive impact of the workshops. The NPT workshop leaders showed skill and expertise in terms both of their knowledge of puppetry and puppeteering and of working with teachers and children.

The workshop leaders regularly referred to the children as a group of ‘puppeteers’, thus reinforcing their important position alongside their newly created puppets and supporting them in recognising both their responsibilities and their power. There was powerful modelling from the workshop leader in one workshop. For example, she spoke directly to the puppets, telling them to be quiet so that the puppeteers could listen and hear her next instructions. In the parents’ assembly at the end of the day she also supported the children highly effectively, confident to engage both the puppets and the children equally during the ‘show and tell’ session in front of parents.

In another school, the workshop leader spent a long time gluing and making final additions to children’s puppets at the hot glue gun table. In conversation afterwards, she spoke of the luxury of having time to spend on these final additions, and of the useful conversations she was able to have with individuals about their choices for their puppets as they came to her for help with finishing.

In yet another workshop the workshop leader showed quick thinking in supporting the children with story planning ideas.

The workshop leaders brought expert knowledge of puppet construction and performance and could teach and demonstrate specific puppeteer skills. They also introduced language and vocabulary associated with puppetry and performance, and this was shared with pupils and modelled to school staff and parents throughout the workshop days.

DEEP ENGAGEMENT

There was evidence that many children developed a strong emotional connection with their puppet, and this personal relationship between puppet and puppeteer was given sufficient time to develop in the workshops observed. There was a quietness and sense of engagement to the making time that is often unusual in a busy classroom, and this was typical of all the school workshops that were visited. Children were observed to be immersed in their

own world, with their individual thoughts, and were sometimes overheard having conversations with both themselves and their puppets as they created them.

The array of resources and unusual items available to decorate the puppets brought gasps of delight from the children when they were finally able to use them, and many became enthralled with one particular decoration or one particular element of how their puppet might look. Very often, the decoration choices supported the children in developing their puppet character, and the luxury and variety of what was on offer provided children with real pleasure and excitement.

One teacher spoke on the planning day of wanting to offer the children in her class ‘something that they’ll be talking about all year!’ and the responses from the children, both during the workshops and in thank-you letters written afterwards, suggest that memorable experiences were had by many.

The children have had a brilliant time and gained so much. I’m pretty sure that it will stay with them forever.
(Class teacher comment)

PSHE EDUCATION FOCUS

As well as developing skill and unlocking creativity, I have witnessed how the arts can transform young people’s lives; nurturing resilience, self-esteem, communication and leadership.
(Cultural Learning Alliance, 2017, p. 18)

PSHE (Personal, social, health and economic education) is a non-statutory subject in schools that, some would argue, frequently does not receive the time or the priority that it should do. Yet, despite this, during the planning day all three teachers made explicit reference to PSHE skills that they hoped to see develop in children throughout the project.

One teacher shared her knowledge of the emotional deprivation of many of the pupils in her class and, recognising that their emotional needs came before other, academic needs, asked for the project to ‘give a voice to the quieter children’ and ‘improve confidence’ in all.

Another teacher was keen to develop social skills and an understanding of compromise in her pupils. Her knowledge of her pupils’ lack of opportunities to problem solve and be independent was also key in her request for children to ‘be able to start something, become fully engaged and see it all the way through’.

Other suggestions for learning focuses included: perseverance; friendship and collaboration; respect for each other; peer evaluation; and recognising emotions.

In the children's thank-you letters at the end of the project there was also evidence of PSHE learning, as these extracts demonstrate:

*I also enjoyed working as a group and working with people I wouldn't usually work with.
... when you try something for the first time it will not always worck [sic], but you need to keep trying.
I was most nervous about the puppet show because my little sister was there and there were lots of people.
I also learnt how to work more efficiently with my team.
I have learned how to make puppets and that it's about teamwork and also patience.*

Class teachers commented on individual children the project particularly engaged or supported, and NPT also recognised key individual success stories in their reflections after events:

A child who initially was quite anxious about entering the main theatre space and the darkness when the lights went down was able to overcome this anxiety to sit with his peers to watch the whole show.

