

## A Critical Examination of the Use of Fairy Tale Literature with Pre-Primary Children in Developmentally Appropriate Early Childhood Education and Care Programs

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What are fairy tales? Folk tales are stories orally passed down from generation to generation that are modified as they are told to remain current in their contextual frame. Folk tales are categorized as *pour quoi* tales, tall tales, or fairy tales. *Pour quoi* tales are stories that answer “why” or have a moral, such as fables. Tall tales are characterized by legends, and communicate historical facts or admirable traits of idealized figures. Fairy tales contain the grouping of stories that frequently feature fairy godmothers or contain other emphases on magical elements (Temple, *et al.*, 2002). Folk tales and fables were not originally written for children; they were intended to reflect philosophical thought. More often than not, early tales depicted adult customs, beliefs, and habits of a particular time. (Morgan, 1999). Oral tales were told by adults for adults. The purpose of the oral folk tale was to foster a sense of belonging and hope that miracles were possible for a better world (Zipes, 1979). They were closely connected to the customs, beliefs and rituals of tribes and communities. Oral folk tales were interactive. The audience could participate and even modify the tales to fit the needs of the community. Thus, it is rather remarkable that over the years they have become staples in the lives of young children. Actually, fairy tales became staples in children’s literature only since the nineteenth century. In the United States, “chapmen” (peddlers) traveled from town to town selling sundries and “chapbooks” (fairy tales) that were made popular by the young readers at the time. Fairy tales had their beginning in children’s literature then, as a marketing tool for cheap vendors (Cashdan, 1999).

Although fairy and folk tales have been part of civilization since recorded history, curiously, they haven’t always been a staple in the lives of children. It wasn’t until Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm published the second edition of their *Children’s and Household Tales* in 1812-15 that fairy tales were written down specifically for a child audience (Zipes, 1979).

Since about 1800, the role of fairy tales in education has consistently drawn attention and animated discussion. Opponents of the use of fairy tale literature in early childhood programs cite intense imagery, fearful responses to common situations, and the reduction of imagination by the substitution of imitative play over imaginative play. (Wolffheim, 1953; Mitchell, 1982; Levin, 2003). To opponents, the substitution of realia literature promotes rich discourse and normative play and the development of imagination. Advocates, on the other hand, cite the development of the id, the resolutions of complex

archetypal elements of development, and the provision of models of resolution of the triumph of good over evil. Advocates also espouse the role fairy tale literature plays in the transmission of cultural components within the construction of ethnic identity. (Bettelheim, 1976; Cashdon, 1999; Temple *et al.*, 2002).

It is important to consider child development as a contextual frame for the consideration of the use of fairy tale literature in pre-primary curriculum. Jean Piaget's theory of developmental stages provides the theoretical underpinnings for many approaches to early childhood education and care around the world. Piaget's theory of cognition includes the notion that a child passes through in an invariant manner that is also transformative, meaning that the quality of later intellectual behavior depends on the quality of the experiences that preceded it. Preschool children are typically engaged in the preoperational period of human development (typically age two through seven) (Good and Brophy, 1995).

The term "preoperational" is used precisely because children have not yet reached the point of engaging in logical or operational thought. In this stage, children are egocentric, meaning that they have not learned to consider things from another's perspective, rendering objectivity impossible. Young children also attribute life to inanimate objects, believing that they have a mind of their own (animism). Piaget noted that children engaged in the preoperational stage do not think abstractly, objectively, or in a logical sequence. As explained by Piaget, these developmental hallmarks of the preoperational stage preclude young children from the strategies necessary to properly distinguish fantasy from reality, as developmentally, their ability to process information is structurally limited. Instead, reality consists of whatever is felt, seen, or heard, at any given moment (Piaget, 1963).

These unrealistic perceptions of the young child give rise to irrational fears of abandonment; of attacks by monsters hiding in closets or under beds; of being alone in the dark; and/or of witches, ghosts, dragons, and other creatures of fantasy. Since fantasy literature (such as fairy tales) cannot be distinguished as make-believe material and is often interpreted literally by the child, new fears may be created by reading stories to him or her about monsters, evil witches, trolls, giants, and other scary characters (Whittin, 1994). This authentication by trusted adults (via storytelling) adds credibility and power to the ethereal and undefined fears of the young child. To attempt to explain to very young children that their fears are illogical and unfounded can be a futile exercise as the child is governed by what is perceived (Mitchell, 1982).

