

## Article

# Examining Puppetry's Contribution to the Learning, Social and Therapeutic Support of Students with Complex Educational and Psychosocial Needs in Special School Settings: A Phenomenological Study

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## Abstract

The present study focuses on investigating the contribution of puppetry as a pedagogical and psychosocial tool in special education, addressing the literature gap in the systematic documentation of the experiences of special education teachers, concerning its use in daily teaching practice. The main objective is to capture the way in which puppetry enhances the learning, social and therapeutic support of students with complex educational and psychosocial needs. The study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach, conducting semi-structured interviews with eleven special education teachers who integrate puppetry into their teaching. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings highlight that puppetry significantly enhances cognitive function, concentration, memory and language development, while promoting the active participation, cooperation, social inclusion and self-expression of students. In addition, the use of the puppet acts as a means of psycho-emotional empowerment, supporting positive behavior and helping students cope with stress and behavioral difficulties. Participants identified peer support, material adequacy and training as key factors for effective implementation, while conversely, a lack of resources and time is cited as a key obstacle. The integration of puppetry in everyday school life seems to ameliorate a more personalized, supportive and experiential learning environment, responding to the diverse and complex profiles of students attending special schools. Continuous training for teachers, along with strengthening the collaboration between the arts and special education, is essential for the effective use of puppetry in the classroom.



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**Keywords:** puppetry; special education; complex educational needs; psychosocial support; inclusive pedagogy; arts-based interventions; phenomenological approach

## 1. Introduction

The recent literature indicates a growing international interest in incorporating the arts and applied theater into the educational process. This trend is supported by increasing

evidence of their positive effects on students' cognitive, social, and emotional development [1]. In the realm of special education, the use of creative and participatory practices is increasingly gaining attention, particularly as they facilitate learning, promote social inclusion and provide psycho-emotional support for children with complex educational and psychosocial needs, which may encompass a variety of emotional, behavioral or social challenges [2].

Applied puppetry refers to the intentional use of puppets and object theater in educational, community or therapeutic contexts to promote creativity, communication and participation [3]. Puppetry, as an applied form of theatrical art par excellence based on symbolic and dramatic play, has always been a tool for encouraging expression, creativity and social interaction in the school context [4,5]. The relevant literature highlights its ability to shape frameworks of safety, acceptance and free communication, in which children are invited to experiment with roles, process experiences and manage social and emotional situations in a way that goes beyond conventional teaching practice [6–10]. For example, Eleta and Dolci [9] discussed how multilingual and intercultural puppetry projects help children express themselves across linguistic and cultural boundaries, promoting a sense of acceptance and creative exploration. Karaolis [10] described how puppets in preschool settings facilitated the inclusion of all children, particularly by supporting teachers to create welcoming and individualized learning spaces. Wang and Tseng [8] found that interactive role-play systems using glove puppetry not only engaged learners cognitively and emotionally but also fostered a sense of achievement and enjoyment in mastering new skills. Williams et al. [6] and Kurscheid et al. [7], evaluating shadow puppet performances in rural Indonesia, reported that traditional puppetry not only captured the attention of diverse audiences, but also served as an effective medium for health education and behavioral change, by integrating familiar narratives with new messages in an accessible and memorable way. Furthermore, Lenakakis et al. [5] demonstrated that puppet theater serves as a pedagogical tool for promoting intercultural dialog and familiarizing elementary school students with diversity, both through their interaction with puppets and with each other during collaborative creative processes. Another study by Lenakakis et al. [11] further supports the view that puppetry in educational contexts provides a unique forum for students to safely explore emotions, negotiate social roles and build empathetic communication, especially in settings characterized by cultural or individual differences.

Puppetry's contribution can be understood more broadly in the light of fundamental psycho-pedagogical considerations. Piaget [12] underlined the role of symbolic play as a key indicator for the development of thought and the transition from sensual-kinetic to symbolic function. Accordingly, Vygotsky [13] placed particular emphasis on the importance of play as a cultural and social tool that favors the internalization of rules, language development and cooperative learning [14], especially when it comes to learners with complex developmental profiles. At the same time, theories of therapeutic art recognize that symbolic expression through artistic activities can reinforce emotion management, mental resilience and the management of trauma or difficulties [15,16]. In practice, puppets give students a concrete yet imaginative medium to act out scenarios, express emotions through characters and experiment safely with new social roles and language. By animating puppets, students can project their feelings, test solutions to difficulties and collaboratively construct meaning, thus making abstract concepts more accessible and personal.

