

## Using Fairy Tales in the Foundation Phase Reading Classroom to Raise Awareness on and Mitigation against Gender-based Violence in South Africa

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**ABSTRACT** Despite the number of legislations that combat gender-based violence in South Africa, many girls and women suffer from violence and its consequences because of their sex and their unequal status in society. This paper seeks to advocate the use of fairy tales as a platform to raise awareness on and mitigation against gender-based violence. Using content analysis, this paper examines the existence of gender stereotypes in the fairy tales that might lead to gender-based violence. Four fairy tales were selected purposefully from a list of popular ones so as to draw the learners' attention to the gender stereotypes and their vulnerability to gender-based violence. The findings revealed that gender stereotypes exist in the selected fairy tales. Females were portrayed as weak, subordinate to men, allowing men control them and have a lower social status. Men were portrayed as providers, saviors for females, better decision-makers, tough and aggressive. Recommendations were made highlighting the role teachers could play in order to develop the Foundation Phase learners' critical thinking so that they are able to challenge and critically analyze the text.

### INTRODUCTION

Despite the view that a family is a haven of love and support, data collected from around the world suggest that girls and women are at greater risk of violence in their homes than anywhere else (World Bank 1994). The research has shown that females of all ages are victims of violence, in part because of their limited social and economic power compared to men (Calvanese 2007; Yuk-ping et al. 2012). Therefore, violence against women is often known as gender-based violence because it partly stems from the women's subordinate status in society. According to the United Nations (1993), violence against women refers to any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. It further states that violence against women is both, a cause and consequence of gender inequality and is an abuse of the power imbalance between women and men. The literature has shown that gender violence has its roots from the society's norms and beliefs. This idea is supported by Odimegwu and Okemgbo (2003), who point out that social and cultural factors intrinsically exert influence on the way of life in a society, which impacts wom-

en. In addition, the World Health Organization (WHO) (2009) points out that the different roles and behaviors of females and males are shaped and reinforced by the gender norms within society. The WHO further points out that in some societies being male is associated with taking risks, being tough and aggressive and having multiple sexual partners. On the other hand, in many societies, women are viewed as subordinate to men and have a lower social status, allowing men to control, and have greater decision-making power than women.

Since these gender inequalities have their roots in the communities, the current study seeks to make an effort by engaging the Foundation Phase learners in redressing these inequalities. This idea is supported by the WHO (2007) who states that school-based interventions attempt to address gender norms and inequality early in life, before gender stereotypes become deeply ingrained in learners. In addition, Marinova (2003) points out that violence is something that is learnt, and to combat it one needs learning and a space for discussing it openly. Moreover, Robbin (1992) points out that as schools are microcosms of society at large, it is important to examine the ways in which educational environments may foster and perpetuate a tolerance of gender-based violence. Therefore, the Foundation Phase is perceived as a

relevant space to combat gender inequalities. A number of school-based interventions to address gender norms and inequality have focused on dating violence and sexual abuse among teenagers and youth. According to the knowledge of the researcher, no studies have been conducted on the use of fairy tales as a platform among the Foundation Phase learners to raise awareness on and mitigation against gender-based violence, hence there is a need for the current study.

Violence against women and girls is one of the most disturbing aspects of living in a culture that promotes a hierarchy of power in human relationships according to class, race and gender, among other divisions (Robbin 1992). Although this study by Robbin was conducted in the United States, South Africa is experiencing a similar concern. According to the Council of Europe Convention Report (CETS No. 210), violence against women, including domestic violence, is one of the most serious forms of gender-based violence. While many studies agree that gender-role stereotyping contributes to narrowly defined expectations of human potential, limited career options for males and females and mixed messages about the world, which contradict daily life experience, the social cost of such stereotyping have not been fully explored in the educational arena (Robbin 1992). According to Bhargava (2009), the socialization process forces males and females into behavioral modes, personality characteristics and occupational roles deemed appropriate by society. Most of these constraints bring about a system that is biased in favour of males. According to the results of a study conducted in Nigeria by Aneame (2012), violence against women is the most acute form of gender inequality in Nigeria. The results further indicated that some of the common harmful traditional practices against women included female genital mutilation, child marriage, ritualistic widowhood, practices, nutritional taboos, cult prostitution, domestic violence and sexual freedom for husbands. The study further revealed that other discriminatory practices included traditional land tenure systems and patterns of inheritance, lack of access to credit, family preference for sons, lack of participation in public decision-making, discrimination in making and employment, discriminatory legislation, and discriminatory religious practices, as well as rape, battery, trafficking in women, murder, kidnap-