Several aspects of young children's capacities to learn are important to consider when planning activities and choosing literature. Preschool children engage in the following processes: analysis (breaking down material into component parts to understand the structure, seeing similarities and differences); synthesis (putting parts together to form a new whole, rearranging, reorganizing); and evaluation (judging the value of tangible materials based on definite criteria) (Edwards and Springate, 1993).

Young children also need to express ideas through different, expressive avenues and symbolic media. Communication with the world is accomplished with a combination of methods. Children need and seek to increase competence and integration across formats including words, gestures, drawings, paintings, sculpture, construction, music, dramatic play, movement and dance (Bredenkamp and Copple, 1997).

In this context then, what is the effect of a preschool curriculum infused with fairy tale literature on the holistic development of preschool-aged children? What fairy tales do provide (as a genre) are rich imaginative resources. However, as delineated above, pre-primary children in early childhood settings need activities which provide rich sensory resources so that their natural strengths of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation may be exercised. Do fairy tales answer these mandates? Or does the powerful imaginative modeling provided by fairy tales promote imitative play, with the corresponding reduction of personal generation of ideas and sensory support that increases school readiness measurements?

Many researchers have confirmed Piaget's notion that young children cannot distinguish fantasy from reality (Elkind, 1978), yet parents and educators alike continue to choose fantasy-type literature as appropriate for very young children. Curiously, one of the reasons preschool children enjoy fairy tales is their very inability to think abstractly. From age three to five they are magical thinkers, believing that thinking something causes it to be so. This is supported directly by Piaget's research. Liberal leaps over logical progression are the norm in preschool-aged children's processing of information (Brierly, 1994).

Elkind (1987) specifically identified the benefits of fairy tales to the developing child who has advanced to the concrete operational stage (generally, ages 7-12), insofar as they provide opportunities to stimulate the child's developing quantitative faculty (the incremental increases foundational to many fairy tales, i.e., the degrees of sizes of bowls, chairs, and beds found in *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* or the incremental degrees of strength in materials and effort to blow the houses down in *The Three Little Pigs*). Using this example, the physical gross and fine motor developmental activities found in the typical preschool setting (blocks and manipulative play), provide the experiences in

seriation necessary to support the cognitive development needed to accommodate the positive benefits of fairy tales, once a child has developmentally advanced into the concrete operational stage.

Bettelheim (1976:15) directly states that “...*the age when fairy tales begin to exercise their beneficial impact... is around the age of four or five.*” Needham (2003) advocates a much later age to begin to explore the death themes inherent in fairy tales, “*The empirical evidence on age supports a notion that children achieve a complete understanding of death only after the age of nine.*” Bettelheim scoffs at the idea of resisting the telling of fairy tales to young children, yet he directly addresses the issue that fairy tales and the gifts they bring belong to children who have developed past the pre-primary experience.

Research indicates that gender plays a role in the selection of literature as well. Collins-Standley *et al.* (1996) published a study in which they showed two- to four-year-old students book covers depicting fairy tale characters in scary, violent, or romantic situations. They then asked the children which book cover they would choose and prefer to “read”. Boys overwhelmingly preferred the violent book cover, while girls slightly preferred the romantic book cover. The strength of the girls’ preference increased as they aged, whereas the boys’ preference remained strong from age two to five. The contributing factors to this study are very difficult to isolate: how much of the choice was constructed as a result of the life-long promptings by the media and popular culture? What factors do genetics and/or parental expectations play? This study provides evidence that, even for two year olds, literature, and specifically the particular genre of literature, plays a role in the development of young children as no other medium can.