Despite growing theoretical and research interest, the use of puppetry as a systematic practice in special education has not yet been adequately researched, especially regarding teachers' perceptions and experiences. Documenting its learning, social and therapeutic dimensions seems to be even more necessary, considering the complex difficulties faced

by special schools and the dynamics offered by the integration of creative practices into teaching [1,4,5,17–20].

Based on the above, the present study seeks to investigate the contribution of puppetry as a pedagogical practice and psychosocial support tool in the field of special education. To accomplish this, it focuses on the experiences and perceptions of teachers working in special schools in Greece, intending to capture how puppetry enhances students' learning, social and therapeutic development, as well as the factors that facilitate or impede its effective implementation in educational settings.

### 1.1. Puppetry in Special Education and Therapeutic Intervention

Puppetry is a complex form of applied art and educational practice, where puppets and marionettes are the main instruments, which are used to facilitate communication, narration and expression of emotions and ideas [21]. Puppets are creative constructions that, through their animation by the teacher or students, are transformed into carriers of roles, stories and experiences, acting as a connecting link between reality and the imaginary [11]. Regardless of whether it is a hand puppet, a finger puppet, a stick puppet or a puppet animated by threads, each form provides the animator with the capability for a variety of movements and expressions, expanding the options for role representation and enhancing the dynamics of interaction within the group [21–24]. Especially in special education, puppetry is used in both organized and spontaneous school activities, supporting the learning, social and therapeutic process with the aim of enhancing the communication, self-expression and self-perception of students with complex educational and psychosocial needs [25,26].

The use of puppetry is based on a broad theoretical framework that highlights the role of play, art and mediation in learning and development [27]. Piaget [12] highlighted symbolic play as an essential stage for the development of thought, imagination and linguistic function, pointing out that the transformation of an object into a symbolic carrier allows the child to process experiences, roles and emotions. Vygotsky [13], through the prism of social constructivism, underlined the importance of play as a social and cultural tool that enhances the internalization of rules, language development, social interaction and knowledge building, especially in the zone of imminent development, a critical element for children with complex needs. In the field of art therapy, theoretical approaches, such as the psychoanalytic theory of symbolic expression [28,29], the humanistic model of creative self-realization [30,31] and contemporary cognitive-behavioral and trauma-centered approaches [32,33], recognize the contribution of creative play and the projective use of symbols, such as the puppet, in the processing of psycho-emotional difficulties, the enhancement of self-esteem and the discharge or renegotiation of traumatic experiences [34]. Within this context, puppetry provides children with a safe and controlled "transitional area" or "potential space" where they can try out roles, express unspoken emotions and develop self-regulation and self-perception skills [29].

The existing literature significantly documents the benefits of puppetry as an educational and therapeutic tool for students with complex needs, emphasizing its contributions to the development of language, social inclusion, self-expression and communication [35–37]. Studies underline that puppetry can function as a theater pedagogical way to enhance cooperation, self-confidence and empathy, particularly in cases of children on the autism spectrum, with intellectual disabilities or speech and communication disorders [38]. The successful implementation of puppetry requires appropriate support, adequate materials and teacher training, while the lack of these factors is recognized as a hindering factor in its systematic integration into school life [10,39].