(NPT staff reflection)

KEY FACTORS IN SUCCESS

The Ragdoll Project has been an important and successful arts education programme. All participants spoke of strong impact and engagement and effective learning taking place in a multitude of ways. The programme has provided an opportunity for experimentation and learning for Norwich Puppet Theatre, and NPT's own evaluation report highlights a wealth of positives:

*[This project] has allowed us to engage with schools in a meaningful way over an extended period of time, responding and adapting to the needs of each school and its children.
The project has given us the opportunity to share good practice as a learning team ... learning taken from this experience ... can now be applied to our ongoing practice.
We offered children and adults participating in the project cultural experiences out of their normal frame of reference.*

Next we refer back to the key questions that this evaluation report set out to explore.

EVALUATION QUESTION 1:

Has the project inspired a 'buzz for learning', creative thought and self-confidence among pupils taking part?

In creating a range of experiences for the children that engaged and fostered creative thinking, Norwich Puppet Theatre achieved its aim of developing a programme that has inspired and challenged pupils to achieve.

Responses from all participants indicate that the inspirational nature of the project was a particular strength. In all schools, the workshop days contributed to a short-term culture of creativity during the timescale of the project, and this was evidenced both through comments and actions during the workshops and through examples of children taking their learning home and developing it further.

Thank you – inspirational! We just wanted to say thank you for yesterday [the school visit to NPT], we all really enjoyed it! Some people enjoyed it so much that they went home and created one.

(Class teacher email following school visit to NPT in January)

The children absolutely loved their trip, so thank you very much. A lot of them said it was the best trip they had ever been on. They can't wait for March when they get to make their own puppets and perform. It's going to be great!

(Class teacher email following school visit to NPT in January)

One class teacher spoke enthusiastically about how many children in her class were already confident with puppet play before the project, but that this confidence had really 'shone through' during the two workshop days in terms of how they explored their own puppet's potential and how keen they were to share and perform their shows to each other.

This particular infant classroom, at many points through the workshop days, was a hive of imagination and invention – of voices, names and puppet personalities. There was evidence of children being deeply engaged: three 5-year-old boys sat for a long time engaged in their own puppet play, seemingly oblivious to all going on around them; one 5-year-old girl lay on the carpet alone, writing sentences about her puppet on a small whiteboard ('My puppet is called Melody. She eats purple and green flowers ... and then wings!'); another girl moved across to tell me about her elephant puppet and the puppet theatre she had made at home the previous evening: 'I chose sparkly things. It is SO sparkly!'

Children who participated in the project gained in many different ways. They had the time to immerse themselves in making and performing, a chance to visit somewhere new and an arts experience that provided space and inspiration for their own learning. The use of puppet-making activities and group puppet-theatre-making activities encouraged children to be confident and expressive. The children enjoyed the workshop sessions and received real satisfaction from their participation. This satisfaction cannot be measured, but is clear from feedback from all participants. All those participants spoken to acknowledged the power of the arts to engage and deeply affect children's thoughts and actions.

EVALUATION QUESTION 2: Has the project helped teachers to integrate creative approaches into their everyday practice?

It is difficult, because of a lack of data, to answer this question with rigour or clarity regarding teachers' longer-term everyday practice. However, there is evidence of immediate short-term impact on teachers.

One of the notably successful aspects of the project was the incorporation of the teachers' INSET day (Phase 1 of the project), when teachers were invited to meet at NPT to plan the workshops for their classes. This served an important function in terms of information sharing, open communication and collaboration between NPT staff and teachers, and encouraged mutual understanding, cross-learning and joined-up thinking.

In facilitating this day, the role of NPT's education team was crucial. Teachers have very little spare time, and therefore it was essential that this day was relevant and reflected a positive use of their time. Creative methods were used to engage participants in a manner that encouraged openness and helped teachers to understand the project aims. In their evaluation discussion afterwards, teachers noted the importance of the NPT creative learning staff being 'so in tune with children' and 'incredibly clear', and described the planning process as 'supportive and interactive'. The teachers talked enthusiastically and freely, both in led discussions and during 'free' puppet-making time, considering the needs of their pupils and sharing stories and experiences with each other. There was discussion of the similarities and differences of their schools, all within the same cluster, and of previous puppet-making and creative arts experiences.

The three teachers who attended this planning and preparation day commented favourably on all aspects of the day:

[Making puppets and performing myself] inspires my teaching.

