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Just what influence do fairy tales, sexist, racist, or not, have upon the socialization of children?

# Teacher-Guided Exploration of the Hidden Messages in Children's Literature

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## Introduction

Many elementary teachers read fairy tales aloud to students almost daily. Without ever directly stating what is important, interesting, valuable or acceptable, the content in fairy tales sends hidden messages indirectly to children.

Just what influence do fairy tales, sexist, racist, or not, have upon the socialization of children? The term socialization is used to identify the process by which a person slowly develops values and attitudes, likes and dislikes, goals and purposes, patterns of response and a concept of self. This image of self is arrived at through a gradual, complicated lifelong process. It takes place largely through learning a role with three aspects: duties, status and temperament (Racism and Sexism Center for Education, 1976).

The importance of books as potential socializing agents has been attested to by numerous researchers. Traditionally, the field of education is considered one of little change—the place where the phrase “but we’ve always done it that way!” was born. Changes in children’s literature, however, defy that reputation. The concerns of educators, parents and researchers about the socialization process brought changes in the contents of children’s stories and the manner in which they are taught.

## Changes in Children's Literature

“Mother Goose” became “Father Gander” when Douglas Larche created *The Equal Rhymes Amendment* (1985). Larche identified sex-bias in nursery rhymes and rewrote them with inclusive messages. In his not-so-sing-song version, instead of Miss Muffet hysterically running “away from the spider who sat down beside her,” Ms. Muffet demonstrates her intelligence by putting the spider back into the garden, thus to balance the ecological environment

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by catching insects. (*Father Gander Nursery Rhymes: The Equal Rhymes Amendment*, 1985).

Another change in children’s literature occurred when educators discovered “Johnny Couldn’t Read.” They decided school was a *feminine* place where boys were not comfortable. Instantly, supplemental readers’ titles included *Cowboy Sam*, *Sailor Jack*, and *Dan Frontier* along with *Dick and Jane*, *Jack and Janet*, and *Tom and Betty* with the content following the connotation of the additional titles. This change was meant to make materials more appealing to boys. The National Defense Education Act, 1961, which provided funds for enrichment materials to enhance the space-race against the Soviets, contributed to the boy-orientation of that era. Allocations were available for science-oriented publications: historical accounts of scientific discoveries and outlines of experiments for children to perform. (Bosmajian, Gershing, Nielsen, and Stanley, 1977.)

Fairy Tales have not escaped the changing times. Some have been revised to reflect today’s values. In Dr. Gardner’s *Modern Fairy Tales* (1977), the Cinderella story does not end with marriage to the handsome prince. Instead, the heroine tells him, “I no longer wish to marry you. We’re different kinds of people and interested in different things. I don’t think we’d be very happy living together for the rest of our lives.”

## Socialization

The catalyst for much of the change has been the realization that the stories children read and hear are part of the socialization process—they reinforce concepts and behaviors. Janice Gibson (1986), professor of educational and developmental psychology at the University of Pittsburgh, says fairy tales do more than entertain. Their heroes and heroines teach important lessons and help children understand the world. This process is not new. Before the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen recorded their tales in the 19th century, itinerant European storytellers wandered the countryside teaching that good wins over evil with the narration of Hansel and Gretel’s elimination of the evil witch (Gibson, 1986).

With the realization that children’s literature is a vital part of socialization came an examination of what children learn at an early educational level through fairy tales. Scholars began pointing out hidden messages that present socialization problems. Among the objections were the messages about cultural and economic values, as well as sex-role stereotyping.

## Cultural and Economic Values

The cultural and economic values depicted in fairy tales leave serious flaws in the quality of life most parents desire for their offspring. For example, lies go unpunished, even rewarded—as in “Rumpelstiltskin.” The poor father’s (untruth) about his daughter’s spinning abilities becomes the means for both the father and daughter’s wealth. In the “Princess and the Pea,” barely hidden messages of snobbery and blue-bloodedness underlie the prince’s search for “real” royalty. Seventeenth century French fairy tales reinforced elitism with descriptions of fine clothes, beautiful, and handsome nobility.

## Sex Roles

Sex roles, sharply defined in fairy tales, are unrealistic and of another era. Aggressiveness or the ability to solve problems is not a characteristic attributed to “good” females; rather, the tales are full of wicked stepmothers, jealous sisters and evil witches. Males, on the other hand, are usually courageous, adventurous and powerful. Jack of

Beanstalk fame is resourceful in defeating the giant and saving his mother. "The Fisherman and His Wife" offers typical fairy tale sex roles: a domineering, greedy wife and a goodhearted, modest husband. Females are portrayed as being capable of performing only menial household tasks. When Snow White wonders what she can do, the dwarves tell her, "You can sew and mend, and keep everything tidy."

### Expanded Choices in Children's Literature

Attempts such as those of Larche and Gardner to re-write well-known children's literature are not the only efforts being made to upgrade it. Alleen Pace Nilson's 1978 study showed a sharp decline in the number of times female characters appeared in Caldecott Medal and Honor Books.

Dates	Percentage of female characters
1951-55	46%
1956-60	41%
1961-65	35%
1966-70	26%
1971-75	22%

In response to this and other statistical studies, publishers have aimed for more balance in male-female orientation (Bosmajian, Gershing, Nilson, and Stanley, 1977). Lists of literature that present women and men in non-sexist roles are now available.

Fairy tales, however, are still used extensively in their pre-20th century forms. Bruno Bettelheim (1975), psychologist and educator, contends that a desirable, complex learning takes place when children read them.

Fairy tales are works of art which are fully comprehensible to the child. The child will extract different meaning from the same fairy tale, depending on *his/her* interests and needs of the moment. When given the chance, *he/she* will return to the same tale when *he/she* is reading to enlarge on old meanings.

