

Fairy Tale as a Pedagogical Tool for Children under the Age of 3: Educators' Views and Practices

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Abstract

Fairy tales are undoubtedly the most popular type of literature for children, as they offer pleasure and allow them to travel to unique and fantasy places. However, their value is not limited to entertainment alone, as there are multiple additional benefits from children's exposure to fairy tales: Fairy tales can contribute to children's holistic development and therefore they are an excellent pedagogical tool for educators. The aim of this study is to evaluate the views of 213 educators working in nursery schools in Attica (Greece), on the contribution of fairy tales in the development of children under 3 years of age, using a research questionnaire with close-ended questions. Also, this study explores the techniques used by the educators to introduce fairy tales in the pedagogical process, and the domains targeted to attain children's development by using these fictional narrations. The results of the research show that educators use the fairy tale in children under 3 years of age, primarily to improve the domain of their language development and the most common technique for introducing the fairy tale into pedagogical practice is simply storytelling. Finally, the present study attempts to contribute to research bibliography, showing the importance of fairy tales to a child's development and at the same time fill the research gap that exists for children under 3 years of age.

Keywords: Fairy tale, Children under 3 years of age, Language development, Socio-emotional development, Cognitive development, Greek ECEC

1. The Importance of Fairy Tales in Children Development

In the past, the pedagogical and didactic importance of the fairy tale has been strongly questioned (Malafantis, 2011; Anagnostopoulos, 1997). Supporters of this view considered that fairy tales cannot serve pedagogical purposes because they relate to an imaginary world and often contain elements of violence and cruelty that are not in harmony with the child's psyche (Malafantis, 2011; Anagnostopoulos, 1997). Gradually, and especially in recent decades, this opinion has been refuted (e.g., Agnoli et al., 2022; Wangid, 2018; Sahin, 2011). The necessity of integrating fairy tale into the learning process is now recognized, because of its important contribution to children's development.

In particular, children's exposure to fairy tales cultivates their critical thinking and ability (Kulikovskaya & Andrienko, 2016). In fact, when the themes of fairy tales are basic and universal issues, they contribute to children's reflection on them (Fleer & Hammer, 2013). At the same time, the choices and actions of the protagonists in fairy tales are an important factor in the development of young children's judgement (Sayer et al., 2018). From this perspective, children are involved in the process of evaluating the facts listened during the story, reflecting on the actions of the heroes and their possible consequences, formulating their opinions and evaluating them (Kulikovskaya & Andrienko, 2016).

Therefore, fairy tales play an important role in the pedagogical process and especially in the education of young children (e.g., Wangid, 2018; Malafantis, 2011; Natsiopoulou et al., 2006). Their content appeals to the child's psyche as these stories convey a wide range of messages and interpretations, provide pleasure, allow children to use their imagination to travel to magical places, and have a positive impact on their cognitive, moral, linguistic and socio-emotional development (Sahin, 2011; Kabaday, 2009).

More specifically, fairy tales contribute to the children's cognitive development through the cognitive processes that are activated and developed during engagement with them (Azamovich, 2021; Pulimeno et al., 2020; Maricic & Stakic, 2017; Yong-Sook et al., 2015): The mnemonic processing of information, attentional focus, perceptual ability, reasoning and critical thinking, the process of decoding linguistic symbols, the development of imagination and creativity (Kulikovskaya & Andrienko, 2016) and, in general, the processing of stimuli, lead to a better understanding of the content.

Also, the positive effect of fairy tales on children's moral development is confirmed by previous research (Kabaday, 2019; Sahin, 2011). Young children consider and evaluate themselves, their actions and the actions of others, either as good or bad, without an intermediate state (Tsilimeni, 2007). Persons and situations are presented in fairy tales in a similar way: There are good and bad heroes or good and bad actions. This identification of children with the heroes and situations in fairy tales supports their efforts to distinguish the difference between good and bad, moral and non-moral, just and unjust, and makes them become familiar with socially accepted rules (VisikoKnox-Johnson, 2016).

