

**Moving Beyond Grimm's Fairytales for Representations of Black and White:  
Diversity as an Integral Component of quality Provision in Early Childhood  
Education**

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**Abstract:**

When considering quality and its axial position within the sphere of early childhood care and education, it is critical to bear in mind the evolving and transformative character of this quality – by its very nature, the concept of this quality is multi-faceted and interpretive. As *Siolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, demonstrates, quality is defined, supported and assessed through a series of inter-related principles and standards. This paper considers the use of children's literature as a pivotal tool in the application of one of *Siolta's* core Principles (Diversity), using one of the Standards (Identity and Belonging) as a demonstrative model for quality practice. It considers the traditional role of fairytales and folklore in early childhood education and explores their contribution to children's construction of identity, in an attempt to offer both the theorist and practitioner an insight into their role(s) in deconstructing the messages conveyed in such literature.

Childcare and early childhood education have become political acts. Virtually every component of both is underwritten by rules of what is considered right and appropriate, as opposed to what is perceived as politically incorrect and/or controversial. This is particularly pertinent to the inclusion of diversity training and education, where practitioners often shy away from issues such as race, religion and disability, for fear of

saying or doing the ‘wrong thing’. Where no scripted curricula exist, there is a certain evident reluctance to explore such issues. It is therefore necessary to consider the interpretive, reflective role of the practitioner in such a situation. This is perhaps best illustrated by example, using *Siolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, as the model of practice, with children’s literature as the medium of implementation:

*Siolta* outlines the Principle of diversity as being where ‘*quality early childhood settings acknowledge and respect diversity and ensure that all children and families have their individual, cultural and linguistic identity validated*’ (1996: 7). Given the holistic and inter-connected nature of the National Quality Framework, this Principle can be further developed through any one its Standards of Quality. Let us take, for example, the Standard on Identity and Belonging, which states that ‘*promoting positive identities and a strong sense of belonging requires clearly defined policies, procedures and practice that empower every child and adult to develop a confident self- and group-identity, and to have a positive understanding and regard for the identity and rights of others*’ (2006: 93). In encouraging the practitioner to consider how their environment reflects and promotes the culture and background of all children present in the setting, and promotes positive understanding for the identity and rights of themselves and each other, he/she is prompted to consider the books and materials used in the setting. Do they, for example, avoid the depiction of stereotypical role models and cultural images (based on gender, culture, age, ability etc.)? It is at this juncture that the discretion and experience of the individual practitioner comes to the forefront, as such a task is largely interpretive and

context-driven. While the fairytale *Sleeping Beauty*, for example, may represent little more than a romantic tale for one practitioner, another might see it as the triumph of good over evil, with the former represented by all things white, the latter embodied by all things black. Such an apparent delineation may therefore represent stereotypical racism and so the fairytale is deemed unsuitable for young children. Similarly, the tale of the *Three Little Pigs* could be opened to such scrutiny: Is it just a tale of three good little pigs and an evil wolf or does it have obvious socio-economic underpinnings? Can the wolf not blow down the house of stone because it is a more expensive, and therefore safer, place to live? As over-stretched and theoretical as such debates may seem (especially when one considers the very young age of the target audience), they are nevertheless representative of the issues facing practitioners in the quest for ensuring ‘political correctness’ in the setting. After all, as Doran (2004: 66) points out, ‘*cultural variations on basic fairy-tale themes reflect the values and identities of the societies they represent*’.

A snapshot of some popular traditional and new children’s stories demonstrate the wholly interpretive nature of literature and its use with children: *Dr. Doolittle* and *Mary Poppins* depict the experience of colonialism as essentially positive, while the story of *Tarzan* is dominated by the necessity of good breeding – it is, after all, Tarzan’s innate upper-class nature that enables him to overcome the social conditioning of being brought up by apes. Roald Dahl’s Oompa Loompas in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* were originally depicted as pygmies, while the 1980’s saw a backlash against *Noddy*, founded in the belief that two grown adult men (in the form of Noddy and Big Ears) sharing a bed had obvious homosexual underpinnings. Even Thomas the Tank Engine has not escaped such

de-construction (Gibbons, 1995) – in one of the stories a rebel bus called ‘Bulgy’ (believed to be a front for ‘Bolshie’) is punished for daring to challenge the dominance of the trains, and calling for their revolutionary overthrow, ends his life humiliatingly as a hen house. The recent *Harry Potter* phenomenon was not without controversy. Many Christian groups denounced the books as being more about the occult than magic, attributing its popularity to a paradigm shift from the social context that was the old biblical view (e.g. suggesting that it makes it more difficult for children today, with less biblical knowledge, to evaluate good and evil or to resist such threats to their faith). The essential point is that *any* piece of literature can be deconstructed. ‘Hidden’ messages can be found, gender disparity and racism can be evidenced, and underlying morals detected. You can find evidence of anything you want to if you look hard enough. Take, for example, Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. On the one hand, Tolkien could be commended for his portrayal of strong female characters and the use of multiple races to convey his story, while on the other, his work could be interpreted as being inherently racist. He could be perceived as dealing in absolutes, which demonstrate a belief that race determines morality; if you are an elf, you are good. If you are an orc, you’re evil. The challenge lies in determining what is both age and context-appropriate for children, by determining the extent to which they understand the various messages (perceived or otherwise) conveyed by the literature.

