The Power of Fairy Tales

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Once upon a time...Long long ago...In a faraway land... There was once...

As soon as we read those words, we know that we are about to be drawn into a tale of magic, enchantment, and fantasy. The reader can also assume that any challenges or problems faced by the central character will be resolved in a happily-ever-after ending which leads to the message or the moral of the story. G.K. Chesterton summed it up succinctly when he said, "Fairy tales do not tell children the dragons exist. Children already know that dragons exist. Fairy tales tell children the dragons can be killed." No matter how frightening the scenario we can be comforted knowing that the hero or heroine will triumph.

Fairy tales are our cultural heritage; part of an ancient form of oral communication whereby traditions, myths, legends, folk and fairy tales have been disseminated throughout the ages. Since the Brothers Grimm decided to collect and publish fairy tales in 1812, many of the tales in 'Kinder -und Hausmärchen' (Children's and Household Tales) have become classics. Their book has been translated into over 160 languages and is one of the world's most read books. As the Grimms published further editions the tales became less gruesome and more child-friendly responding to cultural sensitivities. Later writers of literary fairy tales such as Hans Christian Andersen, 1835, Oscar Wilde, 1888 and Frank Baum, 1901 were also as selective of the content, subtext and social coding that they encased in their magical, appealing and instructive fairy tales (Zipes, 2006).

However, while the use of fairy tales has not diminished, the form in which the fairy tale can be presented has changed radically. Rather than a direct teller-listener conversation or narrator-reader format through the printed medium of text, fairy tales now extend beyond the library or the bookshop into film, advertising, music and even politics. The fairy tale is presented in formats incorporating multiliteracies and digital technologies and is not showing signs of relinquishing its power.

What is the power of fairy tales? The exploration of fairy tales has always been popular in engaging students in literacy activities in primary school classrooms. Neil Gaiman (2016) writes, "We encounter fairy tales as kids, in retellings or panto. We breathe them. We know how they go." Many students come armed with a prior knowledge of the fairy tale framework. Students can read, listen and re-tell traditional versions supporting the development of language and literacy or be challenged by higher-order thinking tasks that invite students to move beyond the basics of the story demonstrating an understanding of the structure and organisation of fairy tales and investigate ways to manipulate, construct, deconstruct and reconstruct setting, plot and perspective.

It can't be assumed that all students are familiar with well-known European fairy tales and so the opportunity to source fairy tales from other cultures is important. Many fairy tales, such as Cinderella, can be found replicated across a range of cultures. Comparing and contrasting these tales provides a lens through which students can see cultural context and commonality of values.

Wellbeing, resilience and emotional intelligence are crucial and fairy tales offer the opportunity to learn through characters' stories, problem solving attempts and fears and anxieties. They are a powerful way to learn vicariously in a safe environment (Bettelheim, 1989). Fairy tale characters navigate the complexities of life and as they work through challenges students may make connections with their own feelings and emotions, their dreams, anxieties, and may consider what they would do if placed in a similar predicament.

Language and Literacy

While reading fairy tales is common in early childhood and primary classrooms, telling fairy tales rather than reading from a book has been shown to enhance emerging literacy and language development in young children, and provide familiar templates that can be remembered and drawn upon in later life. Phillips (1999) found storytelling builds connections between the teller and listener, enhances memory, supports early literacy development and creative thinking. Hibbins (2016) suggested that "oral retelling of pre-existing stories offers ...a psycho-socially complex form of Speaking and Listening" (p. 229).

The difference between reading from a book and telling a story is that the oral story is malleable. It can be adapted to circumstances or allow the listener to join in by repeating phrases, actions and sounds. The opportunity to include identifiable local features into the fairy tale is an age-old prerogative of the storyteller and one that can draw students into the story. Variations may be suggested as stories become familiar to the child. When telling a fairy tale:

- don't be afraid to use props, act the story out or have a storytelling 'spot' in the classroom;
- adapt to circumstances and allow the listener to join in by repeating phrases, actions and sounds;
- retell stories that follow patterns and that you can remember easily like *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*;
- tell the story again and again so you become more confident.