We have been able to discuss everything in a relaxed environment with professionals who really knew about children and who have worked with children in different contexts. Working practically has been a wonderful experience.

I can't wait to share with my class what they will be doing.

I loved it!

I was really in my zone [when making the puppets]!

We can excite the children because we have been here and done it

I've enjoyed time to make [puppets] ourselves as adults. We never have time for this sort of thing.

Words and phrases that were repeated within the data collected from the teachers' INSET day include: clear; practical; relaxed; tailored to suit our class; creative; inspirational; supportive; informative; inspiring. One teacher commented on the benefits of 'having some kind of direction but some freedom too'.

NPT education staff also felt that the visits to NPT in Phase 2 of the project were 'highly effective' in supporting teachers' own development. They commented on improved teacher confidence within their evaluations and reflections:

We have been shown through the course of the project that teacher confidence in the project and creative activities can have an enormous potential effect on the quality of the experience for pupils taking part. ... [Taking time to speak with teachers on the NPT visit] helped teachers feel more relaxed in an unfamiliar setting, in turn helping the children to have a calm, happy experience on their visit to the theatre.

The visits [to NPT] seemed to be effective in supporting teachers in terms of their confidence in bringing their children out of school.

EVALUATION QUESTION 3: How have the workshop sessions and resources provided by Norwich Puppet Theatre supported the needs of the National Curriculum at KS1 and KS2?

The planning and preparation day helped enormously in allowing teachers and NPT staff to focus the workshops on relevant and appropriate curriculum objectives. The project fulfilled elements of the school curriculum in English and Drama, Design and Technology and Art and Design, as well as some thematic areas (for example, creating puppets linked to a Roman theme). There may well be other curriculum areas that were also lightly touched upon.

The puppet-making sessions, story development and performance also fulfilled many PSHE Education elements. While participating in the puppetry workshops children learned many things: drama, art, performing, thinking skills, hands-on materials usage, oral language development, self-confidence, problem solving, recognising emotions, teamwork, collaborating, and making sense of the world through play and making.

The combined learning of teachers and NPT staff, the joint planning and preparation and the regular informal communication between all participants were key features in strengthening the learning and the joined-up thinking and in creating success in terms of covering the school curriculum so effectively.

There was some transfer of skills and knowledge between NPT staff and the teachers, which might help to ensure the sustainability and longer-term impact of the project. Some suggestions were made about how the teachers who took part in the project might be able to share the techniques and process with other classes in their school. Teachers appeared to acquire confidence with the puppet-making process and some basic puppeteering skills, such that they would be able to share and repeat these after the project was over.

One NPT creative learning team member reflected:

Whilst I do feel that the shows do provide a strong stimulus for learning, the visits to the theatre to see our in house shows could have supported the needs of the national curriculum even better if we had been able to provide teachers with specific resources to support follow-up learning in class. As it stands we don't have a resource pack for each show which is explicitly related to the curriculum, something that we are keen to develop but have not been able to up until now due to staffing and time constraints.

NPT's desire to work flexibly with the needs of the schools and children has been a very positive aspect of the project. They already recognise where there may be some gaps in their educational resource materials, and hope in time that these may be remedied with more funding and/or time allocation. Educational resource packs would add a further layer to the learning that is possible, and therefore likely, when schools choose to collaborate with NPT.

Yet, despite some of the gaps that do exist, NPT staff also worked proactively throughout the project to support teachers with immediate project issues. For example:

I created a visual story for teachers to share with their children before the visit to support any children who may be feeling anxious about visiting a new place. One class teacher mentioned on the day that they had all looked at the visual story as a class and she felt it had really helped the children prepare for the visit.

(NPT staff comment)

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The results of the evaluation of the project suggest that the effectiveness of future schools projects and programmes with NPT could be increased in a number of ways.

1. Making clear and effective links between the 'inspirational' theatre experiences and learning that takes place 'back in the classroom'

In this project, the children's making of puppets was preceded and complemented by a creative encounter at Norwich Puppet Theatre. This was a key factor in the project's success, and it is worth considering how the visit to NPT to watch a show influenced pupil thinking.