Concerning students with intellectual disabilities, puppetry has proven to be particularly useful for promoting communication and social skills [40]. Activities designed based on social stories and narration improve interaction and expression in preschool and school-age children with autism [35,40,41]. Social stories, as developed by Carol Gray, are short, structured narratives that describe social situations and expected responses, supporting children in understanding and managing everyday interactions [42]. Puppetry seems to facilitate the participation of even the most hesitant students, acting as a mediating framework that provides security and encourages free expression and emotional discharge [43,44]. Similar forms of theatrical expression, such as role-play, drama games, storytelling and improvisation, are effectively utilized in students with moderate or severe intellectual disabilities, supporting the development of social and cognitive skills while enhancing self-expression and participation in group activities [25,45]. Previous studies have also highlighted the therapeutic dimension of puppetry, which facilitates the externalization of emotions and the psycho-emotional empowerment of students, contributing to reductions in stress and the management of behavioral difficulties [46–49]. In children with speech disorders, therapies that incorporate puppets have been associated with improvements in phonological and lexical skills [50]. Through puppet play sessions, communication skills are improved and the spontaneous use of language in everyday scenarios is encouraged. Recent studies have confirmed the positive effect of puppetry in enhancing social inclusion, developing collaborative skills and building a positive school climate that incorporates increased social engagement and the spontaneous use of theatrical play [25].

From the literature review, it is evident that the majority of studies concentrate on semi-experimental or therapeutic interventions, while only a limited number examine the perceptions of teachers regarding the practical and structured use of puppetry in special education [5,51,52]. Using phenomenological systematic recording, this study seeks to fill a knowledge gap by identifying and describing the challenges and opportunities presented by puppetry in special education in Greece, thereby contributing to the development of pedagogical and therapeutic methods for effectively supporting students with complex educational and developmental profiles.

### 1.2. Purpose and Research Questions

The present research seeks to investigate the contribution of puppetry as a pedagogical practice and psychosocial support tool in the context of special education, focusing on its learning, social and therapeutic value for students between 6 and 18 years of age with special educational needs. The study examines the experiences and perceptions of teachers serving in special schools, with the aim of capturing how puppetry enhances not only pupils' cognitive, linguistic and social skills, but also their mental resilience, emotional expression and management of psychosocial difficulties. Meanwhile, the role of puppetry in creating an inclusive and supportive school environment is analyzed, where the active participation and interaction of all students is promoted. Particular emphasis is given to the investigation of how puppetry is integrated into daily educational and therapeutic practice, as well as to highlight the factors that facilitate or hinder its effective use in special education schools. In this context, the research is called upon to answer the following research questions, based on teachers' perceptions:

1. What is the contribution of puppetry to the learning, social and therapeutic support of students with complex needs?
2. How does puppetry assist the school integration, socialization and psycho-emotional empowerment of students in the context of special schools?

3. Which factors favor or hinder the effective application of puppetry as a pedagogical and therapeutic tool in the daily practice of schools serving students with complex educational profiles?

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Research Design

The present qualitative study is based on the phenomenological approach [53], as it seeks to delve into the personal experiences, perceptions and interpretations of special education teachers regarding the use of puppetry as a pedagogical and therapeutic tool for students aged 6–18 with complex educational and psychosocial needs. As a research assumption, phenomenology is considered particularly suitable for the field of special education, especially in the Greek context, where special education schools do not follow a standardized knowledge-centered curriculum or specific textbooks, but teaching and supportive practices are dynamically shaped on the basis of the particular needs of students and the creative initiative of teachers. In this pedagogical framework, teachers take an active role in selecting, evaluating and implementing practices that they consider appropriate and effective for the specific student population. The phenomenological approach enables an in-depth exploration and interpretation of the way in which the research participants (special education teachers) give meaning to the learning, social and therapeutic value of puppet theater as a practice, as it emerges through their daily experience. It facilitates the collection of narratives or experiences that reflect the complex reality of special education.

### 2.2. Participants

Eleven special education teachers who were teaching during the school year 2024–2025 participated in the survey. The selection of the sample was carried out through purposive sampling, with the main inclusion criterion being the active and systematic use of puppetry in their teaching. This choice ensured that the participants had relevant experience with the subject matter of the study and were able to provide evidence-based answers to the researchers' questions. The sample comprised philologists, kindergarten, primary education and physical education teachers, with six of them being depute teachers and five being tenured. As for their gender, seven were women and four were men, and their years of experience in educational settings serving students with complex needs ranged from four to twenty-two years.

