



Searching for a happily ever after: using fairy tales in primary classrooms to explore gender, subjectivity and the life-worlds of young people

Glenn Saxby¹ 

Received: 16 February 2022 / Accepted: 13 July 2022 / Published online: 5 August 2022

© The Author(s) 2022

Abstract

Fairy tales are ubiquitous in Australian primary schools. Drawing on a review of key literature, this paper aims to determine the implications of teaching fairy tales in the twenty-first-century primary classroom. Research points to the benefits of including fairy tales as a tool to improve all subject areas of the curriculum. Fairy tales present opportunities to positively engage students through the teaching of social justice and the development of emotional intelligence. The review of literature found that teachers need to be cautious and critical when teaching traditional fairy tales which often perpetrate an outdated, gender-ignorant representation of society, and allow students an opportunity to confront these ideas. The book form of Disney fairy tales can be problematic, particularly the earlier versions, which are criticised for being domesticated, sentimental and overly simplistic. The review has also found that multicultural fairy tales have enormous potential to increase cultural equity in the contemporary classroom, but unfortunately, they do not appear to be easily accessible in Australia. The fairy tale is constantly being reinvented and reimagined to fit into modern society, which has led to the emergence of the fractured fairy tale genre, where a traditional fairy tale is subverted. This review found that when used in a critical and inclusive manner, fairy tales have the potential to be an effective resource to teach primary school students in the contemporary classroom.

Keywords Storytelling · Fairy tales · Contemporary classroom · Multicultural · Disney · Gender roles · Social skills

1 Introduction

Stories are an integral part of learning how to develop reading, writing, speaking and listening skills (Lwin, 2016; Mart, 2012; Wardetzky, 2008). Fairy tales are often used by primary school

✉ Glenn Saxby
saxbyglenn017@gmail.com

¹ University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia

teachers without considering the many teaching opportunities this literary genre can create, such as exploring gender stereotypes, storytelling and various social issues. Fairy tales have a long history of use in Australian classrooms as they traditionally offer opportunities to teach various literacy, social and emotional skills. They are ubiquitous in student learning (Bourke, 2008; Hall, 1997); therefore, it is critical to investigate the implications of using these stories to teach not only the subjects of the primary school curriculum but the teaching of social skills, gender awareness and cultural inclusivity for best pedagogical practice.

This review will examine the literature on using fairy tales in the contemporary primary classroom with a particular focus on socio-cultural issues, emotional intelligence, ethics and gender equity issues. Section one will provide a brief history of fairy tales, including a review of critiques of contemporary Disney fairy tales. Section two will examine the literature that foregrounds the implications of using fairy tales as a story telling tool, to teach multiple subjects, and to engage students in cultural, gender, social and ethical issues (critical literacy). A conclusion that examines implications and offers recommendations for teachers that emerge from this literature review will then be provided. Ultimately, this literature review aims to inform primary school teachers' practice regarding the use of fairy tales in the classroom, with implications for principals, curriculum writers and young readers.

2 A brief history of fairy tales

For many children, their first exposure to storytelling is the fairy tale. Tales written hundreds of years ago still appear in various forms and remain as popular as ever (Dewan, 2016; Zehetner, 2013). Fairy tales are generally defined as a prose narration with an indefinite setting, include the trials and tribulations of a character who has adventures of a magical kind that end happily and include folkloric features such as giants, goblins and fairies (Hasse, 2008; Teverson, 2013). It is unknown where fairy tales originated in oral cultures, but we do know they were used as metaphorical stories that helped people learn about themselves and the world they inhabited (Zipes, 2012). Fairy tales were not originally intended for children. They were generally a cautionary tale for adults, often with dark events smattered with violence.

Many of the traditional fairy tales were based on the French tradition as collected by Charles Perreault and the German tradition as collected by the Brothers Grimm. Familiar titles include *Sleeping Beauty*, *Snow White* and *Cinderella*. Perreault is often seen as the most famous trailblazer of fairy tales; however, he was greatly outnumbered, and in some instances also preceded by French women writers, now called the conteuses (female storytellers) (Harries, 2001; Seifert et al., 2012). In the 1800s, fairy tale stories came into common use and were made into child friendly versions (Young, 2004). There is a great deal of literature on interpretations of fairy tales (Bottigheimer, 2014; Tatar, 2019; Von Franz, 2017) and their power and influence on readers (Gladding & Drake Wallace, 2010; Tesar et al., 2016). For this review, the term traditional fairy tales will be used to indicate the child-friendly stories of the twentieth century and not the original source material, which was often violent and horrific. These traditional fairy tales, together with modern fairy tale books, are often the most commonly found within the contemporary primary school classroom.

When delving into the history of fairy tales, Bottigheimer (2009) starts at the publishing history which does not require a folk invention of fairy tales in a distant and misty past.

The publishing history of fairy tales, shows that they were born in Venice in the mid-sixteenth century, were added to in Naples in the early seventeenth century, were developed in France in the late seventeenth century, and were exported to Germany in the second half of the eighteenth century. In the late eighteenth century they began a triumphal march on little book feet throughout literate Europe. In the nineteenth century, school readers spread fairy tales to city and country children alike in Germany and France, and spread the same tales to British, French, Italian, and German colonies in Africa, Asia, and the New World. (p.23)

Schenda (2007) argues that the widespread conviction that oral sources for fairy tales preceded written fairy tales grows from regressive argumentation and that oral telling's develop in conjunction with print and school culture.