The experience of being part of an audience is a powerful one. Excitement and atmosphere build as the audience wait for the performance to start. For the period of the performance the everyday world is in suspense and the world of the imagination takes over. The aspects of the experience that engage the children may surprise the adult. For example, one child spent an entire performance watching the way in which the lights changed, fascinated by the different effects that could be created.

(Duffy, 2003, p. 125)

Links between the performance seen at the puppet theatre and the school workshops could be made more explicit, and the role of the puppeteer could be explored more clearly. For some children the role and expertise of the puppeteer was one of the most memorable and fascinating aspects of the visit. For others, the fascination with the building, the lights and the space may have been worth exploring in different ways. Finding ways to listen to the children's voice, of capturing the performance through the children's eyes, will naturally support and steer the learning 'back in the classroom'.

2. Challenging and changing expectations, with particular regard to puppetry and puppeteering

There is potential for highlighting puppet making, puppetry and puppeteering as elements of an art form in its own right, thus developing the children's sense of puppetry as an art form to which to aspire. Many teachers have little knowledge of puppetry beyond, sometimes, the basics of being puppet show consumers themselves, and their engagement with education programmes from NPT will allow them to offer children expertise beyond that which they can offer alone. To be most successful there should be a balance sought between promoting puppet making and puppetry as accessible to and inclusive of all, while accepting that the children and the teachers are being encouraged to learn aspects of 'expert' puppetry that involve practice, perseverance and a high degree of performance and puppeteering skill.

3. Development of school resources

Resource packs are valued by teachers, and different types of resource could be developed for different purposes at NPT. Resources to support teachers in organising a school trip to the theatre would be good for developing teacher confidence in NPT as a valuable, accessible and manageable place to visit. Resources linked to particular shows can also be useful in supporting teachers both before and after visiting with their class, to extend learning and ensure that the creative capital gained from the visit remains with the child beyond the day itself. Teachers would also benefit from being able to access resources that develop their own teacher expertise in puppetry and puppeteering. One teacher noted on an evaluation form that a 'practical' support pack would be useful, 'teaching how to move ... etc.' So, providing teachers with clear guidance about skills and technical aspects would develop confidence and widen the impact of NPTs in-house expertise. Puppet resource boxes, containing examples of selected puppets,

informational texts, lesson plans and so on, are also a possible future development.

Although the usefulness of resources packs for the classroom is acknowledged, it is important that teachers continue to desire to access the puppet theatre itself with their pupils. A balance needs to be achieved between supporting, teaching and instilling confidence in teachers' own capabilities concerning puppet making and puppeteering, while ensuring that the variety, experience and expertise of the creative learning team and resources at NPT itself remain valued.

4. Building effective relationships with teachers from the outset

A recognition of the need for teachers to feel 'safe' at all stages of a partnership or a project is vital. This was a real strength of The Ragdoll Project, and all participants spoke highly of the benefits of the INSET planning and preparation day. It seemed important that the teachers who had attended the INSET day had gained something, especially from partaking in a similar experience to that which their pupils would be participating in themselves. Teachers enjoyed, and felt safe in, the opportunity to 'play' at NPT. There was significance in the shared experience of the day, and in being provided with a physical resource (their puppets) to return to school with. The NPT education staff commented on the noticeable differences between teachers who had and had not attended the INSET day:

The teachers who had attended were initially a lot more confident and relaxed whereas teachers who had not attended appeared more 'on guard' and tense about the day. This could perhaps be attributed to a lack of familiarity with the space and the face-to-face contact with us as organisers? It made me wonder if there was anything else we could have done to help these teachers feel more at ease about their visit without that experience of the venue. Maybe a venue guide for teachers?

Finding methods of putting teachers at ease may begin with simple strategies such as adding the names, photographs, biographies and contact details of the NPT creative learning team to the schools pages of the website. Currently the names are available elsewhere on the website, but the initial contact point for teacher enquiries is generic.

The ongoing use of telephone and email communication also appeared to facilitate the building of effective relationships with teachers involved in the project, as well as to reassure them at different stages.

The evidence from this project highlights that effective relationship building with teachers begins, yet does not end, with straightforward organisational support. In educational contexts it is important to consider the experiences of the teachers themselves and how these shape and design the experiences of their pupils.

The gift of confidence for the teacher is also a gift of confidence for their students, enabling them and their students to explore and express their feelings and ideas through the rich expressive means available to us as humans.