Bettelheim (1976) provides copious reasons why children aged eight and above benefit from fairy tales. They provide a venue for children to grapple with very big issues while defining the boundaries of the “id” in their psychoanalytic framework. To Bettelheim, in fairy tales, we are able to come to grips with universal problems (aging, death, sibling rivalry, narcissistic disappointments, oedipal dilemmas, self-worth, and moral obligations) in ways that are personally adapted and interpreted by each learner. Contained within most fairy tales are the omnipresent issues of good and evil, and the duality these issues represent stage the opportunity to elicit moral resolutions. Many children in modern society develop without extended families or being part of a well-integrated community. To Bettelheim, fairy tales help children to navigate through their anxieties and transform fears into a confident approach to life, as they learn resolutions through archetypical transmission of models through fairy tales. The fairy tale is suspended in time and place. It starts out with “once upon a time” and ends with the real beginning. “Once upon a time” and “in a place far away” mean that it happened once, somewhere, and it could

happen again, now or in the future (Zipes, 1979). This circular structure gives children a window into another world, outside of their reality, yet inside of themselves; *"In a fairy tale, internal processes are externalized and become comprehensible as represented by the figures of the story and its events"* (Bettelheim, 1976:25). Fairy tales can provide the beacon which illustrates a pathway toward the resolution of the normal anxieties encountered in the developing child. Happy endings, which are typical in fairy tales, provide a positive backdrop for overcoming a dangerous or adverse situation.

Although he finds value in the use of fairy tales with children, Zipes (1979) vehemently disagrees with Bettelheim and denounces his understanding of Freudian constructs. Further, Zipes (1979:162) charges that Bettelheim *"claims to know how children subconsciously view the tales and ...imposes this psychoanalytic mode of interpreting tales on adults."* An example used is the function of a "king" or "queen" in many of the children's stories. What does a monarch mean to a three year old, an eight year old, to a girl or boy of different races and class backgrounds and nationalities?

Bettelheim (1976) also shares the relevance of the transmission of one's cultural heritage contained within the unique nature of fairy tales. To Bettelheim, the fairy tale is an art form fully comprehensible to the child. Although some fairy tales fundamentally transcend both time and borders (for example, Cinderella is first found in 850AD China and is found in the cultural heritage of societies on all continents) (Sur La Leune, 2004), it is important to remember that frequently, cultural variations on basic fairy-tale themes reflect the values and identities of the societies they represent. For example, the Western fairy tales support principles of revenge and justice (by the destruction of evil, even vigilante justice is endorsed), and that one must pay for one's sins. Western fairy tales grapple with the "seven deadly sins" of greed, vanity, gluttony, lust, deceit, sloth, and envy, and typically a fairy tale theme constellates around one of these sins. This explains the emotional fervor of children to certain fairy tales: the issues s/he is grappling with are found in the tale (Cashdan, 1999). While lessons found in fairy tales form the essential force in our cultural heritage, they cannot be viewed as the therapeutic and developmental imperative for young children (Zipes, 1979).

Maria Montessori was also widely known to be an avid opponent of the use of fairy tales in the early childhood setting, preferring, instead, to guide children to realistic thinking and to the conscious examination of reality. Fairy tales are illogical for children, and the confusion of the tales are a burden on the imaginations of the pre-primary student (Woffheim, 1953). Another consideration is the representation of gender imbedded within the fairy tales. Are women portrayed as competent and self-reliant figures, or do we meet incompetent and flawed characters, or cruel and wicked witches, stepmothers, and queens? What about religious overlays? In how many fairy tales do the characters

die and return to life? The deconstruction of individual fairy tales is a copious work that will not be attempted here, but these questions are significant when we ask ourselves about the curricular choices we make on behalf of children entrusted to our care.

Strategies that work in early childhood settings include the promotion of imaginative and creative play (rather than imitative play). Talented teachers could remain diligent and aware that all children are exposed to some degree of fairy tales and fantasy stories, either in print or in the media in some form. By careful observation, a sensitive teacher can help to redirect imitative play scripted by fairy tales into other activities that challenge young learners to generate their own imaginative and creative alternatives (Levin, 2003).

Lastly, the marketing interests of corporate America has inflicted upon an international context a commodification of experience through the media and secondary retail markets of fairy-tale driven merchandising. It is important to be aware of the forces that play on our choices of literature and “family” entertainment and literature while selecting experiences for very young children. However, it is nearly impossible to control the conglomerates that promote fairy tales and mainly aim at profits made at the expense of the fantasy life of children and families. As Zipes (1979) points out, educators truly interested in aiding children in their development of critical and imaginative capacities must first seek to alter the social organization of culture and work that is presently preventing self-realization and causing the disintegration of the individual. Do fairy tales support imagination, or do they aid in supplanting imagination with the intrusion of powerful, archetypal imagery intended for an older audience? Further observation and discourse is warranted to determine the relative benefits, if any, for pre-primary aged children.

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