Disney achieved enormous success with their early film versions of *Snow White* (1937) and *Cinderella* (1950). These stories were then transported to book format. Critics of Disney's fairy tales describe the stories as domesticated, sentimental and are overly simplistic (Shortsleeve, 2004; Zipes, 2012). Disney has seemingly taken a more inclusive approach to gender and socio-cultural issues in recent films and the spin-off books, *Moanna* (2016), *Maleficent* (2014) and the incredibly successful *Frozen* (2013). These narratives do not follow the formulaic nature of Disney's traditional fairy tale adaptations, instead distorting familiar tropes. Schwabe (2016) argues that recent interpretations have also taken a more subversive tone, unsettling fairy tale conventions in movies and their spin-off books such as *Shrek* (2001) and *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012). These fractured fairy tales present an opportunity for teachers in the modern classroom to use a multi-modal method to compare these subverted fairy tales with traditional fairy tales. Fractured fairy tales, or parodies, are usually humorous and there is a more contemporary sensibility embedded in them, making these stories an appealing resource in the modern classroom.

The field of Australian fairy tales is growing rapidly. Sometimes Australian Aboriginal dreamtime stories are mislabelled as fairy tales. Australian Aboriginal stories belong to a living culture and provide a critical means for passing down cultural understandings, so they do not fit into the fairy tale category (Bullen & Sawers, 2016). Australia's colonial past and recent fairy tales provide teachers with an idea of how modern writers are keeping the fairy tale relevant in the contemporary classroom. According to Do Rozario (2011), the Australian fairy tale is finally emerging out of the colonial time warp of plump gum nut babies. Presently, there seems to be two approaches in Australian fairy tale writing, one that is geared more toward a retell of European stories and the other which looks at a more fractured approach (Wood, 2017) where fairy tales do not rely on traditional tropes and a formulaic narrative.

3 Benefits of teaching fairy tales in a contemporary primary classroom

3.1 Storytelling and the power of fairy tales

Oral communication in the form of storytelling is universal across cultures. Storytelling is one of the oldest methods of human communication, and one of the oldest modes of teaching (Landrum et al., 2019). There are several effective ways to use storytelling in the fairy tale

literary genre in classrooms, including immersing students in existing stories, teacher-created stories, class- and teacher-created stories and the students' own stories. According to multiple studies (See Collins, 1999; Isbell et al., 2004; Lwin, 2016; Miller & Pennycuff, 2008; Mixon & Temu, 2006), storytelling is engaging, motivating, fun, adds to a student's corpus of the world and encourages children to be attentive listeners and, therefore, more creative readers and writers. Through the use of fairy tales, Wardetzky's (2008) work explored the successful promotion of language skills of children with a migration background through the practice of storytelling. Her research demonstrates a sustainable integration of art and culture, and that active language acquisition can be achieved through the use of fairy tales.

As a pedagogical tool, further literature examined also indicates that storytelling is an effective way for students to learn English as a first language and as a second language (Colon-Vila, 1997; Lucarevski, 2016). Hibbin (2016) points to the advantages of social and psychosocial skills when using storytelling as a teaching tool.

The benefits of oral storytelling to children in relation to a complex of processes tied to the opportunities afforded by oral storytelling for self-expression, identification with story characters, empathic understanding of self and others and bi-directional communication. It is suggested that the oral retelling of pre-existing stories offers children a parsimonious yet psycho-socially complex form of Speaking and Listening practice. (p. 1)

3.2 Multiple subjects—cross curriculum

Fairy tales can easily be adapted in the primary school to teach a range of subjects. An issue that Australian teachers may have to grapple with is how the teaching of fairy tales fits in with national testing and the widespread influence of “performativity” emerging from neo-liberal policies in primary schools (Appel, 2020). Even under these conditions, there are still copious advantages to including fairy tales to teach the subjects of the curriculum.

Teachers use fairy tales to engage their audience with the power of language in many different ways. Literacy learning takes place as students enjoy reading fairy tales as the vocabulary that they encounter is syntactically and lexically simple (Beckett, 2013; Saville, 2011) helping students to improve their reading and writing, whilst also incorporating new vocabulary (Bourke, 2008). There are also the educational benefits, such as vocabulary extension and the active engagement of predicting skills as children become familiar with the flow and grammar of language (Jalongo & Sobolak, 2011). Students feel empowered and motivated to read fairy tales (Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006; Ockey & Ogden, 1997) because they can relate to the stories' themes and lessons, such as the story of *Tom Thumb* and his feeling of being so tiny in a big world. According to Bourke (2008), fairy tales can be used to successfully teach critical literacy in his first grade class. To his surprise and delight, he describes the advanced ability of young readers to grapple with critical examination of stories such as *The Billy Goats Gruff*, where a student asked why Daddy and Mummy Gruff sent Baby Gruff first. “This question demonstrated to me that children, even as young as 6 years old, are capable of engaging in habits as critical readers” (Bourke, 2008, p. 306). Wee et al. (2019) found that using fairy tales and their parodies, such as the classic *Jack and the Beanstalk*, and its parody, Braun and Bernardini (2011) *Trust me, Jack's beanstalk stinks! The Story of Jack and the Beanstalk as told by the Giant*, using a critical literacy approach the

students were able to perceive the stories from multiple perspectives, challenge stereotypes and confront the dominant social ideology and norms. Other books that come from the same series and could also be useful for teaching critical thinking, include the following: *Believe me, Goldilocks rocks* (2013) by Nancy Loewen; *Honestly, Red Riding Hood was Rotten!* (2014) by Trisha Shaskan; *Seriously, Rapunzel Needed a Haircut* (2014) by Jessica Gunderson.

In the field of mathematics, fairy tales that contain overt mathematical concepts such as Neuschwander's (2013), *Sir Cumference and the Dragon of Pi*, or non-overt mathematical concepts (*Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, see Carlsen, 2013) can be used to assist students with counting, sorting and reducing the anxiety that can arise for students when working mathematically (Columbia, 2017; Edelman, 2017; Fumer, 2018). There is also a series of Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) fairy tale books by Jasmine Brooke (2018), where students use well-known tales such as Rapunzel and the Princess and the Pea to solve science and technology problems. By providing these technological books with a STEM focus, students are asked to draw conclusions and test hypotheses using traditional fairy tales (Marshall, 2018). Questions such as "Could have Rapunzel built a zip line using her hair to escape her tower prison?" frame these books.

