

Gender Stereotypes in Selected Fairy Tales: Implications for Teaching Reading in the Foundation Phase in South Africa

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ABSTRACT The purpose of this study was to investigate gender stereotypes in fairy tales in order to raise awareness of gender issues in learning and teaching, especially in the reading process. A purposive sample of two English and two IsiXhosa fairy tales were selected for intensive analysis among the popular fairy tales. The discourse analysis was used to analyze and deconstruct the texts with regard to how female and male characters were portrayed. The results indicated that both genders were frequently presented in stereotypical terms. The females were portrayed as submissive and dependent on men to rescue them. On the other hand, boys were portrayed as having power, bravery, strength and wit. This has implication for teaching reading in the Foundation Phase as this portrayal is stereotypical and not likely to be an accurate representation of many women today in the New South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of gender equality and women's empowerment has been raised and discussed in many forums. For example, it was among the issues discussed in the European Union's (UN) strategy for sustainable development adopted in 2006, one of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2005, 2006, 2007) priorities, discussed in the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995) and many other forums. Discussions in these forums have resulted in the existence of comprehensive frameworks that laid the foundation of equal treatment and equal opportunities between men and women. In South Africa, for example, there have been a number of legislative procedures in place to uphold the right of women and girls, such as Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (2000), the Employment Equity Act (1998), the Domestic Violence Act (1998) and the Constitution of South Africa (1996). In the discussions about gender equality in the above mentioned organizations and many other forums, a consensus was reached that textbooks can be used as a vehicle for gender equality in meeting the goals of Education For All (EFA) (UNESCO 2009). UNESCO further points out those textbooks are a basic vehicle of socialization, conveying knowledge and values. Thus, textbooks were viewed as key tools for achieving international goals relating to Education for All, gender equality and education for human rights and

peace. However, textbooks have been the object of debate and controversy. Numerous studies reveal that gender stereotypes exist in the textbooks, especially in children's literature (Louie 2012; Rayaprol 2010; European Women's Lobby 2008; Kuo 2005). This is a cause for concern as textbooks are supposed to uphold the values of the Constitution of South Africa. Adding to the crucial role played by textbooks, Cherlad (2006) points out that children learn the values and beliefs of their culture through the transmission of stories and tales produced by children's literature. Therefore, the current study seeks to explore if the information contained in the English and IsiXhosa fairy tales is a true reflection of the Constitution of South Africa towards gender equality. This concern is echoed by Cherland (2006) when she states that the lives of women are changing in our society, and it is important to mirror this change in children's literature as well.

According to Lazar (1993), children's literature, in addition to being one of the favourite choices for reading among learners as they grow up, is commonly used in the context of reading practices in English Second Language classrooms. As it has already been pointed out that gender stereotypes exist in children's literature, especially fairy tales, Fox (1993) warns teachers to be sensitive to their teaching materials or they will easily fall into accepting everything literature presents without questioning it. In addition, Kuo (2005) points out that in a democratic and anti-bias classroom, teachers need to

be extremely aware of the fact that dominant reading practices will make students accustomed to the texts and as a result identify themselves with the characters in many stories. According to Crowle (no date), many of the social stereotypes and cultural symbols that children learn over time come from the books they read. Therefore, if the textbooks contain information that is gender bias, that could lead to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes subconsciously through textbooks. In order to avoid such situation, Kuo (2005: 2) points out that teachers should help learners develop critical thinking through learning processes such as “reading against the grain,” in which teachers equip learners with a certain stance that deliberately challenges the text and helps learners uncover the gender inequalities present in the text. In addition, Louie (2001) states that coping with gender stereotyping in textbooks requires increasing awareness of gender issues on the part of authors and teachers.

According to Louie (2001), studies on gender stereotypes in children’s literature appeared as a consequence of the women’s movement in the early 1970s. Kasner (2004) defines gender stereotypes as characterizations involving personality attributes, physical traits, ambitions, occupations, and life styles ascribed to an individual, because of his or her sex. Kasner further points out that gender bias exists in the content language and illustrations of a large number of children’s fairy tales. According to Rayaprol (2012), sex is a biological fact and gender is a social construct. Therefore, boys and girls do not have any natural psychological or social differences, but it is society that makes them learn gender roles. According to European Women’s Lobby (2008), gender roles are shaped and imposed through a variety of social influences. For example, European Women’s Lobby points out that the first and one of the strongest influences on a person’s perceived gender role is his or her parents. European Women’s Lobby further point out that parents are the first teachers and some parents still hold traditional definitions of maleness and femaleness and what kind of activities are appropriate for each. Gender roles are also reinforced by school in that access to formal primary, secondary and third level education and the content of the curriculum as taught to girls and to boys is a major influencing factor on gender differences, choices