### 2.3. Instrument

A semi-structured interview was used, which meets the requirements of the phenomenological approach, by allowing in-depth exploration of the participants' personal experiences and meanings [54]. The interview guide was formulated based on research questions of the study and focused both on teachers' perceptions and experiences of the contribution of puppetry to the learning process and psychosocial development, as well as on the ways in which puppetry enhances school integration, socialization and therapeutic support of students. In addition, teachers' experience on the factors that facilitate or hinder the application of puppet theater in the daily teaching and support practice of special schools was examined. The interview included twelve open-ended questions, as well as appropriate exploratory sub-questions, with the aim of facilitating the free expression of the participants' views, experiences and practices, while maintaining the necessary focus on the main thematic units of the study (see Appendix A). The questions referred to specific experiences of puppetry, the observed changes in students, the difficulties encountered, and the conditions considered crucial for effective implementation. To ensure the phenomenological validity of the tool, the interview guide was checked by an experienced

researcher familiar with the topic. A pilot study was also carried out with two teachers who met the participation criteria, in order to assess the degree of understanding and clarity of the questions. The pilot implementation found that the wording of the questions was understandable and did not consider it necessary to readjust them.

#### 2.4. Procedure

Necessary approvals were obtained from the school administrations, after approval from the University of the Aegean Deontology Committee. Then, the teachers who met the participation criteria were personally approached and informed in detail about the purpose, object and methodology of the study. All participants were provided with extensive information in writing on the observance of confidentiality, the anonymity of personal data and their right to participate or possibly withdraw from the survey without any consequences whatsoever. The participation was completely voluntary and proceeded only after explicit written consent had been obtained from all teachers. The interviews were conducted securely, either in person or via an online platform, depending on the participants' preferences and availability, and lasted 15 to 30 min. During the planning and execution of the interviews, special care was taken to respect the participants' personal and professional time, as well as to choose an appropriate place for face-to-face interviews to facilitate a calm and focused discussion. Each interview was recorded with consent to ensure data accuracy, and the transcript was completely anonymized.

#### 2.5. Analysis

The analysis of verbal data followed the methodological approach of thematic analysis with inductive logic, according to the principles formulated by Braun and Clarke [55]. The choice of inductive analysis was considered appropriate for highlighting the experiences, meanings and voices of the participants without predetermined theoretical limitations, allowing the indexed verbal material to shape the basic themes and interpretative schemes of the research. The recorded data were transcribed verbatim, anonymized and registered in the QCAmap software (version 1.2.0.), an open access web application for systematic text analysis in scientific projects based on the techniques of qualitative content analysis [56], which in this study was used solely to manage, organize and categorize the qualitative data within the framework of thematic analysis. The analysis began with multiple readings of the transcripts by two independent researchers, with the aim of achieving an in-depth acquaintance with the content and identifying important meanings, patterns and recurring themes.

The open coding process was the first stage of the analysis, during which characteristic fragments of the material were labeled. As the analysis progressed, the codes were correlated and organized, through axial coding, into broader subcategories and topics. The final goal was selective coding, during which their inclusion in key thematic axes reflecting the content and dimensions of the research material was finalized. The agreement between the two raters was systematically checked using the Cohen's kappa coefficient, which amounted to 0.81, an indication of high reliability in the code matching [57]. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion, until a full consensus was reached on the wording and classification of the final codes. Methodological triangulation was also applied through independent coding and peer discussion to enhance the credibility of the findings.

Twenty-three initial codes were assigned, which were organized into nine subthemes and finally into three overarching themes, as these emerged from the research material. The presentation of the results that follows is based on the systematic development and refinement of themes and subthemes that came out from the analysis process and is

documented with indicative excerpts from the interviews. This structure is compatible with Bronfenbrenner's [58] ecosystem model, as it captures the effects of puppetry on the learning, social and emotional development of students at an individual, interpersonal and organizational level.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Puppetry's Contribution to Learning and Psycho-Emotional Development

Analyses showed that puppetry contributes to the learning, social and therapeutic support of students with complex educational and psychosocial needs, covering a wide range of functions within the classroom (See Table 1).