Fairy tales offer teachers the potential to combine language with song. Engh (2013) suggests that studying music in the language learning classroom has several educational benefits.

The use of music and song in the language-learning classroom is both supported theoretically by practicing teachers and grounded in the empirical literature as a benefit to increase linguistic, sociocultural and communicative competencies. From an educational standpoint, music and language not only can, but should be studied together (p.121).

When used in drama and reader's theatre, fairy tales encourage positive social interactions for developing reading skills, whilst also improving the affective and physiological dimensions of language learning (Bland, 2015; Worthy & Prater, 2002). Barfod and Bentsen (2018) point to the positive influence on pupils' academic performance, physical activity, social skills and well-being when immersing children in fairy tale stories in natural outdoor settings where fairy tales often take place. "Thus, in choosing teaching methods for enhancing pupils' opportunity to get these positive benefits during the school day, udeskole (outdoor education) can be seen as a promising model, teaching school curriculum outside the classroom during ordinary school time" (Barfod & Bentsen, 2018, p.151). Änggård (2010, p.23) explains that "A special feeling for nature is achieved through enchantment. Through the leaders' stories and the children's play, nature is presented as a fascinating place with many opportunities for fun and adventure."

3.3 Culture in the classroom

Classrooms are becoming more diverse and multicultural. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017), 49% of Australians were born overseas or had one or both parents born overseas. Furthermore, the data showed that 18% of the people born overseas had arrived since 2012, and in 2016 there were over 300 separately identified languages spoken in Australian households. This evidence points to an increase of students arriving in Australian classrooms for whom English is not their first language. For English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D) students, research points to the advantages that fairy tales have to develop visual and

verbal literacy skills (Birketveit, 2015; Khatib & Aghajanzadeh, 2015). According to Lee (2020), fairy tales help to cultivate English as a Second Language (ESL) students' understanding of various social assumptions around gender, class and social norms that are grounded in their reality. However, there is research that points to cultural differences in how students comprehend narrative structure when working with traditional fairy tales (Zhang & Lauer, 2015). This same research indicates that when discussing character development in fairy tales, collectivist cultures and individualist cultures often see behaviours and attitudes of characters very differently.

According to Cai (2002), including multicultural fairy tales help students gain an appreciation of cultural diversity and these stories can have a transformative effect. This can happen by immersing students in multicultural literature which is used as a tool to provide students with a chance to develop sensitivity to social and cultural inequality. Furthermore, Cecilia (2012) argues that in a global society, being more sensitive to students from other backgrounds and cultures should be a goal of childhood education. Similarly, Holmes et al. (2007) reveal that multicultural texts can help demystify races and promote a greater understanding and acceptance of other cultures. Researchers have demonstrated that fairy tales are ripe for reworking where characters from different cultures inhabit traditional fairy tale structures along with non-traditional settings (Alexander & Morton, 2007; Hurley, 2005; Yenika-Agbaw, 2014). On the other hand, Goo (2018) argues that having multicultural restrictive criteria on what narratives can be taught in the classroom has had little change in society and after 50 years, they have had little success according to the multiculturalist educators themselves. "Although multiculturalists are calling for increasingly restrictive criteria on what stories can be taught in the classroom, there is little evidence that this kind of multicultural education has ever been effective in promoting social harmony" (Goo, 2018, p.328).

Busy teachers who have an ever increasing workload and pressure placed on them from parents, administrators and educational bodies (Buchanan et al., 2013; McGrath-Champ et al., 2018; Whelan, 2018), may ask "What are the books out there and can they deliver a more effective and balanced cross-cultural set of fairy tales for the classroom?" Whilst there are blogs (Gordon, 2020) and websites (No Time for Flashcards, 2019) that discuss multicultural fairy tales, there is a gap in the literature around how these stories can be used in a contemporary classroom. Titles of these multicultural fairy tales include *The Ghanaian Goldilocks* (2014) and *Adelita: A Mexican Cinderella Story* (2004), which sound intriguing but these books are scarcely available in Australian schools and public libraries and the only way to obtain a list of these books is to search on blogs and websites. These tales could be easily paired with the traditional fairy tales do enhance discussion about individual differences, particularly around physical appearance and settings. *The Three Little Javelinas* (1992) is an excellent example of a multicultural take on the classic *Three Little Pigs*. It not only encourages students to think critically but is a celebration of cultural diversity, and includes a female character that outsmarts the nefarious villain. Daintree, an Australian book distributing company, does have a set of multicultural tales written by Cari Meister (2017), but unfortunately, only two out of the twelve printed are available for purchase. Whilst it appears that multicultural fairy tale resources are available, it is a time-consuming process for Australian teachers to be able to get access to these materials. As the number of more diverse fairy tales grow, it is prudent pedagogical practice that teachers try to incorporate these stories. A comprehensive list of multicultural fairy tales that is easily accessible would be beneficial to busy teachers.

3.4 Gender issues

Vladimir Propp (1968), when analysing the structure of folktales, insists that there are two types of hero-centric fairy tales: the first looks at the exploits of seeker heroes which are predominantly men, and then there are the victim heroes which are mainly women. To provide positive empowering female role models for both boys and girls, this stereotyping needs to be continually deconstructed by educators. Pilch (2015) advises caution when teaching traditional fairy tales as many of these stories are perpetrating an outdated, gender-ignorant representation of society. She further challenges teachers to step outside the teaching of traditional fairy tales and consider gender-awareness a goal to accomplish during their classes by the incorporation of comparing and contrasting traditional fairy tales with fractured versions. Kuykendal and Sturm (2007), explain

Fairy tales can be immensely influential in children's developing gender identity, so it is important to examine the messages that are being transmitted. It has long been recognized that the traditional European canon of fairy tales, those that have survived to the present day, are tales that reflect and reproduce the patriarchal values of the society that crafted them (p.39).

