

“ONCE UPON A TIME...” USING FAIRY TALES FOR DIDACTIC PURPOSES

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Abstract

All psychological functions are developed in a social context. Learning strategies to facilitate a more effective adaptation to different situations and providing the subject the necessary data to make informed decisions is a priority. With the topic of our paper, we tried to stimulate an interest in fantasy and happy endings in our lives, the components of positive thinking to facilitate the subjects’ successful actions in the future. We, teacher and students together, tried to rediscover the role the fairy tale plays for all ages and in all situations. We have focused our attention on fantasy, intuition and activation of the resolute individual potential, approaching some unconventional methods, i.e. using stories, metaphors, fairy tales and myths as methods that could be used by fantasy, making everything possible, being in contrast to rational models. The methods used in our research included tests for identifying the subjects’ level of creativity, the classical test the “Johary’s Window” applied during the pre-trial and post-experimental stages and fairy tales or stories. The fairy tale was used as a communication tool, a projective personality test, stimulation of individual and group creativity and even as a therapeutic tool, proving to be an excellent teaching method.

Key words: Learning strategies, education, fairy tale

The academic curriculum includes – at the Child and Adolescent Counselling discipline for students from the Faculty of Psychology –seminars and practical workshops during which we introduced a theme entitled “Stories and movies, premises of changing unwanted behaviours”. With this issue we tried to stimulate the interest in fantasy and happy endings in our lives, components of positive thinking, in order to facilitate their successful actions in the future. We, teacher and students together, tried to rediscover the role the fairy tale plays for all ages and in all situations. Our efforts included both the intentions of exploring the meaning of fairy tales and the way they can be used as instruments for children’s psychological development. These actions pursued not only pedagogical exploitation of the most known fairy tales, but also teaching students to “build” tales targeting certain educational aims.

In an anthology of tales, the surprising finding was that fairy tales were originally written for adults, becoming only in the XIXth century literature for children.

The Grimm brothers collected, selected and compared tales from different peoples, drawing the conclusion that beyond some elements of continuity, some specific national notes appear; they were gathered in a book of fairy tales known as “*Kinder und Hausmärchen*”, containing more than two hundreds stories, of which only twelve were included in children's books.

The reference to “*Hausmärchen*” is very interesting, making us pay attention to the intimate space of the house of the transmitter and the receiver(s) of the tale, the fact that the fairy tale reflects events occurring in the child’s inner world and its sustainable value is contained by the power to help children and adults to cope with their inner conflicts they face during growth and development, or in other life situations. In this way one can explain the continuous resistance of fairy tales as a scene on which inner conflicts can be projected and the sources and nature of these conflicts identified.

Nossrat Peseschkian, a very well known specialist in psychiatry and neurology, appreciated – especially in Germany, Switzerland and the U.S. –and considered the founder of Positive Psychotherapy, presents 100 case studies for education and self-help in his book “*Oriental Stories as tools of psychotherapy*”, based on the cross-cultural approach. He accredits the idea that a story can become the focus of the therapeutic efforts and may lead to changes in attitudes and behaviour, targeting less the reason, clear logic and therefore the principle of achievement, and more the intuition and fantasy. Fairy tales become means by which values, moral concepts and models of behaviour are transmitted and anchored in human consciousness.

Scheherazade was the first “specialist” who, during 1001 nights ‘soothed’ the mental disorder

of the bloody shah Riar, telling him the tales that made her famous. The very clever Scheherazade's tales are crossed by deep moral and profound wisdom. Each tale can be looked at from two points of view: first of all, it successfully treats the sultan; secondly, the tales are treatments for readers and listeners, who remember the tale, draw conclusions, learn something and keep what they learn in their mind. Stories, tales, myths, fables, parables, artistic productions, poetry, jokes are tools of popular therapy and pedagogy; with their help people had helped themselves long before the development of psychotherapy.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

We have focused attention on fantasy, intuition and activation of resolute individual potential approaching some unconventional methods, using stories, metaphors, fairy tales and myths as methods by which fantasy can use them, in contrast to rational models, making everything possible. For trainers and trainees, for parents and children, and sometimes for psychotherapists, these methods ensure transmission of values, moral concepts and patterns of behaviour, anchoring them in human consciousness, aiming to change attitudes according to life situations.

The multiple valences of the fairy tale as an instrument of communication and a teaching method are joined to the classic valences of the tale as a literary species.

As a communication tool, the tale creates a basis of identification and protection, the subjects learning, at the same time, to understand themselves, to assess themselves positively and to discover their own inner strength

The act of communication knows barriers resulting from the people's tendency to judge, to agree or disagree with the partner's views, some people's belief that those around them do not improve their behaviour unless they criticize it, the unasked offers of solutions and advice, moralizing, trying to resolve the problem by imposing someone's logical arguments.

Instead the fairy tale, the proverb or the fable offer the subjects the possibility to know themselves in allegorical terms, to establish new types of relationships with self and others in which censorship is wisely not ignored, but replaced with an internal emotional one, making the approach of fantasy possible, establishing a form of self confidence and safety validated, at the beginning in the imaginary world, being further reinforced in the real world.

From the communication point of view, contemporaneous researchers, psychologists, psychotherapists, teachers emphasizes how a fairy tale can help people to understand themselves, to appreciate themselves positively, to discover their

own inner strength to "heal themselves" (Sempronia Filipoi, 1998, 8).

The fairy tale as a didactic method is used as a means of resolving conflicts between: student - student, student - teacher, teacher - teacher, but also to solve internal conflicts. During our investigative approaches the researcher had the opportunity to appreciate the fairy tale creator's personality by tale interpretation. In this way the fairy tale becomes a projective personality test, element of psychodrama.