In addition, the linguistic ability in children is developed through fairy tales as it is related to the acquisition of language skills and early literacy (Wildova & Kropackova, 2015;

Natsiopoulou, 2011). Early literacy refers to the achievement of reading and writing skills that take place effortlessly and start from the first years in a child's life (Sandvik et al, 2014; Riley, 2003). In general, children's attraction to stories serves as a trigger for exposure to the letters of the alphabet, enriching vocabulary and oral language, producing words and sentences, recognizing language forms and structures, perceiving the appropriate reading rhythm, etc. (Sholichah & Purbani, 2018; Sipe, 2001).

Regarding the emotional domain in children's development, Cassar (2000) notes that children identify themselves with the emotions represented in fairy tales. The emotions experienced by the characters help children to discover a wide range of emotions and identify what they have felt in the past or are experiencing in the present, express their thoughts and feelings, enhance their self-esteem, and develop themselves into autonomous individuals (Fleer & Hammer, 2013; Hohr, 2010). Of particular importance is the fact that children can observe the reactions resulting from the emotions of the heroes (with whom they identify) without experiencing the severity of the consequences that may have existed in real life (Agnoli et al., 2022; Garner, 2010; Blake & Maiese, 2008).

Finally, fairy tales stimulate the children's interest in social phenomena and challenge them to recognize what these fictional stories reflect in real life. Through fairy tales, children's social aspects develop as they become aware of various social and global problems and participate in the effort of collective problem solving and responsibility (Sayer et al., 2018; Fleer & Hammer, 2013). At the same time, by experiencing the lives of the heroes through identification and imitation, they experience the universal values of friendship, solidarity, mutual respect, gender equality, etc. (Kulikovskaya & Andrienko, 2016).

For all the above reasons, the use of fairy tales is an excellent pedagogical tool in the hands of educators (Wangid, 2018) and can be used in a variety of ways and techniques. Some of the most well-known techniques – among others - are: (a) storytelling, simple reading of the fairy tale, (b) storytelling cards; children are given pictures to compose their own story or if they are younger they can place the pictures in chronological order, (c) 'scaled creation'; children can add their own elements during the storytelling; (d) dramatization, puppet theatre and role-play, where children actively experience the situations involving the heroes; and (e) digital storytelling; stories using multimedia (image, sound, music, text).

At this point, it should be mentioned that the pedagogical value of the fairy tale and its contribution to children's developmental domains can be further enhanced through activities that follow the fairy telling or, more generally, that follow the introduction of fairy tale into the pedagogical process (e.g., Azamovich, 2021; Malafantis, 2011). Such activities may include painting, arts and crafts, construction, retelling the story (with or without pictures), language exercises (e.g., discussion, word repetition, etc.), turning the fairy tale into a poem, dramatization, etc.

Considering all the above, this research attempts to investigate the views and techniques of 213 educators working in nurseries in Attica (Greece), regarding the use of the fairy tale as a pedagogical tool in children under 3 years of age.

More specifically, this research attempts to answer the following research questions:

- What are educators' beliefs about the contribution of storytelling to the development of children under 3 years of age?
- What domains of children's development do they target most when using the fairy tale as a pedagogical tool?
- Which techniques do educators use to introduce the fairy tale into the pedagogical process?
- What activities do they implement after introducing the fairy tale into the pedagogical process?

To address the research questions, a sample quantitative research method using a questionnaire with close-ended answers, was chosen. This method offers the researchers the opportunity to approach a large part of the population to investigate specific questions, and to express the phenomenon studied through numerical data (Cohen et al., 2012) using statistical tools.

In summary, the importance of this research lies in the fact that while many notable studies have been conducted on the contribution of fairy tale to children's development (e.g., Kabaday, 2019; Wang et al., 2018; Natsiopoulou, 2011; Tsitsani et al., 2011; Natsiopoulou et al., 2006; Natsiopoulou, 2002; Papoulia-Tzelepi, 2001), to the best of our knowledge there is no study reporting on children under 3 years of age. Most studies investigating educators' perceptions of the contribution of the fairy tale to children's development are related to ages above 3 years (e.g., Azamovich, 2021; Kabaday, 2019; Wang et al., 2018; Sahin, 2011). Therefore, the results of the present study can contribute to the scientific literature and can be a starting point for subsequent research on children of this age.