(Davis and Dolan, 2016)

5. Establishing the importance of the creative process rather than the outcome as the priority for learning

The difference in approach that each school workshop took is admirable, in that time was dedicated to focus on and plan work alongside teachers that at the very least complemented and, if possible, added to the class's 'normal' curriculum. The intended outcomes for each individual class and class teachers' desire for a final performance or showcasing event were also given appropriate discussion time on the INSET day. These showcasing events are an important part of the puppetry genre and puppet-making process, and are valued in schools as they help, in many ways, to justify the value of taking part in such arts experiences. However, time must be given to recognise the importance of the process too. Facilitating reflection time for teachers on this aspect and offering support in how to justify and prioritise the process when presenting to other stakeholders (school management, parents etc.) would be positive features of any future projects.

6. Clarity about puppet making as a medium for learning, or as the main learning focus itself

The use of puppets as method is not without its complexities. At times during the project puppets were used as a medium for learning about other things – as, for example, a useful illuminating tool for a topic. At other times the puppet making itself was the main learning focus. Puppets can easily be relegated to the role of learning medium only, as a means to another end, rather than as the learning product and process in their own right. The explicitness of the difference between these two ways of seeing can, one might argue, be crucial to the effectiveness of the learning taking place. So clarity around the main focus is key, and providing workshops or experiences that cater for both aspects could be a positive way forward.

7. The need for challenge – physical, technical or intellectual

Too often children of ten are still making the same sorts of puppets and performing the same sort of show as they did when they were seven ... when it ceases to be a challenge, it deserves not to be taken seriously.

(Currell, 1980, p. 12)

The same puppet-making method was used with all children in all workshops. Given that it was not known how much puppet making the pupils had done previously, this was a sensible decision that allowed all pupils to achieve and succeed. Other methods allowed differentiation to come into play: for example, the older and more capable pupils were challenged to achieve more highly in some ways than the younger children taking part. Yet, still, there is perhaps room for a more distinct challenge scale within future projects, specifically in terms of the puppet making and puppeteering aspects. This is especially important if the same teachers, children or schools were to access future workshops. Part of this challenge is also about ensuring that teachers have sufficient knowledge of puppet making and puppeteering progression that they are able to decide upon suitable challenges. These challenges may be technical, and linked with specific making skills, or they may be intellectual – for example, developing the puppet character through careful consideration of movement and voice.

8. Recognition of the life-changing capabilities of the arts

Experience of art and culture in school can shape all our lives. Through culture we encounter the values and imaginations of others, past and present. Creativity is therefore one of the essential ingredients of a rich and tolerant society and of personal and national identity. It should be one of the cornerstones of education, not an option or an afterthought and we should be celebrating all kinds of intelligence and intuition, not creating hierarchies within the disciplines of the mind.

(Cultural Learning Alliance, 2017, p. 18)

Throughout the project there has been the sense that these children have benefited from connecting in a deeper way to the arts and to puppetry. The value of new experiences has been central to the project and highlighted by the participants throughout the process:

*This is completely out of their
[the children's] normal experiences.*

(Class teacher comment)

*It has been great for them to have
the experience of visiting the theatre,
they were all enthralled by the show.*

(Class teacher comment)

*When asked on Wednesday if anyone
had been to the theatre before, none of
the children on that day had visited before.
This felt like a good indication that we
had chosen a good geographical area
to focus on and schools to work with.*

(NPT staff evaluation comment)

*I wish I could be a puppeteer
and make puppets like you!*

(Pupil comment)

*I have never done anything like that
[puppet making and performing] before!*

(Pupil comment)

An arts education contributes to a variety of aspects of a child's development, powers and personality. The degree of personal relationship and attachment that children developed with their puppet creations was also clear to observe.

The project also provided new positive experiences for the class teachers, learning and reflective space for NPT's education team and, ultimately, pride, enjoyment and a sense of ownership and achievement for the children involved.

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“Arts education is not a luxury, it’s a necessity. It’s really the air many of these kids breathe. It’s how we get kids excited about getting up and going to school in the morning. It’s how we get them to take ownership of their future.”

THE CULTURAL LEARNING ALLIANCE, 2017, p. 1



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