Fairy tales form an essential part of the complex layering of cultural stories and influences that sustain and propagate cultural norms. According to Parsons (2004), although it is not exactly known how fairy tales affect the unconscious, we do know that these stories are related to historical and cultural contexts, and as we are part of this system, we tend to accept the gendered discourse embedded in them as natural, essential and conclusive. Rice (2000) points out that fairy tales have been viewed as key sites for gender construction and that these stories constitute a kind of “script” (Berne, 1975) for acceptable forms of feminine and masculine behaviour. A teacher does need to consider how they will discuss these traditional fairy tales with twenty-first-century students to provide a fair and balanced view of gender roles in modern Australian society.

The Feminine Beauty Ideal, as defined by Spade and Valentine (2017), is the socially constructed concept that a woman's most important asset is her physical attractiveness. This notion of beauty pervades the traditional fairy tale. Clarke (2020) found that female heroines in fairy tales propagate the perception of the body as ideally beautiful and therefore desirable which is often set within socially constructed parameters and can be problematic for children's holistic development and well-being. She further explains that a particular concern is the fixation with thinness and its association with being beautiful powerful and worthwhile. Research by Tirlea et al. (2016, p.231), point out, “Body image distortions and unhealthy dieting practices start at a young age and predominantly affect girls.” They further argue that body dissatisfaction can lead to low self-esteem, low self-efficacy, depression, anxiety and other mental issues. *The Paper Bag Princess* (1980) by Robert Munsch subverts the traditional gender paradigm and has our princess dressed in nothing but a paper bag as she saves a very ungrateful (due to her clothes being burned and having to wear a paper bag dress) prince from a dragon. Perrault's *Ricky of the Tuft*, written in 1697, also interrogates this notion of feminine beauty by reifying charm and wit in women above beauty (Makinen, 2001).

According to Coyne et al. (2016), Disney princesses may indeed be one of the stronger and significant forms of influence for the young child. Kochiyama's (2015) studies on how gender has been portrayed historically and in current times in fairy tales points to the findings that the princess ideal and its beauty culture continues to be more prevalent than ever in all parts of the

world and this in turn can provide positive opportunities for teachers to empower students' critical thinking skills, by approaching these texts from multiple and alternative perspectives. Kochiyama therefore recommends that it is imperative teachers of young children consider the highly stereotyped view of the slender princess when reading traditional Disney fairy tales as part of an educational program.

Kuo's (2005) work is especially important. She shows that the persistent imbalance in gender representation is not only in fairy tales but is the case in all of children's literature genres. Kochiya's (2015) article investigates the traditional fairy tale films of *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1957) and compares these with a modern fairy tale by Disney, *Tangled* (2010). The conclusion was that Disney had created a powerful, smart and resourceful female because that is what contemporary society demanded.

Studies of masculinity in fairy tales have lagged well behind the study of femininity (Jorgensen, 2018). Males are often shown as rescuers, fighters, hyper-masculine, self-sufficient, heroic and perseverant (Cekiso, 2013; Chakraborty, 2017; Neikirk, 2009). In the case of *Cinderella* and *Snow White*, men really only appear as peripheral characters about whom we learn very little. Jorgensen (2018) posits that male fairy tale heroes start from a position of meekness and modesty that qualify them for a rise to power and wealth. When critiquing the revisionist fairy tales of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Carter (2006) explains that men can be classified into three groups: princes, beasts or royal pains. He argues that the princes are nice and they usually must experience some sort of transformation of attitude, appearance or reputation. The beasts may appear to be beasts before showing their true colours or they may stay as beasts that are dangerous, deadly and destructive. Furthermore, Carter argues that if they are royal pains, weak-willed or a general nuisance, then Freeman has the men experience a "hostile takeover" from the powerful, feminine locus of power. These characters, according to Carter, may be a result of Freeman writing in the post American Civil War period when males were a depleted resource.

The three criteria used to discuss the roles of males in the fairy tales of Mary Freeman by Carter draw parallels to Atterby's critique of a Michael Cunningham's *A Wild Swan and Other Tales* (2015). Attebery (2018) found three distinctive types of male: the little man (anxious about failing to live up to the model), the monster bridegroom (fear taking on its worst features) and the erotic swan (an alternate beau ideal). These types of reimagining of fairy tales broaden what it means to be masculine and help students to understand that there are different forms of masculinity within society. The final point of this section which is relevant to the classroom is left to Jorgensen (2018) whose research posits that "masculinity is constructed in fairy tales as contingent and vulnerable, with men susceptible to transformations and judged more by hierarchical values like stature and birth order than are women, who tend to be judged by beauty" (p. 338).

3.5 Social and emotional lessons

Fairy tales share the common elements of fantasy and the assertion of moral lessons for society and individuals (Henderson & Malone, 2012; Le Guernic, 2004). In his seminal work, Bruno Bettelheim (1977), a clinical psychologist, discussed the psychological and cultural benefits of using fairy tales as part of childhood development. Through a Freudian lens, Bettelheim believed that children engaged in emotional growth when interacting with fairy tales and were able to move out of their self-centred nature as they grappled with allegorical teaching of these tales. Bettelheim's research influenced the way fairy tales were taught in the classroom. Later

researchers (Tatar, 1992; Williams, 2010; Xiaoyi, 2017) challenged many of Bettelheim's views, claiming that adults were placing self-serving ideals onto fairy tales and that the selection of fairy tales used by Bettelheim were selected based on their usefulness to support Freudian theories that position the child as the transgressor who deserves punishment. Furthermore, Wardetzky (1990) investigated the self-created fairy tales from upwards of two thousand German children (ages eight–ten years), and found not the slightest glimmering of an effort to elaborate questions of social justice, morality, the relationship between good and evil, or power as a social category. Wardetzky's research also challenges Bettelheim's thesis that fairy tales assist children to resolve conflicts involved in separating from their parent, rather the children's stories were here and now dangers and did not describe tests for adulthood.