2. Method

2.1 The Sample

The sample in the present study consists of 213 educators from Attica, Greece. The method by which participants were selected was the simple random sampling. This is a probability sampling method, in which the probabilities of selecting units from the population are equal. In this case, the sample was randomly selected from lists of numbers corresponding to educators (Creswell, 2016).

Concerning the social and the demographic characteristics of the sample, the educators were asked to answer about (a) the gender, (b) the age, (c) the years of work experience and (d) the type of educational qualifications.

Therefore, the results show that (a) 96.7% of the sample are females and 3.3% are males— as the vast majority of educators in Greece are women, (b) 35% of the educators are 31-40 years old, 33% are 41-50 years old, 23% are 20-30 years old and 9% are 51 years old and more, (c) 28% of the sample has 11-20 years of work experience, 25% has 0-5 years, 24% has 21-30 years, 19% has 6 -10 years and 4% has 30 years or more, (d) 68% of the educators have a

university degree, 18% have a postgraduate degree and 14% have a vocational training degree.

In addition, all participants in the survey were informed about the purposes of the study and about issues of anonymity and confidentiality. More specifically, at the beginning of each questionnaire there was information on: the purposes of the survey, the reasons why their participation was necessary, the voluntary nature of their participation, the possibility to withdraw from the survey at any time they wished and withdraw with them any unprocessed data and finally, the ways in which the researchers would ensure their anonymity and the confidentiality of the data (Cohen et al., 2012).

3. Results

The educators who participated in the research were asked to answer about the domains of children's development to which the fairy tale contributes (Table 1), using a five-point Likert scale; 1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: neither agree nor disagree, 4: agree, 5: strongly agree.

Also, through a five-point Likert scale; 1: not at all, 2: a little, 3: neither a little nor a lot, 4: often, 5: very often, they answered about the techniques they use to introduce the fairy tale in their pedagogical process and the activities that follow the fairy tale (Table 3).

Finally, the survey sample was asked to rank from 1 (less) to 4 (more), the domains of children's development targeted when using the fairy tale as a pedagogical tool (Table 2).

Table 1. The means of statements about the contributions of the fairy tale to the domains of the children

A. Cognitive Domain	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
A1. Memory development	213	4.21	.820
A2. Focusing attention	213	4.51	.758
A3. Perceptual ability	213	4.04	.992
A4. Reasoning and critical thinking	213	4.17	.960
A5. Decoding language symbols	213	3.78	1.060
A6. Development of imagination and creativity	213	4.53	.797
A7. Time comprehension skills	213	3.86	.964
B. Moral Domain	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
B1. Discrimination between good and bad	213	3.73	.886
B2. Distinguishing between truth and lies	213	3.62	1.008
B3. Distinction between the moral and the immoral	213	3.39	.965
B4. Patterns of positive behavior	213	4.19	.940
B5. Understanding the relationship between choices and consequences	213	4.03	.893

C. Language Domain	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
C1. Phonological awareness	213	4.37	.861
C2. Understanding the rules of language	213	4.05	1.114
C3. Vocabulary enrichment	213	4.73	.679
C4. Promotion of narrative skills	213	4.56	.729
C5. Developing listening and speaking skills	213	4.45	.770
C6. Production of words and expressions	213	4.63	.646
C7. Understanding the appropriate reading style	213	3.89	.797
C8. Cultivating literacy	213	4.11	.820
D. Socio-Emotional Domain	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
D1. Emotional recognition	213	4.54	.807
D2. Self-awareness	213	4.13	.893
D3. Emotional self-regulation	213	4.30	.870
D4. Empathy	213	4.49	.907
D5. Self-esteem	213	4.22	.811
D6. Dealing with difficult/traumatic situations	213	4.02	1.012
D7. Interest in social phenomena	213	4.04	.942
D8. Collegiality development	213	4.15	.869
D9. Recognition of universal values (e.g., peace, friendship, equality, etc.)	213	4.16	.961

According to the results of the survey presented in Table 1, educators seem to recognize the contribution of storytelling in all domains of the development of children under 3 years of age. In particular, they seem to recognize its high contribution to enriching vocabulary, producing words and expressions, promoting narrative competence, recognizing emotions, developing imagination and creativity, and focusing attention.