Because the fairy tale will continue to be used, some educators have changed their approach to teaching them. Instead of teaching "happily ever after" story-lines, one approach is to use a lesson plan to elicit the children's responses to objectionable hidden messages. The plan is adaptable to several age levels, uses definitions for dealing with contemporary concepts, and can be a pattern for studying numerous pieces of literature. Discussion pointers (DPs) are suggestions and can be varied according to the participants. One or several class periods may be used. The following lesson plan is offered as an example. It deals with five values: prejudice, elitism, materialism, sexism, and racism.

#### Sample Lesson Plan: Sexism, Racism, and Other "ISMs": Hidden Messages in Children's Stories

**OBJECTIVE:** To teach participants to look past the story-lines of any story or book and begin to examine the values consciously or unconsciously projected. The concepts to be discussed are prejudice, elitism, sexism, racism, and materialism/classism.

**RATIONALE:** Initiating discussions of familiar fairy tales stimulates a wide range of awareness and interest.

#### MATERIALS:

1. Print version of "The Princess and the Pea."
2. Introductory comments for teacher.
3. Discussion pointers.
4. Blackboard and chalk or newsprint and magic markers.

5. Background brochures when possible on racism, elitism, and sex roles.

#### ACTIVITY:

1. Teacher reads and prepares in advance.
2. Assign person in the group to read "The Princess and the Pea" aloud. Then pass it around so everyone can study the illustrations.
3. While it is being passed, start a free-flowing discussion. Aim to introduce concepts of prejudice, elitism, sexism, racism, and materialism/classism through participants' comments on story. Use chalkboard or newsprint for writing concepts and definitions.
4. "The Princess and the Pea" can be followed by discussion of other familiar tales.
5. Given time and participants inclination, analyze society's institutions for the values they encourage and reward.
6. Participants can locate and bring in stories or books that promote values they would like to see applied throughout society.

#### Questions (Q) and Discussion Pointers (DP)

1. Q: **What do you think of the prince? Is he prejudiced? How?**

DP: **Prejudice** means pre-judging without having all the facts. (Prejudice can be for or against a person or thing.) The Prince was prejudiced in favor of princesses, regardless of what they were like as people. All he cared about was that the princess be a "real" princess. He was prejudiced against all women who supposedly were not "real" and "genuine" regardless of what they were like as people.

- Q: **What is an example of prejudice?**

DP: (With young children) Pick a characteristic (eye color, hair color) and briefly act out with students that, because you want to talk to, and be friendly with, only people with blue eyes—the one thing about people that you care about—you lose valuable relationships with other people (non-blue eyes)—and you may not like some things about people with blue eyes. With older groups: Discuss types of prejudice in society (see how many the group can come up with, e.g., by color, sex, age, income, weight, etc.) We judge people simply by that one thing about which we are prejudiced, and thus we often limit our experiences.

2. Q: **Were the prince and princess elitist?**

DP: **Elitism** means people thinking and acting as if they are better than most other people, because they are richer, have more power, or are smarter than others, etc.

- Q: **What was the princess like from what we know of her?**

DP: Spoiled and pampered.

- Q: **Why would only a "real" princess have so much trouble sleeping on such a soft bed when most other people wouldn't? (Some people can't even afford a bed!)**

DP: Royalty indicates living a pampered, spoiled life. Explore what royal families are like.

- Q: **In what other areas do people sometimes think they are better than others?**

DP: Money, skin color, beauty, sports, education.

3. Q: **Are the would-be princesses materialistic?**

DP: **Materialism** places a higher value on riches and possessions than on people.

In the story, it seems all the young women wish to marry a prince.

Is that natural? Does that happen today?

4. Q: **Is the story sexist, and why?**

DP: **Sexism** is any attitude, action or institutional structure that subordinates a person or group because of

their sex ("sub" means "lower").

Q: **Is any one subordinate in the story? Are some people subordinates in real life?**

DP: Limited work roles, lower wages, less options, less decision-making are examples of subordination.

Q: **How do the pictures describe the women in the story?**

DP: Pleading, begging the prince to choose them.

Q: **What does the story tell us is the most important thing a woman wants to do?**

DP: Find a husband, the richer the better.

5. Q: **Is the story racist?**

DP: **Racism** is any attitude, action or institutional structure that *subordinates* a person or group because of (color) or ethnic background. In the USA, racism is White people thinking they are superior and having the power to subordinate people of other *nationalities* by keeping them from good jobs, housing, education, health care, etc.

Q: **If a book makes children other than White feel put down, left out, or hurt in any way, is it racist? Does this story do any of these?**

DP: Look at the pictures in the book. Are the characters all White?

Q: **Does the picture show us the prince went "all over the world" as the story says? Do the women in the drawing represent races "all over the world?"**

DP: The women pictured are White, yet White people are only a minority of the world's population. More Black, Brown, and Yellow people live in our world than Whites. Some of these civilizations pre-dated the White, European ones. Royalty was part of many of these cultures. (Perhaps some students would like to prepare reports on royalty.) A good opportunity exists here for a discussion on why royalty lost its authority as people demanded control over their lives.

Through teacher-guided discussions of such desirable

values as this lesson plan provides, the socialization of students is guided toward more realistic expectations of life. Teaching in this manner, however, is a change requiring extra preparation.

Because of the concerned educators, researchers, and parents who recognized the hidden messages, many forms of children's literature are now being taught with a goal of more realistic socialization: "Girls who are assertive, boys who are gentle, mothers who have good jobs, and fathers who help around the house, both males and females who feel free to express themselves and to develop whatever talents and qualities they desire regardless of stereotyping" (Bosmajian, Gershing, Nilsen, and Stanley, 1977).

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