and access to rights European Women’s Lobby (EWL) (2008). In addition, Rayaprol (2012) states that school continues to reinforce gender stereotypes by offering home science to girls and sports to boys. Media is also cited as reinforcing traditional attitudes and behaviour, including in advertisement and children’s programmes (EWL 2008). Crowle (no date) points out that stereotypes are learned behaviours and come from many avenues like parents, family members, the media, school, the general public and the books children learn.

Gender is portrayed in many ways in fairy tales. According to Kasner (2004), in fairy tales, boys are typically adventurous; rescuers; fighters and capable; symbolize ingenuity and perseverance. On the other hand, female characters are represented as victims; seldom triumph if not beautiful; passive; submissive and dependant to male figures. Kasner further points out that stereotype in fairy tales set children up for unreal expectations and girls to believe false hopes and not to empower themselves. Kasner is of the opinion that in many fairy tales, both boys and girls are often presented in stereotypical terms and stereotypes in literature can quietly condition children to accept the way they see the world; thus, reinforcing gender images. Louie (2012) states that fairy tales play a major role in reinforcing gender stereotypes as well as transmitting society’s expectations to children. Louie further points out that, in fairy tales, girls are taught to be sweet, naïve, passive and self-sacrificing, whereas boys are encouraged to be strong, adventurous and self-sufficient heroes and saviors. Kasner (2004) points out that when children are exposed to fairy tales they may believe the stereotypical roles of male and female to be true. Thus, the manner in which gender is represented in the fairy tales may have a significant impact on children’s attitudes and perceptions of gender appropriate behavior within society. Louie (2012) states that beauty ideal in fairy tales is viewed as an oppressive, patriarchal practice that objectifies, devalues and subordinates women. This may lead to the misconception by the majority of teenage girls that being attractive is more important than being considered intelligent, which ultimately reflects in their academic achievement (Louie 2012). In addition, Cherland (2006) points out that the messages portrayed in children’s literature may hinder their self-esteem and may limit their per-

ception of their own abilities in life. Cherland further points out that by the age of three, children are able to distinguish between themselves and the other sex and the stereotypes formed early in a child's life will tend to stay with them for the remainder of their years.

The literature has shown that gender stereotypes continue to exist in children's literature (Louie 2012; Ruterana 2012; Cherland 2006; Kuo 2005). Subsequently, many studies have focused on the strategies to cope with gender stereotypes in reading (Dionne 2010; Western Australian Minister for Education 2006; Kuo 2005). Dione (2010) points out that developing critical literacy skills is a major challenge for teachers who are preparing learners for a world saturated with information. Dione further states that a major part of the challenge is to show learners how text, in all its forms, carries subtle messages regarding relationships of power, often justifying social inequalities. The literature suggest that by integrating critical literacy into daily classroom activities, teachers can help learners understand how texts are constructed and how authors are able to influence their understanding of the world (Dione 2010; Cherland 2006; Kuo 2005). Dione (2010) defines critical literacy as a lens, or overlay, for viewing texts that becomes a regular part of classroom practice. Dione further points out that this process helps the reader to identify the power relations, inequalities and injustices texts may contain. According to Western Australian Minister of Education (2006), to be critically literate, learners need to know how context affects the interpretation of language. Western Australian Minister of Education further points out that having an understanding of situational and socio-cultural contexts equips a reader with the fundamental knowledge to deconstruct, analyse and interrogate texts. Therefore, the current study seeks to explore the gender stereotypes in the English and IsiXhosa fairy tales so that teachers can be aware of the existence of stereotypes in their teaching resources, like fairy tales. Such awareness may help teachers stimulate learners to analyze different fairy tales and other books and construct new meanings out of them. In other words this may assist the learners to interact with the text critically. Having such a skill may assist learners, especially in the Foundation Phase to be aware of gender stereotypes in the textbooks and become critical readers. The

purpose of this study is therefore to address the following questions:

1. Are females and males represented equally in the selected fairy tales?
2. How do the selected fairy tales portray the role of females and males?
3. Is the perception of females in the selected fairy tales a true reflection of female positions in the real world?
4. Is the perception of males in the selected fairy tales a true reflection of male positions in the real world?