The fairy tale can be considered a means of knowing its creator's personality, and, more than that, as in psychology a method of knowing the degree of creativity can turn into a stimulating method of this dimension of personality, the tale can be used as a method of stimulating the individual and group creativity.

The objectives of the research were:

- identification and self-identification of conflicts,
- making the subjects aware of their conflicts and engaging them into the activity of solving them,
- identification of the subjects' psycho-individual particularities,
- stimulation of the subjects' creativity.

Without neglecting the previously reported functions, i.e. those of communication, teaching, personality traits –including the level of creativity – and of stimulation of creativity, we take into consideration the therapeutic fairy tale feature.

The use of fairy tales with therapeutic messages presents some advantages, such as: lighting, enlarging the interior space representing a life lesson, offer models of behaviour and moral values to the extent that the message is not imposed by a final moral conclusion, and it is not directly related to the experience of real life, but it is taken like the message of a dream, bringing unexpected solutions with a positive emotional effect. Thus, the therapeutic message becomes a source of subsequent behaviour.

The tale is a tool that makes possible the change of plans, the abandonment (for a while) of the logical-rational schemes a given subject was treated. The process of moving something to another plan can lead to sudden insights, leading to possible real solutions, which previously had been neglected because of the rigidity of the mental scheme. The tale addresses the subconscious, which works with 11 million bits, as opposed to the conscious, which is much more limited - 50 bits. It is a perfect tool of "problem solving" and can be applied, with appropriate and necessary modifications, in any context and to any kind of problems. From the perspective of this therapeutic function, the tale acts as a "mirror", on which emotional necessities are projected, enabling an unexpected wealth of images and allowing the shaping of the message in accordance with the subject's structure.

Unusual, possible non-rigid solutions leave room for stimulating some individual ways of adaptation. There is a mediator between the patient's resistance to change (therapy) and the frontal attack on misconceptions and the defence mechanisms.

In education, there are references to an academic self, showing that people who have self-esteem and a positive image of themselves, get better results. Research shows that poor academic results lead to a decrease in self-esteem and low self-esteem tends to be offset by the increased self-esteem in other areas. Self-esteem as the subjects' positive or negative attitude towards themselves and the way they feel capable, important, valuable, is relatively constant, with a steady part, and one that changes over time or during difficult series of failures.

The tool which assesses self esteem, the most used instrument in psychological research, is the Rosenberg scale, a questionnaire that we used to evaluate our subjects' self esteem. It was used twice: once at the beginning and once at the end of the post-intervention period, to help us compare the results. The "arsenal" of methods used during our research consisted of probes of identification of the level of creativity, the classical probe "Johary's window" applied at the same time as the questionnaire, i.e. during the pre- and post-experimental periods. The research focused on self-image because it is particularly important in the human life, in the manifestation and development of personality, in the initiation, implementation and development of relations with the group. People tend to search for occasions which conserve their esteem and self esteem, avoiding the opposite type of situations.

The insistence on self esteem is also determined by the importance of this quality, revealing a perseverant quality in time, in relationship with the others' appreciations. A good self esteem prevents scholar failure, some learning difficulties, delinquency, drug abuse and even suicide.

In order to reach the goal and meet the objectives of the research, we worked with a number of 15 students from the Faculty of Psychology and Pedagogy from Brasov.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

By the tales, proverbs and fables that have been "built" and/or told, the students have recognized themselves and were able to establish a new form of self confidence and safety. The Rosenberg test, applied at the beginning and the end of the research, showed an increase in self-esteem, a more positive attitude towards themselves. The "Johary's Window", applied during the same two stages of pre-trial and post-experiment, together with free conversation and

directed conversation, which concerned the subject's way to relate with his/her peers, teachers and himself/herself, showed that students felt more capable, more important and more valuable. According to the criteria of a fairy tale composition, namely, the three characteristic moments: presenting the problem, the crisis, the solution, the students created – sometimes individually, sometimes together – tales that became projective personality tests. After presenting the characters and the situation, usually of a precarious balance, there comes the crisis, the central phase of the tale, when the issue which is the core of the story is presented as clearly as possible. From this point, students were often given the chance to intervene, offering solutions, solving the problems, finding allies. In this phase, all forms of solutions are developed with narrative means. It should be stated: who the protagonist is, which is the problem to be solved, who one can count on, who the enemies against whom one might fight are. In the end, a new balance appears, more stable and more satisfying than the opening. This type of tale is a tool of therapy and pedagogy, a communication tool; for us it was a teaching method and a way to resolve conflicts between students, especially their inner conflicts.

CONCLUSIONS

During several meetings, the students were passionate about fairy tales, the atmosphere being different from that of other seminars. Each had a tale from childhood which had marked him/her emotionally. Tales have triggered strong reactions. They got very close to each other, and communication between them and the teacher became more open. The Rosenberg Test for evaluating self-esteem was resumed at the end of the research showing a slight improvement.

Over several meetings, the tale was used as a communication tool, a projective personality test, stimulation of individual and group creativity and even as a therapeutic tool, proving to be an excellent teaching method.

Inventing a tale is good for anyone, provided they do not try to interpret it, because the subsequent interpretation cripples the tale. The one-the-spot created tale simply gives a pictorial representation of a process already underway.

"Translating" an event into images reproduces symbolically the way in which the subject sees this event at that moment, bringing it near the conscience and being able to "open" new opportunities, whereas imagination has the endless capacity of finding solutions for what is presented to it as a problem (Santagostina, P., 2008).

From the other people's stories, individuals can understand, learn how others have solved similar problems and clarify values. Some question this form of help; however, they are increasingly present in the West, and also in Romania.

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