ping and induced prostitution. In addition, the WHO (2007) points out that gender inequality can contribute to gender inequalities in health and access to healthcare, opportunities for employment and promotion, levels of income, political participation and representation and education.

The literature revealed that gender stereotypes in children's literature present an overwhelmingly traditional and negative portrayal of women and that the development of gender identities and expectations among youngsters may be affected by these portrayals (Bhargava 2009; Marinova 2003). The literature further reveals that girls may expect that they will continue to be victims and needy and that their responsibilities include maintaining beauty and sexual appeal, while boys may determine that their role is to protect and defend women and possess them even through the use of violence (Dietz 1998). Occupational segregation is one of the factors cited by the Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC) (2001) that are associated with gender stereotyping. The EOC highlights the importance of raising awareness of the pervasive nature of gender stereotyping and the social and economic damage it causes, to increase young people's opportunities and to act as a catalyst to bring about reduction in occupational segregation. The EOC further states that what is seen as gender appropriate may change as children grow older but it will still influence their choices and decisions, which are made throughout life. In addition, Dietz (1998) points out that the gender role that is internalized by the individual when she or he is young necessarily has a significant impact upon the perspective of that individual and the additional roles she or he assumes in later life.

In children's literature, the role of men is always to protect and provide for women. This could be dangerous for the men to fulfill. According to Yuk-ping et al. (2012), discrepancies between the normative ideals of male identity and the reality create pressure for men, particularly those who do not have the resources to live up to the cultural ideals of male identity. Yuk-ping et al. (2012: 3) further state that studies in other western countries have shown that the pressure to act like a "real man" often compel marginalized and socially excluded men to use other forms of resources, for example, violence and deploy different strategies to develop alter-

native forms of masculinities. According to Lowe et al. (2012), aggression for men is a legitimate means of assuming control over the world around them and in order to avoid shame, men fight to protect their honor and respect.

According to the WHO (2009), young children are especially vulnerable to the gender stereotypes provided by the texts because they do not have the critical capacity necessary to distinguish between fantasy and reality, to identify persuasive intent or to understand irony and disregard stereotypes. The WHO further states that the cumulative and unconscious impact of these stereotypes can contribute to limiting development of a child's potential. This is due to the fact that in many fairy tales gender inequality manifests itself in the different roles between males and females. For example, masculinity in fairy tales is associated with independence, competition, emotional detachment, aggression and violence. On the other hand, females are often portrayed as weak, dependent and submissive. Therefore, these gender stereotypes are particularly troublesome in the context of a society like South Africa that is struggling to overcome real life violence against women. Hence the current study seeks to raise awareness on and mitigation against gender-based violence.

### Objectives of the Study

Inspired by the high rate of gender-based violence in South Africa, the objective of this study is to explore how gender stereotypes that exist in fairy tales could be used as a platform to raise awareness on and mitigation against gender-based violence among the Foundation Phase learners.

### METHODOLOGY

Using content analysis, this study examines the role played by fairy tales in the Foundation Phase reading classroom in an effort to raise awareness on and mitigation against gender-based violence. The sample of books chosen for the analysis in this study was intentionally not random. The researcher felt that a purposive sample of the most popular fairy tales would provide the best picture of what the learners in the Foundation Phase go through. As the number of children's books available is vast, most popular children's books would include books

with gender stereotypes that would be most likely to influence gender-based violence. The following two English and two IsiXhosa fairy tales were selected for intensive analysis among the list of popular fairy tales: Cinderella, Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs, *Unonqana* and *Untonganayentsimbi* (Iron-rod). Each fairy tale was read and the characters' roles analyzed. The language and the themes were also considered.