METHODS

Instruments

The instruments used in this study consisted of two English and two IsiXhosa fairy tales that were purposively selected among the list of popular fairy tales in both languages. The English fairy tales were Cinderella (3 pages) and Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (7 pages). The versions read for both tales were written by Jacob and Wilhelm (1812) (The Grimm Brothers). The IsiXhosa fairy tales were Untonganayentsimbi (7 pages) and Unonqana (3pages). Both IsiXhosa fairy tales were written by Sigewu and Madolo (2011).

Procedure

Each fairy tale was individually read and the characters analyzed. The major focus was on the representation or visibility of male and female characters, gender-linked activities and portrayal of gender in the text compared to the real world. The language and the theme of the text were also taken into consideration. These fairy tales were viewed as narratives and were analysed and deconstructed. This approach (discourse analysis), the narratives are analysed and placed in context. The research is therefore qualitative in nature.

RESULTS

Depiction of Gender Stereotypes in IsiXhosa Fairy Tales

Untonganayentsimbi (Iron-rod)

This fairy tale is about bravery. Bhuzalusiba manages to save his sister (Untonganayentsimbi)

against the ogres who want to eat her. Through his bravery and wit, Bhuzalusiba manages to defeat hundreds of ogres alone. Bhuzalusiba puts himself in danger in order to save his sister.

The title of this fairy tale is Untongayentsimbi. Anyone reading this fairy tale would expect Untongayentsimbi to take the centre stage. Instead the major focus is on her brother, Bhuzalusiba whose bravery becomes the major focus of the fairy tale. Untongayentsimbi is seen as helpless, she cannot defend herself against the ogres. She waits for her brother to save her. This fairy tale portrays gender stereotype that females are defenseless and that males are brave and can take risk in order to save a helpless female. Children, especially Foundation Phase learners may take this as real and apply it in their communities.

Unonqana (No English Translation)

This fairy tale is about the bravery of a woman called Unonqana. Through her bravery the ogres are afraid of her. Once they recognize her voice they run away. But at home she is abused by her husband. The husband does not want to take instructions or advice from her. The husband undermines her. Although young readers may identify themselves with Unonqana, through her bravery, the element of being bullied by her husband may give a negative picture. Male learners may think that abusing a woman is normal. On the other hand young female readers may think that getting married is not a good idea.

Depiction of Gender Stereotypes in English Fairy Tales

Cinderella

In this fairy tale Cinderella lives with her stepmother and stepsisters after her father's death. She is abused by the stepmother and her daughters. Cinderella is portrayed as weak and passive because she does not challenge the stepmother and her daughters although the house belongs to her. As a result, her family members think that she is inferior to them. Cinderella waits to be rescued by a prince who marries her and she is able to live happily ever after. This fairy tale portrays women as people who cannot defend themselves. Thus, they wait for a male figure to rescue them. Moreover, the females in

this fairy tale are associated with the house work. Cinderella does all the house work and does not worry herself about the outside world. Beauty also plays a prominent role in this fairy tale. If you are beautiful you get married to a handsome prince.

Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs

In this fairy tale the main character is Snow-White. She is a princess but is told that to be a good girl she must obey what she is told to do. This includes cooking and cleaning. As she grew up she became more beautiful than her stepmother, and this annoyed the stepmother. The stepmother instructed the huntsman to kill Snow-White. Snow-White was saved by the seven dwarfs who asked her to cook for them. They warned her not to let anyone into the house. Snow-White did not obey the instruction and one day she opened the door and let in the woman who was knocking at the door. She was not aware that the woman was a queen who wanted her dead. The queen killed Snow-White but the seven dwarfs managed to bring her back to life. This fairy tale teaches the females to obey the instructions from the males and failure to obey may have consequences. This shows that females cannot think for themselves but should obey and take advice from the men.