From a language and literacy perspective fairy tales can also enrich a child's vocabulary and develop an ear for rhythm and language patterns. The repetition of particular phrases or repeated words creates a certain rhythm to the

story, helping children remember the story. Fairy tale events often follow the 'rule of three'. There are three bears and three billy goats, Rumpelstiltskin demands three rewards, and three wishes are often offered by a magical being. As students read and re-tell stories there is the opportunity to use sequencing words —*first, so, then, next, after that, finally* that build verb, adjective and vocabulary lists.

The structure of the fairy tale is easily identifiable and once the sequence is understood the basic framework of story including setting, characters, and plot (rising action, climax, and resolution) can be easily recognised from one tale to another. Hearing a favourite fairy tale repeated frequently supports students to re-tell it in correct chronological order. Re-telling a familiar story also builds complex links between cognitive processes (knowledge, understanding, analysis, judgment), and interpretation (emotions, feelings).

There are opportunities to reshape the story elements such as character, plot and setting. For example, children can be encouraged to present alternative viewpoints, relocate the setting or offer a different ending. Rather than a narrative text students can write persuasive or expository texts. This supports students to understand how we can shape the stories we write. Further ideas include:

- Creating imaginary Instagram posts. What if the wolf decided to take an unsafe selfie on the top of the three little pigs' roof? Would he become famous? Would it change the consequences?
- Writing letters to the Editor. Does the height of Sleeping Beauty's hedge ruin your view of the Lake?
- Creating an alternative. Consider gender stereotyping in some tales as female characters wait for their prince.
- Borrowing a fairy tale character from one story and place it in another. What happens when Red Riding Hood climbs the beanstalk with her delicious cakes? Would the giant change his diet?
- Choosing a familiar fairy tale and changing an object or the setting while keeping the storyline.
- Writing a diary/blog from the perspective of one character.
- Videoing an interview between a fairy tale character from a familiar tale and yourself.

Wellbeing and Resilience

Fairy tales catapult the hero or heroine into various recognisable challenges (family conflicts, abandonment, parent/child relationships, process towards autonomy, acceptance of self) (Bettelheim in Koutsompu, 2016). Hansel and Gretel are abandoned in the forest and must use their wits to find their way to safety. Red Riding Hood responsibly ventures in the woods for altruistic reason but veering off the pathway results in nothing going to plan. Sleeping Beauty finds herself encircled by an impenetrable growth due to a good fairy's protective spell (Shiel et al., 2018).

By navigating the complexities of life, characters work through challenges and students may make connections

with their own lives, their dreams, anxieties, and consider what they would do if placed in the same predicament. At a symbolic-imaginary level, fairy tales guide and assist children in coming to grips with issues from real, everyday life developing creative thought as well as emotional intelligence (Koutsompou, 2016).

A fairy tale told well provides a guide to making good decisions. The message of the *Three Bears* is quite clear, if you choose to steal there will be consequences. There are also broader and more complex themes in fairy tales that resonate with students including courage, integrity and sacrifice. But be aware that not all fairy tales are appropriate for all ages.

There are further opportunities for developing emotional intelligence by reading contemporary adaptations with students and encouraging them to link ideas to their own experiences. Discussing different perspectives and suggesting alternative endings is an opportunity to explore social justice and the relationship between good and evil. There are a number of contemporary authors who have twisted plots and offer alternative perspectives of character behaviour. If a fractured tale is the way you might choose to begin a few examples include:

- *Honestly, Red Riding Hood was Rotten!: The Story of Little Red Riding Hood as Told by the Wolf* by Trisha Speed Shaskan certainly offers another side to the story.
- *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by Jon Scieszka has almost convinced me the wolf was definitely wronged by the three little pigs.
- *Goldilocks and Just the One Bear* by Leigh Hodgkinson is a delightful tale of consequences. There is some justice in a grown-up Goldilocks getting a taste of her own medicine when a bear visits her new apartment.

It seems that Achim von Arnim was incorrect when he wrote to Jacob Grimm (22 October, 1812) and prophesied

that writing fairy tales down would hasten the "death of the entire fairy tale corpus" (Bottigheimer, 2014, p. 85). If anything, the options for presenting fairy tales have increased. We need our fairies, muses and magical elders to preserve and continue the evolution and storytelling traditions as well as harnessing their power to boost imagination, develop literacy skills and explore resilience in using a timeless formula that continues to engage children.

And beyond all those important reasons for including fairy tales in the primary curriculum I have to agree with Cashdan that "fairy tales are an unparalleled source of adventure" (2014, p.17). That's their superpower.

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