**Table 1.** Thematic codes and dimensions of learning, social and therapeutic support through puppetry.

Subtheme	Code	Description
Learning Support	Cognitive engagement	Enhancement of attention, memory and understanding through puppetry
	Language development	Improvement of oral expression and communication
	Active participation	Involvement and activation of students in the teaching process
Social Support	Team collaboration	Strengthening cooperation and teamwork among students
	Relationship management	Promoting interaction, resolving conflicts and strengthening friendly relationships
Therapeutic Support	Inclusion	Facilitating acceptance and participation in the school environment
	Expression of emotions	Ability to externalize and manage emotions
	Boosting self-esteem	Strengthening self-image and self-confidence through participation.
	Stress coping	Reducing stress and enhancing psychosocial adaptation

Regarding learning support, the teachers underlined that puppetry functions as a means of activating cognitive function and as a tool to facilitate concentration and memory, especially in children on the autism spectrum and learners with moderate intellectual disabilities. Participant 4 characteristically noted, "*In children with autism, I noticed that when we use puppetry, they retain their attention for longer and remember better the steps of a story*". Language development is also an important field, with many reporting that students, especially those with speech and communication disorders or low cognitive functioning, show improvements in oral expression and communication skills through role-playing with puppets. As Participant 6 described, "*I have a student with severe intellectual disability who refuses to speak in class. But when he handles a puppet, he begins to express himself in words and participate in the dialog*". In addition, the experiential dimension of puppetry mobilizes even the most hesitant students, offering them the safety of distance from the actual exhibition. As was noted, "*Puppetry motivates even the most hesitant pupils to participate, because the puppet acts as a shield that gives them courage*" (Participant 2). Some teachers noted that simple hand or rod puppets, as well as puppets made by the students themselves from everyday materials, were particularly effective and engaging.

Concerning social support, the teachers highlighted the contribution of puppetry to the cultivation of teamwork and cooperation, an element that proved to be particularly useful for students with behavioral and interactional difficulties. Participation in group puppet activities enhances the ability to reconcile and resolve conflicts, as one participant noted: "*In my group we have two students with ADHD who have difficulty working together. Through puppetry, they manage to work together and discuss the script to some extent*" (Participant 7). Moreover, the enhancement of social inclusion is underlined through the experiences of students who initially indicated social isolation and gradually, through the assignment of roles and interaction with classmates, managed to feel accepted and functionally integrated

into the group: “A student with mild cognitive and learning difficulties began to integrate more into the group when we assigned her a role in the performance” (Participant 3).

Referring to therapeutic support, teachers focused on the effect of puppetry on the expression of emotions, the enhancement of self-esteem and the treatment of anxiety or behavioral difficulties. Through the roles of the puppets, students with emotional difficulties or anxiety found a safe framework to talk about their worries and emotions: “A boy with intense anxiety agreed to ‘talk’ through the puppet about what worries him, something he had never been able to do in any other activity” (Participant 1). Furthermore, the use of the puppets as a mediation tool helped reduce tension and facilitate the psychosocial adaptation of students who experienced frequent outbursts of anger or emotional instability: “Children with outbursts of anger calm down more easily when the puppet ‘talks’. It is as if they distance themselves from the problem and manage it more calmly” (Participant 5).

### 3.2. Puppetry as a Means of Integration and Social Empowerment

Analyses showed that puppetry functions as an artistic means of enhancing the school integration and social empowerment of students with complex needs (See Table 2).

**Table 2.** Thematic codes and dimensions of integration, socialization and psycho-emotional empowerment through puppetry.

Subtheme	Code	Description
Integration	Participation in joint activities	Active involvement of all students, without discrimination
	Sense of belonging	Cultivating a climate of safety and acceptance
Socialization	Build friendly relationships	Developing social skills and relationships
	Encourage communication	Improving verbal and non-verbal communication
Psycho-emotional empowerment	Self-expression	Encouraging free expression of thoughts and feelings
	Acceptance of diversity	Cultivating respect and tolerance

Teachers repeatedly stressed the contribution of puppetry to the creation of a non-discriminatory environment, where all students have the opportunity to actively participate in common activities. “Even children who are usually isolated or experience difficulties to get involved find their role in the group when we work with the puppets,” said Participant 3. Participation in group puppetry activities seems to enhance a sense of belonging, as it promotes a climate of safety and acceptance, where students feel that they are an integral part of the school community. As another teacher noted, “Children with social adjustment difficulties began to feel more secure when they shared roles to play with the dolls” (Participant 10).