In determining what is appropriate for use with the aforementioned Identity and Belonging Standard, a practitioner may find it useful to consider the developmental and socialisation stages of the children in the setting (ranging in age from birth to six years

old). With such an age group, the ‘*collaborative classroom*’ approach to literature, bolstered by Booth *et al* (1997: 10), may be overly ambitious – though further group discussion about the story and its characters should be encouraged, the dualistic contrasts between light and darkness, black and white, or good and evil may well be lost on a four-year old. Piagetan theory characterises children of that age as being unapologetically egocentric so unless they can relate directly to the story-line, their interpretation of it is largely surface. Their understanding of evil, for example, is based on personal fears and perceptions. Children are inevitably frightened by the idea of evil, and so are fascinated by stories which overcome this fear. They feel personally involved when evil is vanquished and good triumphs (the premise of most fairytales). They gain a type of control over a terror which seems to be lurking in the shadows, threatening them with what clinical psychologists such as Fuller (1999) refer to as ‘*learned helplessness*’.

The fact that every culture has its own variations of traditional and popular fairytales for children, which encompass that culture’s core values and morals, is indicative of the relevance of the relationship between a child’s sense of identity formation and literature. The surface of traditional fantasy, characteristically, is unreal; cars fly through the air, children walk through wardrobes and animals are imbued with human characteristics such as speaking, wearing clothes etc. Fantasy’s depths, by contrast, are real, disclosing basic and balanced truths about people and life. Though brilliantly farcical or satirical, these works have the power to simultaneously teach and delight. Returning once again to *Harry Potter*, there are clear examples of identity formation and recognition. At the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry (where the novels are set), adult authority is wise and benevolent. All of the story’s child protagonists respect it as being the way

society operates. Differences between worthy and unworthy adults or children are, in the end, unmistakable as elaborate rules govern the behaviour of the main characters.

Children are taught to understand their own identity in relation to adults and adult authority, a fact mirrored in all early childhood care and education settings. Children gain security from knowing that there are certain standards that all of us are expected to live up to – literature reflects this by labeling the deviant from these standards as the ‘bad guy’. As Fuller (1999) contends ‘*good and evil are concepts that represent the essential rules of behaviour without which no society can survive*’.

In addition to the concept of self-identity, *Siolta’s* Standard on Identity and Belonging encourages the practitioner to consider the relevance of group-identity within the particular setting. Again, literature has a notable impact on this type of identity formation, as our identity is constructed in an ongoing mirroring process with others. To know who we are, we need to learn who ‘others’ are and vice versa. The skill lies in ensuring that we don’t use binary oppositions to generate false ‘us’ and ‘them’ interpretations of identity. While some of these oppositions, such as the prevalence of truth over falsehood, seem reasonable, others (favouring white over black or masculine over feminine) may have harmful repercussions. As society is in a constant state of historical and cultural flux, the mirror images of ourselves that we perceive are being constantly altered. It is important that this ongoing redefinition is reflected in the selection and use of appropriate children’s literature.

The fear in deconstructing literature is the risk of alienation it inherently presents. By providing the kind of examples outlined above, has the practitioner been discouraged (even frightened!) from using basic fairytales and folkore with young children? The hope would be that conversely, he/she has been made aware of the vast area of debate that *could* be opened by children's literature, and is therefore encouraged to be both reflective and realistically interpretive of its use in the setting. The *Council on Interracial Books for Children* (2006) offers practitioners some functional guidelines when deciding on the types of literature to use with young children:

- Check the illustrations – look out for stereotypes, tokenism and gender-based role assignments.
- Check the story line for standards of success (e.g. does it take dominant, white behaviour standards for a person from a minority group to succeed?) and the resolution of problems (e.g. are the reasons for poverty and oppression explained, or are they accepted as inevitable?).
- Look at the lifestyles – when stories of 'home' are used, for example, are trailers included to depict Traveller lifestyles?
- Consider the relationship between people – how are family relationships depicted? In Traveller families, are there always lots of children? Is the traditional family always portrayed as two-parent?
- Note the heroes – each different ethnic group has their own heroes but are they represented in the literature chosen?

- Consider the effect on a child's self-image – are norms established which limit a child's aspirations and self-concept? What effect can it have on images of the colour white as the ultimate in beauty, cleanliness, virtue etc.?
- Consider the author's perspective – no author can be wholly objective (even within children's literature) as they write out of a cultural, as well as a personal context. In that sense, is the book overtly patriarchal or feminist?
- Identify loaded words – certain words ('savage', 'primitive', 'lazy' etc.) may have insulting undertones. It is important that they are recognised and discussed, to disband any stereotypes they may represent.

Such guidelines are echoed in *Siolta*, where the practitioner is encouraged to reflect on their practice and experiences in the setting. The selection and use of books and materials further bolsters this need for self-analysis. Children's literature has never been richer, more challenging or more political. Though it has its opponents – Maria Montessori being among the most notable – the use of fairytales and fables continue to be one of the staples of most early childhood care and education settings. While many cynics refer to such literature as '*fakelore*' (Singh, 1998), it undeniably serves its purpose in linguistically and pictorially conveying the moral messages and values of the culture(s) it represents. It achieves this by a variety of techniques such as labeling, narrative procedure, sustainable endings, the universalisation of values, euphemisms, metaphors and so forth. It is the responsibility of the individual practitioner to evaluate these techniques and their impact.

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