

FOSTERING CRITICALITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: A PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH USING FAIRYTALES

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the pedagogical potential of fairytales as a medium for developing critical thinking skills in elementary school students. Moving beyond the traditional view of fairytales as mere entertainment or moral instruction, this research positions them as complex literary texts that can stimulate analytical thought. Through a comprehensive review of recent literature and pedagogical models from 2017 to 2024, this study explores how the intrinsic structures of fairytales—such as plot, character dilemmas, and turning points—align with the cognitive processes of critical thinking. The thesis examines various instructional strategies, including critical reading, digital reconstruction, and interactive storytelling, that can transform fairytale reception into an active, analytical exercise. The findings suggest that when methodically integrated into the curriculum, fairytales can significantly enhance students' abilities to question, evaluate, and reflect, thereby serving as an effective tool for fostering intellectual independence from an early age.

Key words: *school children, pedagogy, terms, critical thinking, fairytales, research, model.*

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, education faces the critical challenge of preparing children not just to absorb information, but to analyze, evaluate, and create. Critical thinking, the ability to think clearly and rationally, is no longer a luxury but a necessity for navigating a complex world.

Concurrently, educators are seeking engaging, developmentally appropriate tools to cultivate these skills from the earliest school years. Fairytales, with their timeless narratives of heroes, villains, and magical dilemmas, present a surprisingly potent, yet often underutilized, resource. This study explores the intersection of these two elements, proposing fairytales as a "gateway" to critical thought in elementary education.

While fairytales are ubiquitous in early childhood, their use in formal education is often superficial, limited to reading for pleasure or extracting simple moral lessons.

There is a gap between the recognized potential of fairytales to stimulate imagination and their practical application in fostering higher-order thinking skills. A 2024 study noted that few investigations have connected fairytales to the development of creative thinking, despite their rich narrative structures. This thesis addresses this gap by systematically investigating how fairytales can be methodically used to develop critical thinking, moving beyond passive reception to active, analytical engagement.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following questions:

1. What specific elements within fairytales (e.g., plot structure, character conflicts, and symbolism) can be leveraged to stimulate critical thinking in elementary school students?
2. What pedagogical models and instructional strategies are most effective in transforming fairytale reading into an exercise in critical analysis?
3. How can these strategies be integrated into the existing elementary school curriculum to foster skills such as questioning, evaluating, and problem-solving?

Significance of the Study

This research is significant for educators, curriculum developers, and researchers. It provides an evidence-based framework for using a beloved literary genre to achieve crucial educational outcomes. For teachers, it offers practical, classroom-ready strategies. For researchers, it synthesizes current scholarship and identifies avenues for future investigation, particularly in areas like digital storytelling and critical literacy.

Definition of Key Terms

Critical Thinking: In this context, it refers to the ability of students to analyze information, solve problems, consider multiple perspectives, make reasoned judgments, and reflect on their own thinking processes.

Fairytales: Traditional or authored stories involving magical elements, fantastical creatures, and archetypal characters, often presenting a conflict or dilemma that requires resolution.

Pedagogical Model: A structured approach or strategy for teaching, which includes specific methods, activities, and learning objectives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Critical Thinking in Early Childhood Education

Critical thinking in young children is not abstract philosophy, but a concrete set of skills. It involves observing, questioning assumptions (like why a character is "good" or "bad"), making predictions, and connecting story events to their own lives. Researchers like Munandar (2012) argue that fostering creativity and critical thought

allows children to maximize their potential and recognize multiple solutions to problems. This forms the basis for intellectual independence.

The Enduring Power of Fairytales: From Moral Lessons to Cognitive Tools

Fairytales have long been recognized for their role in character development, teaching values like kindness, honesty, and courage. However, their cognitive potential is equally profound. The hero's journey, the presence of a clear dilemma, and the characters' multiple attempts to solve problems serve as excellent models of iterative design thinking and persistence. The plot, characters, and turning points directly aid children's cognitive and analytical skills by presenting problems that need to be understood and solved.

Theoretical Frameworks: Linking Fairytales and Critical Thought

This thesis is built upon several interconnected theories:

Reader-Response Theory: This theory posits that meaning is created through the interaction between the reader and the text. In a classroom, this means students actively construct understanding by forming expectations, making predictions, and reacting to the story. Vučković and Premović (2024) used this theory to develop a model for the critical reading of fairytales.

Social Constructivism: From this perspective, children build knowledge through social interaction. Discussing a character's choices with peers, debating the fairness of an outcome, and receiving feedback from a teacher allows them to reflect on the story and construct a deeper, more nuanced moral understanding .

Critical Literacy and Multimodal Learning: Critical literacy encourages readers to look beyond the surface and question the ideologies and power structures within a text. This is particularly relevant for examining gender roles or cultural assumptions in traditional tales. Furthermore, modern classrooms are embracing multimodal learning, where students don't just read but also create using digital tools, fostering even deeper critical engagement.

Empirical Studies on Fairytales and Critical Thinking

Recent research provides strong empirical support for this topic. A 2024 study by Tolipova used a cyclical classroom action research model and found that having children consider character choices and predict endings significantly improved their creative and critical thinking. Another 2024 study developed a Science-Mathematics-based fairytale book and proved its effectiveness in improving critical thinking skills, albeit with medium effectiveness. In 2023, Kargin's action research on "critical multimodal literacy" demonstrated that when elementary students use digital tools to reconstruct fairytales (changing characters, plotlines, and themes), they exhibit "nuanced critical insights" about gender and power dynamics. Foundational work by

Dragić (2017) also established a strong theoretical link, showing that the process of fairytale reception is highly compatible with the stages of critical thinking: evocation, understanding of meaning, and reflection .