When developing social skills with children in a modern classroom setting and in the wider world, children's literature plays an important role. Multiple studies have shown that fairy tales can effectively be employed in the classroom to help children develop emotional intelligence using Lowell and Harris (1992) contemporary *The Three Little Javelinas* (Wipf & Ros-Voseles, 2012), emotional regulation by reading *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Cinderella* (Fleer & Hammer, 2013) and link the ideas to what is happening to their world. Young children learn that characters that are purely good or evil exist only in fairy tales and that to make mistakes is human (Kulikovskaya & Andrienko, 2016). According to Zehetner (2013), fairy tales have been used positively by parents for centuries to encourage personal growth and impart morals and that they are just as relevant today as they have ever been. Teachers in the contemporary classroom often select fairy tales for their therapeutic and didactic effects. Lessons include the teaching of ethics and morality, by challenging, for example the way a nefarious character behaved. These discussions then determine if there could be alternative courses of action that the character may have undertaken. A further advantage of fairy tales, according to Gates et al. (2003), is that they can be used efficaciously to teach without overt sermonising. This can benefit a teacher greatly as they can incorporate the teaching of morals and social skills in a seamless fashion.

An advantage of fractured fairy tales is that they often employ humour, giving the teacher a valuable tool for making learning fun. Research proves that humour in the classroom fosters positive student-teacher relationships, decreases anxiety, increases cognitive performance, transcends cultural boundaries and makes learning more enjoyable (Al-Delimit & Aziz, 2016; Loizou et al., 2011). Serafini and Coles (2015) explain that "A judicious use of humour enables teachers to develop a sense of immediacy in the classroom. Increased immediacy in the classroom is associated with greater enjoyment, greater motivation, and more positive attitude towards the teacher and the class" (p.638).

Fairy tales have long been used in counselling and therapy. According to the Jungian interpretation, fairy tales can teach children how to deal with conflict, desires and relationships in a healthy way and have the power to influence values, beliefs and health in a child's future. Robinson (1986) argues that fairy tales can be adapted to serve as a useful teaching tool in family therapy as these stories often deal with dysfunctional family groups. Hill's (1992) studies demonstrated that a positive of fairy tales in therapy is that they often help young people via transference, where children transfer their anger and fears onto the fairy tale rather than onto other people in their lives. In contrast, Darker-Smith's (as cited in VisikoKnox-Johnson, 2016) research showed that girls who are immersed in fairy tales such as Beauty and the Beast are more likely to stay in destructive relationships into adulthood.

4 Recommendations and conclusions

The review above shows that most studies of the use of fairy tales reveal that there are benefits to teaching this genre in classrooms. However, many scholars note that some issues with gender and culture need to be carefully considered.

Fairy tales have the potential to be an effective resource to teach across several subject areas of the curriculum. Society is changing and fairy tales are also constantly being reimagined to fit into modern society. Incorporating a range of fairy tales in an inclusive and thoughtful way allows teachers a valuable opportunity to teach multiple skills and subjects in the contemporary classroom.

Gender equity has not yet been achieved in fairy tale literature; however, there has been promising progress in the role of the female characters being portrayed as strong and intelligent characters rather than being passive participants. As such, based on the critical gender work, this paper recommends teachers encouraging their students to challenge stereotypical gender representations. Active discussion about the historical and socio-cultural context of these traditional stories is valuable and sound pedagogical practice in the contemporary classroom.

Inclusive pedagogical practice is needed when teaching fairy tales. Studies by Cekiso (2013), Fisher and Silber (2000), and Kuo (2005) advise that strategies such as comparing the gender roles in fairy tale books, as opposed to the real world, and also allowing the students to unearth gender inequalities and come up with solutions on how to address these issues would be useful to explore these issues. Exploring these gender constraints within a fairy tale unit has the potential to offer teachers an opportunity to use these resources in a more equitable and inclusive way. Teachers need to be aware that traditional fairy tales in many ways reflect the gender scripts in our culture and have the potential to be highly influential in the way children develop their gender identity. It would also be useful to include general teacher training workshops in fairy tale history as an adjunct to the use of fairy tales in the primary classroom.

The majority of studies cited above reveal that fairy tales offer teachers the flexibility to teach social skills, such as cooperation, ethics and empathy. Australian author Ron Newton has created a useful series of books about teaching the values of honesty, kindness and self-esteem through fairy tales. Newton's books are easily accessible in Australia. They provide a valuable resource to help teach literacy and critical life skills, such as being kind to people and animals in *The Enchanted Princess* (2010). To support children's mental and emotional health, Pia Jones and Sarah Pimenta (2020) have created *Therapeutic Fairy Tales*, a resource for professionals and caregivers dedicated to supporting young children through challenging situations of life and loss, covering diverse themes such as family breakdown, untreatable illness and parental depression. The use of humour can be a very effective learning tool in the contemporary classroom. Studies by Bakx et al. (2015) indicate that for primary school students, a sense of humour is one of the most desirable teacher characteristics. Fractured fairy tales offer teachers a humorous and inclusive way to engage primary school students by fostering a fun and productive classroom environment.

In producing this review of scholarship examining fairy tales, the evidence shows that teachers should be encouraged to, and feel confident about, using fairy tales in the classroom, particularly when they are gender inclusive, promote multicultural ideals, contain humour, teach social skills and compliment many subject areas of the curriculum.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions.