### FINDINGS

#### The Fairy Tales and Gender Roles

In addition to the other agents of socialization, the fairy tales were perceived as having the potential to affect the Foundation Phase learners' definition of gender. The fairy tales were seen as continuously bombarding the learners with portrayals of men and women that are characteristically stereotypical. In the four selected fairy tales, men are strong and work jobs that require excessive amounts of physical strength. For example, in Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, the dwarfs do all the hard work associated with men. On the other hand, Snow White is supposed to lock herself in doors and cook for them because she is a woman. Females in the selected fairy tales are also portrayed in stereotypical roles that are usually related to sexuality wherein the woman focuses upon her beauty or physical attractiveness. Snow White is one of such victims. She is depicted as being saved by her beauty.

The men are also depicted in a stereotypical manner as they are always portrayed as brave and being able to rescue the women. In one of the selected fairy tales, *Untonganayentsimbi*, the male character, *Bhuzalusiba* is portrayed as brave and he manages to save his sister from the ogres. In all the four selected fairy tales, men play a leadership role and females are submissive and dependent upon men.

### DISCUSSION

The study sought to use the chosen fairy tales in the Foundation Phase reading classroom to raise awareness of and mitigation against gender-based violence in South Africa. The narratives of the four selected fairy tales reflect a number of gender stereotypes. This finding is supported by a study conducted by Cekiso (2013)

that gender stereotypes exist in IsiXhosa and English children's literature. The existence of gender stereotypes in fairy tales has the potential to facilitate gender-based violence. Dietz (1998) supports this idea and points out that gender stereotypes present an overwhelmingly traditional and negative portrayal of women and may affect the gender identities and expectations among youngsters. For example, girls may expect that they will continue to be victims and needy, while boys may determine that their role is to protect, defend women and possess them even through the use of violence (Dietz 1998). Dietz further points out that the roles internalized by the individual when she or he is young necessarily have a significant impact upon perspective of that individual and the additional roles she or he assumes in later life. This idea is also mentioned by O'Bryant and Corder Bolz (1978) who state that viewing gendered content can be assumed to affect children's personal gender schemas. Robbin (1992) observed that young children are especially vulnerable to the teaching of the texts because they do not have the critical capacity necessary to distinguish between fantasy and reality, to identify persuasive intent or to understand irony and disregard stereotypes. Therefore, the teachers are likely to play an important role in an attempt to raise the Foundation Phase learners' awareness on and mitigation against gender-based violence.

Gender stereotypes in the selected fairy tales portray the role of men to be protective and provide for the women. According to Yuk-ping et al. (2012), this responsibility might create pressure for men, particularly those who do not have resources to live up to the cultural ideals of a male identity. Yuk-ping et al. further point out that the pressure to act like "real man" often compel marginalized and socially excluded men to use violence. In addition, Lowe et al. (2012) state that aggression for men is a legitimate means of assuming control over the world around them and in order to avoid shame men fight to protect their honor and respect.

### CONCLUSION

The current status of the fairy tales reveals the existence of gender stereotypes. These gender stereotypes could raise unrealistic expectations for both, male and female learners. The teachers, therefore, are supposed to play an im-

portant role so as to develop the learners' critical thinking and to save their minds from being manipulated by the fairy tales. The teacher intervention is also important in using the fairy tales to raise awareness on and mitigation against gender-based violence. The perception is that by focusing on the reality behind the gender stereotypes, teachers can change the Foundation Phase learners' minds and eliminate gender-based violence in South Africa.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has revealed that children are vulnerable to the gender stereotypes provided by the texts because they do not have the critical capacity to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers develop the Foundation Phase learners' critical thinking so that they are able to challenge the text. The teachers should also help the learners differentiate between the world of fairy tales and the real world so as to promote gender equality, as it exists in the real world and stipulated in the Constitution of South Africa. In order for teachers to perform the abovementioned responsibilities, it is recommended that they be trained to raise their awareness about gender stereotypes and how this might facilitate gender-based violence. It is also important for the Foundation Phase teachers to familiarize themselves with the Bill of Rights, which is chapter two of the Constitution of South Africa. The perception is that having this information will give them a clear picture of the future citizens they want to produce out of the Foundation Phase learners.

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