METHODOLOGY

Research Design: A Qualitative, Multi-Model Approach

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically a review and synthesis of existing pedagogical models. Given the nature of the research questions, which seek to understand how and why certain strategies work, a qualitative approach is most appropriate for exploring the depth and nuance of classroom practices.

Data Collection Methods (Analysis of Pedagogical Models)

Data was collected through a systematic review of academic databases, educational journals, and conference proceedings. The search focused on peer-reviewed articles and studies published between 2017 and 2024 that detailed specific methods for using fairytales to develop critical or creative thinking in elementary-aged children.

The collected pedagogical models were analyzed and categorized based on their core instructional strategy, the specific critical thinking skills they targeted (e.g., analysis, evaluation, inference, perspective-taking), and the theoretical framework underpinning them. This allowed for the synthesis of a comprehensive picture of effective practice.

DISCUSSION

Fairytales as Catalysts for Cognitive and Analytical Skills

The literature overwhelmingly confirms that fairytales are natural catalysts for critical thinking. The inherent structure of a fairytale—presenting a conflict and the characters' attempts to resolve it—mirrors the problem-solving process. By engaging with the story, children are implicitly learning to:

Analyze cause and effect: Why did the witch capture Hansel and Gretel? What was the consequence of their actions?

Evaluate character decisions: Was it wise for the protagonist to take a gift from a stranger? What other choices could they have made?

Predict outcomes: What will happen next? This requires students to use evidence from the text to form hypotheses.

Effective Pedagogical Models for the Classroom

The research reveals several distinct, yet complementary, models for classroom practice.

The Reception Theory Model: Evocation, Meaning, and Reflection

This model, articulated by Dragić (2017), structures the reading process in three stages:

1. **Evocation:** Before reading, students activate prior knowledge and form a "horizon of expectations." What do they think a story about a "brave tailor" will be about?

2. **Understanding of Meaning:** During reading, students confirm or challenge their predictions and grapple with the text's meaning.

3. **Reflection:** After reading, students analyze the aesthetic distance between their expectations and the actual story, discussing themes and character motivations. This framework systematically guides students through the core components of critical thought.

The Critical Reading Model: Deconstructing Ideology and Gender Roles

This model, developed by Vučković and Premović (2024), encourages students to read against the text. Using reader-response theory, it prompts students to question the underlying messages in traditional tales. For example, a class reading "Baš-čelik" might analyze the construction of heroism or the limited roles given to female characters. This approach fosters critical thinking by teaching children that stories are not neutral but carry particular viewpoints and ideologies.

The Critical Multimodal Literacy Model: Reconstructing Narratives Digitally

Kargın's (2023) action research presents a modern, highly engaging model. Here, students use digital tools to reconstruct fairytales. They are tasked with changing a character's gender, altering the plot to empower a traditionally passive character, or creating a new ending from a different perspective. This act of creation requires deep critical analysis of the original text's structure, themes, and power dynamics. It transforms students from passive consumers into active, critical producers of meaning.

The Role of the Educator in Facilitating Critical Engagement

Across all models, the teacher's role is pivotal. The teacher is not just a storyteller but a facilitator of inquiry. Effective teachers employ strategies like:

Asking open-ended questions: "Why do you think the wolf pretended to be the grandmother?" instead of "Was the wolf bad?"

Encouraging discussion and debate: Creating a safe space for students to share and defend their interpretations.

Mastering storytelling techniques: As Musfiroh (2005) notes, effective storytellers bring characters to life, use pauses to build suspense, and engage with the audience, making the narrative a dynamic and thought-provoking experience.

Fairytales should not be confined to language arts. As demonstrated by the Science-Mathematics based fairytale book, they can be integrated into STEM subjects to contextualize problems and make abstract concepts more tangible and engaging. A fairytale about a giant could lead to a math lesson on measurement, or a story about a magical seed could introduce a science unit on plant growth.

Teacher Training and Storytelling Proficiency

For these strategies to be effective, teacher training programs must include modules on critical pedagogy and the art of storytelling. Teachers need to be equipped not only with the knowledge of what to teach but also the skills of how to use fairytales to provoke thought, manage discussions, and guide students through the processes of deconstruction and reconstruction .

Involving Parents and the Home Environment

The development of critical thinking should extend beyond the classroom. Parents can be encouraged to read fairytales at home and engage their children in similar analytical conversations. Asking “What would you have done in that situation?” during bedtime stories can reinforce the skills being taught at school and foster a lifelong habit of critical engagement.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has demonstrated that fairytales are a powerful and versatile tool for developing critical thinking skills in elementary school students. Their narrative structures naturally lend themselves to analysis, evaluation, and problem-solving. Recent pedagogical research provides clear, effective models—from structured reception theory to innovative digital reconstruction—that educators can use to unlock this potential. The key lies in moving beyond passive reading and adopting a methodical, inquiry-based approach that positions the child as an active constructor of meaning. In conclusion, the path to critical thinking need not be paved with dry exercises and abstract problems. It can be an enchanted gateway, led by brave heroes, clever animals, and magical twists. By harnessing the power of fairytales and applying thoughtful pedagogical strategies, educators can guide young students not only to love stories, but to think deeply about them, question them, and in doing so, develop the intellectual independence they will need for the rest of their lives.

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