Declarations

Competing interests The author declares no competing interests.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Al-Delimit, A. D. D., & Aziz, R. N. (2016). Humour as EFL learning-teaching strategy. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 7(10), 105–115.
- Alexander, L. B., & Morton, M. L. (2007). Multicultural Cinderella: A collaborative project in an elementary school. *School Libraries Worldwide*, 13(2), 32–45.
- Änggård, E. (2010). Making use of “nature” in an outdoor preschool: Classroom, home and fairyland. *Children Youth and Environments*, 20(1), 4–25.
- Appel, M. (2020). Performativity and the demise of the teaching profession: The need for rebalancing in Australia. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 48(3), 301–315.
- Attebery, B. (2018). Reinventing masculinity in fairy tales by men. *Marvels & Tales*, 32(2), 314–337. <https://doi.org/10.13110/marveltales.32.2.0314>
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2017). 073/2017. *Census reveals a fast changing, culturally diverse nation*. <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/lookup/media%20release3>. Accessed 11 Oct 2020
- Bakx, A., Koopman, M., de Kruijf, J., & den Brok, P. (2015). Primary school pupils' views of characteristics of good primary school teachers: An exploratory, open approach for investigating pupils' perceptions. *Teachers and Teaching*, 21(5), 543–564. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2014.995477>
- Barfod, K., & Bentsen, P. (2018). Don't ask how outdoor education can be integrated into the school curriculum; ask how the school curriculum can be taught outside the classroom. *Curriculum Perspectives*, 38(2), 151–156. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41297-018-0055-9>
- Beckett, S. L. (2013). *Revisioning red riding Hood around the world: An anthology of international retellings*. Wayne State University Press.
- Berne, E. (1975). *What do you say after you say hello?: The psychology of human destiny*. Random House.
- Bettelheim, B. (1977). *The uses of enchantment: The meaning and importance of fairy tales*. Vintage Books.
- Birketveit, A. (2015). Picture books in EFL; vehicles of culture and visual literacy. *Nordic Journal of Modern Language Methodology*, 3(1), 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.46364/njmlm.v3i1.108>
- Bland, J. (2015). Drama with young learners. In J. Bland (Ed.), *Teaching English to young learners: Critical issues in language teaching with 3–12 year olds* (pp. 219–238). Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Bottigheimer, R. B. (2009). *Fairy tales : A new history*. State University of New York Press.
- Bottigheimer, R. B. (2014). *Fairy tales and society: Illusion, allusion, and paradigm*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Bourke, R. T. (2008). First graders and fairy tales: One teacher's action research of critical literacy. *The Reading Teacher*, 62(4), 304–312. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RT.62.4.3>
- Braun, E., & Bernardini, C. (2011). *Trust me, Jack's beanstalk stinks!: The story of Jack and the beanstalk as told by the giant*. Picture Window Books.
- Brooke, J. (2018). *STEM solves fairytales. Rapunzel: Fix fairytale problems with science and technology*. Franklin Watts.
- Buchanan, J., Prescott, A., Schuck, S., Aubusson, P., Burke, P., & Louviere, J. (2013). Teacher retention and attrition: Views of early career teachers. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 38(3), 8.
- Bullen, E., & Sawers, N. (2016). Australian fairy-tale films. In J. Zipes, P. Greenhill, & K. Magnus-Johnston (Eds.), *Fairy tale films beyond Disney: International perspectives* (pp. 233–245). Routledge.
- Cai, M. (2002). *Multicultural literature for children and young adults. Reflection on critical issues*. Greenwood Press.

- Carlsen, M. (2013). Engaging with mathematics in the kindergarten. Orchestrating a fairy tale through questioning and use of tools. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 21(4), 502–513. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2013.845439>
- Carter, J. B. (2006). Princes, beasts, or royal pains: Men and masculinity in the revisionist fairy tales of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman. *Marvels & Tales*, 20(1), 30–46.
- Cecilia, R. R. (2012). Narrowing cultural boundaries in the EFL classroom: Fairy tales from India. *Revista española de lingüística aplicada*, 25, 225–244.
- Cekiso, M. (2013). Gender stereotypes in selected fairy tales: Implications for teaching reading in the foundation phase in South Africa. *Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology*, 4(3), 201–206.
- Chakraborty, P. (2017). Debating/Problematising the stereotypes in fairy tales. *Glocal Colloquise: An International Journal of World Literatures and Cultures*, 3(1), 113–120.
- Clarke, S. (2020). Body image and young children. In S. Garvis & D. Pendergast (Eds.), *Health and wellbeing in childhood*. (3rd ed., pp.77–95). Cambridge University Press.
- Collins, F. (1999). The use of traditional storytelling in education to the learning of literacy skills. *Early Child Development and Care*, 152(1), 77–108. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0300443991520106>
- Colon-Vila, L. (1997). Storytelling in an ESL classroom. *Teaching Pre K-8*, 27(5), 58–59.
- Columbia, L. (2017). *The power of picture books in teaching math and science* (2nd ed.). Taylor and Francis.
- Coyne, S. M., Linder, J. R., Rasmussen, E. E., Nelson, D. A., & Birkbeck, V. (2016). Pretty as a princess: Longitudinal effects of engagement with disney princesses on gender stereotypes, body esteem, and prosocial behavior in children. *Child Development*, 87(6), 1909–1925. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12569>
- Dewan, P. (2016). Perennially popular: The appeal of classic fairy tales for children. *Children and Libraries*, 14(2), 27–31.
- Do Rozario, R.-A. C. (2011). Australia's fairy tales illustrated in print: Instances of Indigeneity, colonization, and suburbanization. *Marvels & Tales*, 25(1), 13–32.
- Edelman, J. (2017). How preservice teachers use children's literature to teach mathematical concepts: Focus on mathematical knowledge for teaching. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 9(4), 741–752.
- Edmunds, K. M., & Bauserman, K. L. (2006). What teachers can learn about reading motivation through conversations with children. *The Reading Teacher*, 59(5), 414–424.
- Engh, D. (2013). Why use music in English language learning? A survey of the literature. *English Language Teaching*, 6(2), 113–127.
- Fisher, J., & Silber, E. (2000). Good and bad beyond belief: Teaching gender lessons through fairy tales and feminist theory. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 28(3), 121–136.
- Fleer, M., & Hammer, M. (2013). Emotions in imaginative situations: The valued place of fairytales for supporting emotion regulation. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 20(3), 240–259. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2013.781652>
- Furner, J. (2018). Using children's literature to teach mathematics: An effective vehicle in a STEM world. *European Journal of STEM Education*, 3(3), 14.
- Gates, P. S., Steffél, S. B., & Molson, F. J. (2003). *Fantasy literature for children and young adults*. Scarecrow Press.
- Gladding, S. T., & Drake Wallace, M. J. (2010). The potency and power of counselling stories. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 5(1), 15–24.
- Goo, Y. (2018). Multicultural literature education: A story of failure? *Society*, 55(4), 323–328.
- Gordon, C. (2020). *Happily ever after: 21 multicultural fairy tales to delight every child and teen*. Brightly. <https://www.readbrightly.com/multicultural-fairy-tales-for-children/>
- Gunderson, J. (2014). *Really, Rapunzel needed a haircut! The story of Rapunzel, as told by Dame Gothel*. Capstone.
- Hall, L. (1997). Fairy tales in the primary curriculum. *Education 3–13*, 25(1), 18–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279785200051>
- Harries, E. W. (2001). *Twice upon a time: Women writers and the history of the fairy tale*. Princeton University Press.
- Hasse, D. (2008). *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of folktales and fairytales*. Greenwood Press.
- Henderson, K. L., & Malone, S. L. (2012). Ethical fairy tales: Using fairy tales as illustrative ethical dilemmas with counselling students. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 7(1), 64–82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15401383.2012.660128>
- Hibbin, R. (2016). The psychosocial benefits of oral storytelling in school: Developing identity and empathy through narrative. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 34(4), 218–231. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2016.1225315>
- Hill, L. (1992). Fairy Tales: Visions for problem resolution in eating disorders. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 70(5), 584–587.
- Holmes, K., Powell, S., Holmes, S., & Witt, E. (2007). Readers and book characters: Does race matter? *The Journal of Educational Research*, 100(5), 276–282.
- Hurley, D. L. (2005). Seeing white: Children of color and the Disney fairy tale princess. *Journal of Negro Education*, 74(3), 221–232.