Regarding socialization, participants pointed out that puppetry contributes substantially to the creation of friendly relationships and the development of social skills. Many children who had difficulties in establishing friendships or appeared particularly closed off, through teamwork and role-sharing with the puppets, were able to become closer to classmates and build more stable social bonds. “We had a student with selective mutism who gradually began to communicate with her classmates through puppetry”, said Participant 4. This improvement was not limited to oral communication, but also extended to non-verbal communication, as students were taught to interpret expressions, gestures and roles, thus expanding their social repertoire.

The dimension of psycho-emotional empowerment also strongly surfaced in the teachers’ narratives. Puppetry provided students with a safe framework for self-expression

and free expression of thoughts and feelings, giving voice even to children who usually avoid talking about themselves or their feelings. One teacher described the transformation of a student with anxious tendencies, who *“through the puppet managed to express for the first time what concerned him”* (Participant 6). Moreover, puppetry emerged as a means of cultivating respect and tolerance, promoting the acceptance of diversity within the school group. *“When we negotiate diversity issues through dolls, children seem to identify more easily and accept the particularities of their classmates”*, underlined Participant 8.

### 3.3. Reinforcing and Inhibitory Factors of Puppetry’s Application into Practice

Table 3 displays a variety of factors that either facilitate or hinder the use of puppetry in special education, as well as specific suggestions for improvement made by the teachers themselves.

**Table 3.** Thematic codes and emerging reinforcing and inhibitory factors for puppet theater exploitation.

Subtheme	Code	Description
Reinforcing factors	Administrative support	Support from administration and training team
	Availability of materials and infrastructure	Adequacy of equipment, materials and suitable premises
	Teacher training	Use of training opportunities
Inhibitory factors	Lack of time	Difficulty in puppetry’s integration due to limited teaching time
	Inadequate training	Lack of knowledge/skills about puppetry
	Limited resources	Material shortages
Suggestions for improvement	Need for systematic training	Recognized need for additional training
	Suggestions for better integration	Specific ideas and suggestions for improving practice

Administrative support emerged as a decisive supporting factor, both from the school principals and from the wider educational team. The coordinated attitude of the administration and the positive mood of the colleagues strengthen the feeling of security and encourage the implementation of innovative artistic activities. As a teacher characteristically noted, *“When there is open support from the principal, we can experiment more and organize puppet games that involve the whole school or, if not all, students from other classes”* (Participant 11).

The availability of appropriate materials and infrastructure also appears to be an important reinforcing factor. Adequacy in equipment, materials and spaces enables teachers to fully implement their plans and design activities tailored to the needs of students. Furthermore, the existence of education and training opportunities in the use of puppetry is recognized as an essential prerequisite for its effective integration into teaching practice: *“Some seminars I attended that were related to the use of theater as an educational method helped me to try out new techniques in the classroom”* (Participant 2).

However, important inhibitory factors still exist. The lack of sufficient teaching time is seen as a major obstacle, as the pressure of many actions that need to be taken makes it difficult for puppetry to be systematically integrated. In addition, the inadequate training of teachers creates a degree of insecurity and hesitation in the use of puppetry, although teachers notice benefits of it. A lack of resources (puppets, fabrics, etc.) often acts as a hindering factor, especially in school units with limited facilities and infrastructure. *“We are often forced to improvise with what exists, because there are not always the necessary materials”*, said Participant 9.

Concerning suggestions for improvement, special emphasis was placed on the need for the systematic and specialized training of teachers in the use of puppetry as a special

education tool. The participants propose the organization of more seminars and workshops regarding the use of applied theater in education, but also the creation of manuals of good practices. Specific suggestions for the better integration of puppetry into daily practice were highlighted, such as the creation of special spaces in each school unit, the strengthening of collaborations between teachers and the recognition of puppetry as an official part of the special education program. These proposals aim to further strengthen the practice and ensure equal opportunities for all students to participate.

#### 4. Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the contribution of puppetry as a creative, pedagogical and psychosocial practice in special education, focusing on its learning, social and therapeutic value for students with complex educational and psychosocial needs. Through the experiences and perceptions of special education teachers, the findings highlighted the multidimensional role of the puppet and, at the same time, the factors that reinforce or hinder its application in educational practice.