Table 2. The means of ranking the domains of children's development targeted by the use of the fairy tale

A. Domains	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
A1. Cognitive	213	3.28	1.662
A2. Moral	213	2.89	1.801
A3. Language	213	3.70	2.003
A4. Socio-Emotional	213	3.50	1.678

Regarding the domains of children's development that educators target when using the fairy tale as a pedagogical tool, it seems that they primarily target the linguistic area, followed by the socio-emotional, cognitive and moral areas (Table 2).

Table 3. The means of fairy tale techniques in the pedagogical process

A. Techniques of Introducing the Fairy Tale	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
A1. Storytelling	213	4.67	.864
A2. Storytelling cards	213	3.12	.798
A3. Scaled creation	213	3.06	.938
A4. Dramatization	213	3.48	.873
A5. Digital storytelling	213	1.10	.794
B. Activities after the Fairy Tale	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
B1. Painting, crafts, etc.	213	4.86	.678
B2. Story retelling (with or without pictures)	213	3.35	.675
B3. Language exercises (discussion, repetition of words, etc.)	213	3.84	.687
B4. Conversion of the fairy tale into a poem/song	213	3.10	.761
B5. Dramatization	213	4.01	.877

According to Table 3, the most common way in which educators introduce storytelling into the pedagogical process is simple storytelling, while the other techniques are applied less frequently. As for the activities that follow the fairy tale, these are mostly related to painting, construction, etc., while turning the fairy tale into a poem/song is the least frequent.

4. Discussion

The analysis of the survey data showed that educators believe that fairy tales have a positive impact on all the domains of the development in children under 3 years of age. These findings are consistent with previous research involving older children (e.g., Wangid, 2018; Sahin, 2011; Kabaday, 2009) and demonstrate the undeniable value of the fairy tale in children's holistic development.

In fact, research participants use fairy tales as a pedagogical tool targeting specific domains in children's development. The main domain they focus on is the linguistic area, followed by the socio-emotional, cognitive and moral areas. This finding converges with the results of Kabaday's (2009) study, in which preschool teachers had participated and their responses showed a focus on similar domains of the children's development.

Moreover, if we consider the developmental milestones (Australian Government, 2012) and the characteristics of the fairy tales aimed at children under 3 years of age - most of the page is taken up by the picture, the text is mainly about words and approaching the age of 3, children can understand simple and short stories - then we can easily see that the focus of the teachers on the language domain corresponds to the reality and the needs of children.

Regarding the techniques used by educators to implement the fairy tale in the pedagogical process, we find that they mainly apply simple storytelling followed by dramatization. After the fairy tale, the activities primarily involve painting and construction, dramatization and language exercises. Previous research has highlighted the importance of fairy tale-related activities such as painting, dramatization (Kulikovskaya & Andrienko, 2016) and language

exercises for children's development (Malafantis, 2011).

What is striking about the above finding on the introduction of fairy tale into the pedagogical process is that, while many studies have highlighted the positive benefits of digital storytelling in preschool age (e.g., Reradovic et al., 2016; Yuksel-Arsian et al., 2016) and while children of this age are attracted to sounds and images, the digital storytelling is hardly used by the research participants. Therefore, there may be a need for educators' training on the use of digital storytelling and its application in the pedagogical process.

Concluding this section, we should mention the limitations of this research. One of its limitations is that not all techniques for introducing storytelling into the pedagogical process and the possible activities that can follow it, were fully-examined. In the survey questionnaire, the responses were closed-ended, and educators were not given the opportunity to mention any other technique or activity they used. Furthermore, the participants were only from Attica (Greece) and the views of educators from other regions were not considered.

In any case, this study attempted to highlight educators' views on the contribution of fairy tales in the developmental domains of children under 3 years of age. With its results, the study aims at contributing to the scientific bibliography and inspiring further studies for this group age. Besides, as it is clear from the educators' responses, fairy tales are an excellent pedagogical tool in their hands and therefore the ways in which they can be used for children's development under the age of 3, should be further investigated.

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