- Isbell, R., Sobol, J., Lindauer, L., & Lowrance, A. (2004). The effects of storytelling and story reading on the oral language complexity and story comprehension of young children. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 32(3), 157–163.
- Jalongo, M. R., & Sobolak, M. J. (2011). Supporting young children's vocabulary growth: The challenges, the benefits, and evidence-based strategies. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 38(6), 421–429.
- Jones, P., & Pimenta, S. (2020). *Therapeutic fairy tales: For children and families going through troubling times* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429286087>
- Jorgensen, J. (2018). Masculinity and men's bodies in fairy tales: Youth, violence, and transformation. *Marvels & Tales*, 32(2), 338–494.
- Khatib, M., & Aghajanzadeh, G. (2015). Broadening children's reading scholarship through fairy tales: Authenticity in EFL reading. *Humanising Language Teaching*, 17(5), 38–48.
- Kochiyama, A. (2015). Teaching gender awareness through fairy tales in the EFL classroom. *English Review: Journal of English Education*, 2(1), 1–7.
- Kulikovskaya, I. E., & Andrienko, A. A. (2016). Fairy-tales for modern gifted preschoolers: Developing creativity, moral values and coherent world outlook. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 233, 53–57. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.10.129>
- Kuo, J. (2005). Teaching ESL/EFL students to recognize gender bias in children's literature. *The Internet TESL Journal*. <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Kuo-GenderBias.html>
- Kuykendal, L. F., & Sturm, B. W. (2007). We said feminist fairy tales, not fractured fairy tales! Children & Libraries. *The Journal of the Association for Library Service to Children*, 5(3), 38–41.
- Landrum, R. E., Brakke, K., & McCarthy, M. A. (2019). The pedagogical power of storytelling. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology*, 5(3), 247–253. <https://doi.org/10.1037/stl0000152>
- Le Guernic, A. (2004). Fairy tales and psychological life plans. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 34(3), 216–222. <https://doi.org/10.1177/036215370403400305>
- Lee, Y. J. (2020). What today's children read from “happily ever after” Cinderella stories. *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1554480X.2020.1781641>.
- Loewen, N. (2013). *Believe me, goldilocks rocks!: The story of the three bears as told by baby bear*. Capstone.
- Loizou, E., Kyriakides, E., & Hadjicharalambous, M. (2011). Constructing stories in kindergarten: Children's knowledge of genre. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 19(1), 63–77.
- Lowell, S., & Harris, J. (1992). *The three little javelinas*. Scholastic Incorporated.
- Lucarevski, C. R. (2016). The role of storytelling on language learning: A literature review. *Working Papers of the Linguistics Circle*, 26(1), 24–44.
- Lwin, S. M. (2016). It's story time!: Exploring the potential of multimodality in oral storytelling to support children's vocabulary learning. *Literacy*, 50(2), 72–82.
- Makinen, M. (2001). The fairy tale. In *Feminist popular fiction* (pp. 56–91). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Marshall, B. (2018). Rapunzel (STEM solves fairytales) [Review of *Rapunzel (STEM solves fairytales)*]. *The school librarian*, 66(1), 46. School Library Association.
- Mart, C. T. (2012). Encouraging young learners to learn English through stories. *English Language Teaching*, 5(5), 101–106.
- McGrath-Champ, S., Wilson, R., Stacey, M., & Fitzgerald, S. (2018). *Understanding work in schools: The foundation for teaching and learning*. NSW Teachers Federation.
- Meister, C. (2017). *Multicultural fairy Tales: Hansel and Gretel*. Capstone.
- Miller, S., & Pennycuff, L. (2008). The power of story: Using storytelling to improve literacy learning. *Journal of Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives in Education*, 1(1), 36–43.
- Mixon, M., & Temu, P. (2006). First road to learning: Language through stories. *English Teaching Forum*, 44(2), 14–19.
- Munsch, R. (1980). *The paper bag princess*. Annick Press.
- Neikirk, A. (2009). “... happily ever after” (or what fairytales teach girls about being women). *Hohonu: A Journal of Academic Writing*, 7, 38–42.
- Neuschwander, C. (2013). *Sir cumference and the dragon of pi*. Charlesbridge.
- Newton, R. (2010). *Teaching values through fairy tales: Kindness*. Ready Ed-Publications.
- No Time for Flashcards. (2019). Culturally diverse fairy tales – 11 picture books for your classroom. *No Time for Flashcards*. <https://www.notimeforflashcards.com/2019/07/diverse-fairy-tales.html>
- Ockey, G., & Ogden, D. (1997). Tapping student interest with fairy tales. In C. Coreil & M. Napoliello (Eds.), *The Journal of the Imagination in Language Learning*, 4, 58–62.
- Parsons, L. T. (2004). Ella evolving: Cinderella stories and the construction of gender-appropriate behavior. *Children's Literature in Education*, 35(2), 135–154.
- Pilch, S. (2015). Once upon a time there was a girl: Teaching gender through fairytales. *Modern English Teacher*, 24(3), 43–45.
- Propp, V. I. A. (1968). *Morphology of the folktale* (2nd ed.). University of Texas Press.