DISCUSSION

The present study sought to examine gender stereotypes in the selected fairy tales in order to suggest ways teachers can cope with the reading material that portrays gender imbalance. The narratives of the four fairy tales reflect a number of features that reflect gender stereotypes. These include feminine beauty ideal. The findings from this study support the previous studies that feminine beauty dominates in fairy tales (Louie 2012; Kasner 2004). In the current study in both English fairy tales the theme of feminine beauty dominates. The old queen in Snow-White is prepared to kill anyone more beautiful than her. The princes in both English fairy tales are looking for beautiful wives and both fairy tales have evil stepmothers. According to Kasner (2004), beauty in fairy tales seems to be the key factor for girls compared to power, strength, and wit as key factors for boys. Kasner further points out that by admonishing feminine beauty over

anything else only set children up for unreal expectations where girls will think that being beautiful means everything in life. In addition, Hoffert (2002) points out that in most fairy tales the heroine is portrayed as ideal good girl, unequivocally beautiful, kind and compassionate, does not complain or get angry and naive. This may lead to girls not empowering themselves through their own strengths and intellects. In addition this may instill in more attractive young girls that they should and can use looks to go through life or instill that they are more valuable or vanity due to their looks.

The study revealed that both genders are frequently presented in stereotypical terms. In the IsiXhosa fairy tale, Bhuzalusiba puts himself in danger in order to protect his sister against the hundreds of ogres. This may have influence on the young male reader who would like to defend a female no matter how dangerous the situation is. On the other hand the female characters represented by Untonganayentsimbi are portrayed as weak and helpless. When they find themselves in a dangerous situation they cannot escape on their own but wait for a male to rescue them. This is gender stereotype as females today do not and are not expected to behave in this fashion. The results of this study also support the previous studies that the duties carried out by men and females are different. Many studies revealed that in fairy tales females are portrayed as house wives who perform all the duties related to the house while men go out and organize food for living (Louie 2012; Dionne 2010). In all the four fairy tales in the current study, females are seen as house wives. In Snow-White and the seven dwarfs, an agreement is made between her and the dwarfs that they will keep her safe if she does cooking and cleaning for them. Therefore, a woman, according to fairy tales is supposed to be responsible for everything in the kitchen and man is a protector and is one who will be right at the end. In the current study this is confirmed by the fact that Snow-White has been warned by the dwarfs, who represent men not to open the door but could not listen. Thus, the woman's failure to obey the man's instructions may have painful consequences for the female. This is a gender stereotype and if not corrected during the reading process, especially in the Foundation Phase, male learners may think that it is their right to instruct females and expect females to be submissive.

Implications for Teaching Reading in the Foundation Phase

There are a number of practical implications on the above findings and discussion. This study revealed that gender stereotypes exist in the selected texts. Therefore teachers are advised to be sensitive to their teaching sources or they might easily fall into a passive acceptance of everything literature presents to them. In addition, Rayaprol (2010) points out that gender bias is also taught implicitly through the resources chosen for classroom use. In order to avoid this, teachers need to be aware of gender issues and need to be aware of the gender bias embedded in many educational materials and texts and need to take steps to combat this bias. This awareness will put teachers in a better position to sensitize the learners to the disadvantages of gender stereotypes in the reading process as learners in the Foundation Phase identify themselves with certain characters in the fairy tales. In order to address this, teachers should help the learners to develop critical thinking so that they are able to challenge the text. In addition, teachers need to help the learners differentiate between the world of fairy tales and the real world in which they live. The literature reveals that this could be achieved by engaging learners in the discussion where they compare the status and role of males and females in the text and in the real world (their communities). This gives opportunity for the teacher and learners to uncover gender inequalities present in the text and also come up with solutions on how they should be addressed. In other words, teachers should help the learners reconstruct the text and indicate how they could present it in a manner that takes into consideration gender equality. In addition, teachers need to create a learning environment that is free of gender stereotyping in instructional organization, interactions and activities and using gender free language in order to maximize learners' achievement and growth.

Another practical implication of this study is that teachers should motivate learners to read different types of materials. Weiner (1992) points out that motivation influences individual's choices of which activities to do, level of engagement in them and degree of persistence at them. Therefore, it is important for the teachers to encourage the learners not to label a certain type of reading material as being relevant only

for females or for males. This stereotypical thinking should be dealt with so that the learners are encouraged to read a wide range of genres, irrespective of sex. It is also important for teachers to treat males and females equally in the classroom as this will provide equal opportunities for both sexes to participate in class and take on leadership roles.

CONCLUSION

It was indicated in the introduction that the textbooks were viewed as a vehicle for gender equality in meeting the goals of EFA. However, the current status of children's literature, especially, the fairy tales, reveals the existence of gender stereotypes. This is supported by literature and the results of the current study. This may send a wrong message to the young readers, especially in the Foundation Phase. In order to solve this problem, teachers' intervention is recommended. Teachers are encouraged to produce good out of what is bad. This could be achieved if teachers can help learners become critical readers.

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