Regarding the first research question, it was found that puppetry constitutes a flexible and effective pedagogical means of enhancing cognitive function, concentration and memory, especially for students on the autism spectrum or with intellectual disabilities, but also, in general, for children with communication or language difficulties [45,50]. Teachers described how puppetry facilitates the participation of even the most hesitant students, acting as a mediating framework that provides security and encourages free expression [4,5,43]. In this context, the use of simple hand or rod puppets, as well as puppets created by students themselves from everyday materials, was reported by educators to be particularly effective and engaging. The opportunity for students to participate in the creation of their own puppets not only fostered creativity but also increased their sense of ownership and involvement in the learning process. The utilization of puppets has allowed students who avoid verbal communication to express themselves and participate actively, which is in line with previous research on the value of alternative forms of expression in facilitating learning in learners with complex needs [35,40,41]. At the same time, the therapeutic dimension of puppetry strongly emerged. Students were able to articulate thoughts and feelings that they had difficulty expressing in other circumstances, which contributed to stress reduction, psycho-emotional empowerment and the management of behavioral difficulties, supporting self-esteem, mental resilience and emotional discharge, especially when systematically integrated into the school environment [15,46,48,49].

In relation to the second research question, puppetry seems to be a factor in the school integration and social empowerment of students. The participants emphasized that through teamwork, the distribution of puppet roles and experiential engagement with them, positive conditions of integration are formed, where each student feels that he or she belongs and is accepted by the team [25]. Puppetry promoted cooperation, facilitated the development of friendly relations and contributed to the resolution of social difficulties, even in cases of children who initially presented social isolation. The ability of students to express their emotions through the puppet created a framework of acceptance and safety, while promoting respect for diversity and the cultivation of empathy. The above findings are in line with the related literature, which highlights the contribution of the arts to inclusive education, to enhancements in students' sense of belonging and to the fight against social isolation in students with complex educational needs [21,35–37,44].

Concerning the third research question, specific reinforcing and hindering factors affecting the application of puppetry in the school environment were recorded. Administrative support, the adequacy of materials and infrastructure and the training of teachers emerged as key prerequisites for the successful integration of the method [10,38,39]. On

the contrary, a lack of time and resources, along with the absence of systematic training, acts as an inhibitor and often leads to the fragmented or superficial application of puppetry in practice. Participants underlined the need for further specialization, systematic training and the institutional recognition of puppetry as a tool for supporting learners with complex needs, in order to ensure the conditions for the all-embracing participation of students. These findings are in line with previous research, which underlines that the success of creative and participatory methods in special education requires institutional support, adequate infrastructure and the continuous professional development of teachers [17,59].

## 5. Limitations and Future Research

The present study focuses on the perceptions and experiences of special education teachers who have incorporated, to some extent, puppetry into their teaching and supportive practice. The degree and regularity of puppetry could not be quantified precisely, which may affect the heterogeneity of the sample in terms of the experiences and results reported. Additionally, the selection of the sample through purposive sampling favors the collection of data from people with greater awareness or a positive attitude towards creative teaching methods, limiting the possibility of generalizing the findings [60].

Despite the fact that reliability assurance procedures were implemented in the analysis, with the participation of two independent raters and the verification of agreement between them, the interpretation of the qualitative data remains intertwined with the subjective prism of the participants and researchers. Moreover, the findings reflect the conditions and specificities of specific school contexts and may not be fully representative of all special education schools or all educational environments supporting students with complex needs.

Future research could focus on more systematically recording the intensity, quality, duration and forms of puppetry's use, including larger and more diverse samples of teachers and students from different geographical areas and age. Additionally, prospective studies should investigate the effectiveness of the method compared to other creative or conventional teaching approaches within special education. Furthermore, the integration of quantitative tools or mixed methodologies would be of particular interest in order to evaluate the effects of puppetry on the learning and psychosocial development of puppeteers with complex educational needs from a positivist or post-positivist perspective. Finally, exploring the views of students or their families on participation in puppetry (group) activities could provide a fuller imprint of the benefits and challenges associated with such educational practice.