- Rice, P. S. (2000). Gendered readings of a traditional “feminist” folktale by sixth-grade boys and girls. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 32(2), 211–236. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10862960009548074>
- Robinson, J. G. (1986). Fairy-tales and teaching family therapy. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 8(4), 383–393. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1986.00734.x>
- Saville, K. (2011). Strategies for using repetition as a powerful teaching tool. *Music Educators Journal*, 98(1), 69–75.
- Schenda. (2007). Semiliterate and semi-oral processes. *Marvels & Tales*, 21(1).
- Schwabe, C. (2016). The fairy tale and its uses in contemporary new media and popular culture introduction. *Humanities*, 5(4), 81–n/a. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h5040081>.
- Seifert, L. C., Stanton, D. C., & Kennedy, T. (2012). Enchanted eloquence: Fairy tales by seventeenth-century French women writers. *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 7, 338–339.
- Serafini, F., & Coles, R. (2015). Humor in children’s picture books. *Reading Teacher*, 68(8), 636–638.
- Shaskan, T. S. (2014). *Honestly, Red Riding Hood was rotten!: The story of Little Red Riding Hood as told by the wolf*. Capstone.
- Shortleeve, K. (2004). The wonderful world of the depression: Disney, despotism, and the 1930s. Or, why Disney scares us. *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 28(1), 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1353/uni.2004.0012>
- Spade, J., & Valentine, C. (2017). *The kaleidoscope of gender: Prisms, patterns, and possibilities* (5th ed.). SAGE.
- Tatar, M. (1992). *Off with their heads!: Fairy tales and the culture of childhood*. Princeton University Press.
- Tatar, M. (2019). *The hard facts of the Grimms’ fairy tales: Expanded edition*. Princeton University Press.
- Tesar, M., Kupferman, D. W., Rodriguez, S., & Arndt, S. (2016). Forever young: Childhoods, fairy tales and philosophy. *Global Studies of Childhood*, 6(2), 222–233.
- Teverson, A. (2013). *Fairy tale*. Routledge.
- Tirlea, L., Truby, H., & Haines, T. P. (2016). Pragmatic, randomized controlled trials of the Girls on the Go! Program to improve self-esteem in girls. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 30(4), 231–241.
- VisikoKnox-Johnson, L. (2016). The positive impacts of fairy tales for children. *University of Hawai ‘i at Hilo HOHONU*, 14, 77–81.
- Von Franz, M. L. (2017). *The interpretation of fairy tales: Revised edition*. Shambhala Publications.
- Wardetzky. (1990). The structure and interpretation of fairy tales composed by children. *The Journal of American Folklore*, 103(408).
- Wardetzky. (2008). Sprachlos? Erzählen im interkulturellen Kontext: Ein Projekt zur Sprachförderung von Kindern mit Migrationshintergrund. *Scenario (Cork)*, 2(2), 50–74.
- Wee, S.-J., Kim, K. J., & Lee, Y. (2019). ‘Cinderella did not speak up’: Critical literacy approach using folk/fairy tales and their parodies in an early childhood classroom. *Early Child Development and Care*, 189(11), 1874–1888. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2017.1417856>
- Whelan, R. (2018). It’s time to get serious about: Teacher workload. *Independent Education*, 48(2), 30–31.
- Williams, C. (2010). Who’s wicked now?: The stepmother as fairy-tale heroine. *Marvels & Tales*, 24(2), 255–271.
- Wipf, J. B., & Ros-Voseles, D. D. (2012). Lost opportunities: Rediscovering fairy tales. *Library Media Connection*, 30(4), 26–28.
- Wood, D. (2017). Strategic, stylistic and notional intertextuality: Fairy tales in contemporary Australian fiction. *Text*, 43, 1–12 <http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue43/Wood.pdf>
- Worthy, J., & Prater, K. (2002). “I thought about it all night”: Readers theatre for reading fluency and motivation. *Reading Teacher*, 56(3), 294–297.
- Xiaoyi, L. (2017). How fairy tales educate and civilize us: Ethical literary criticism on fairy tales. *Interlitteraria*, 22(2), 273–281.
- Yenika-Agbaw, V. (2014). Black Cinderella: Multicultural literature and school curriculum. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 22(2), 233–250. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2013.819027>
- Young, T. A. (2004). *Happily ever after: Sharing folk literature with elementary and middle school students*. International Reading Association.
- Zehetner, A. (2013). Why fairy tales are still relevant to today’s children. *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health*, 49(2), 161–162. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpc.12080>
- Zhang, Y., & Lauer, G. (2015). How culture shapes the reading of fairy tales: A cross-cultural approach. *Comparative Literature Studies*, 52(4), 663–681.
- Zipes, J. (2012). *Fairy tales and the art of subversion the classical genre for children and the process of civilization* (2nd ed.). Routledge.