## 6. Conclusions

This study highlighted the dynamic and multi-level contribution of puppetry as a creative, pedagogical and psychosocial tool in the context of special education. Through the experiences and perceptions of teachers, it was found that puppetry can function as a means of enhancing the cognitive, linguistic and social development of students with complex educational and psychosocial needs, while contributing substantially to their psycho-emotional empowerment and the creation of an inclusive school environment. Its use as a tool for expression, communication and dealing with emotional difficulties is particularly important, encouraging the cooperation, acceptance and active participation of all students, as well as the use of theatrical pedagogical techniques and methods in education [61,62].

The results indicate that the successful utilization of puppetry requires appropriate support, along with the systematic training of teachers in artistic teaching methodologies. The integration of puppetry into the daily school curriculum or theater pedagogical methods in teaching, in general, can enhance the conditions of inclusion and provide

perspectives for differentiated and experiential teaching, adapted to the needs of students with diverse and complex learning profiles.

As an extension, it is necessary to institutionally recognize puppetry as a didactic and therapeutic practice in educational environments serving students with complex needs, to encourage the development of appropriate infrastructures and to promote cooperation between educators, specialists and cultural institutions. The empirical documentation provided by this research can serve as a starting point for the design of educational programs, the implementation of innovative, creative and arts-based initiatives and the dissemination of good practices in the field of special education, with the ultimate goal of improving the quality of educational and psychosocial support to all students.

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**Disability Language/Terminology Positionality Statement:** In this research paper, we consistently use person-first language (e.g., “students with complex educational and psychosocial needs,” “students with intellectual disabilities,” “students on the autism spectrum”), reflecting the conventions established in the international literature and special education practice in Greece. This choice is guided by a commitment to upholding the dignity, individuality and rights of all students, in alignment with contemporary pedagogical principles and legislative frameworks that promote equity and inclusion. The terminology adopted throughout the paper is intended to avoid negative, patronizing or stigmatizing language. References to students’ characteristics are made only where necessary for scientific clarity and always with respect for their personhood and diversity. Our approach is informed by the social model of disability, which recognizes the role of environmental and systemic factors in shaping participation, inclusion and educational experience. We recognize that preferences regarding disability language may differ among individuals and communities, and that both person-first and identity-first approaches are valid. Our terminology choices in this study are based on prevailing cultural, legal and disciplinary standards in the Greek context and are intended to foster respect, autonomy and equal participation for all learners.

## Appendix A. Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. What was your first experience with puppetry in educational practice? How did you feel during this first attempt? What was the response from your students?
2. What motivated you to introduce puppetry into your teaching? Were there any specific needs or challenges that led you to use puppetry?
3. How do you typically integrate puppetry into your daily teaching and support activities? Can you describe a typical session that involves puppetry? Is puppetry used in specific subjects or more broadly?

4. What types of puppets or resources have you found most effective or engaging for your students? Are there particular materials or styles that your students prefer? Do you use ready-made or handmade puppets?
5. In what ways do your students participate in the creation or animation of puppets, if at all? Do you involve students in making the puppets? How do students contribute during puppet shows or activities?
6. How does puppetry affect students' attention, memory, and overall engagement in learning? Have you noticed differences in participation compared to traditional methods? Are there specific examples you can share?
7. Can you share any examples where puppetry helped students with communication or language difficulties? Did you observe changes in verbal or non-verbal expression? Were there students who became more willing to speak or interact?
8. How does puppetry influence teamwork, relationships, or social inclusion among your students? Have you noticed students collaborating more easily? Are there examples of previously isolated students engaging more through puppetry?
9. What changes, if any, have you observed in students' self-expression, self-esteem, or emotional management as a result of puppetry? Have students used puppets to express feelings they would not otherwise share? Did you observe reduced anxiety or increased confidence?
10. Have you used puppetry to support students with complex psychosocial needs, and if so, how? Can you describe a situation where puppetry played a therapeutic role? Were there particular techniques that worked well?
11. What factors have facilitated or hindered the use of puppetry in your school setting? What kinds of support (administrative, material, training) have been helpful? What obstacles have you encountered and how have you managed them?
12. What would you suggest for improving the integration of puppetry as a teaching and support tool in special education? Are there resources, training, or organizational changes that you believe would help? Do you have recommendations for colleagues considering the use of puppetry?

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