Fairy tales are salient for teaching primary students about social justice and emotional intelligence, study finds

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From Little Red Riding Hood to the Ugly Duckling, fairy tales have long been read to children across the ages. Yet despite criticisms of being outdated and sexist, new research shows that fairy tales still hold an important place in primary education.

In a new review from the University of South Australia, researchers found that fairy tales are a valid resource for teaching primary students about social justice and emotional intelligence. The review is published in The Australian Journal of Language and Literacy.

Experienced teacher and UniSA Education Doctoral candidate, Glenn Saxby, says that when fairy tales are presented in a critical and inclusive manner, they can help explain complex issues to children.

"Once upon a time, fairy tales were the main way to teach children about the world and their place within it, but over time—and especially post early 'Disneyfication'—people have become more critical about them," Saxby says.

"While there's no denying that some fairy tales present unrealistic expectations or stereotypes, when fairy tales are used in a critical and inclusive manner, they can be an effective teaching resource in the contemporary classroom.

"Fairy tales offer many positive opportunities for children to learn about empathy, kindness, ethics, and cooperation. But also, when fairy tales portray outdated or gender-ignorant representations, teachers can use these instances to confront and discuss ideas with their students."

The review outlines many benefits of fairy tales for modern learning—from understanding the structure of a compelling tale, to teaching literacy or even STEM, and understanding gender stereotypes. For example, questions such as "Could have Rapunzel built a zip line using her hair to escape her tower prison?" can frame discussions.

Saxby says while teachers should be encouraged to feel confident about using fairy tales in the classroom, they should do so with a creative and critical lens.

"Active discussion about the historical and sociocultural contexts of fairy tales can provide many teaching opportunities in the classroom, but there is still scope for teachers to extend beyond traditional boundaries," Saxby says.
"Multicultural fairy tales have enormous potential to increase cultural equity and understanding among primary children, so finding fairy tales from different cultural backgrounds would be an excellent resource for teachers.

"We need to look beyond the 'traditional tale,' and through teachers, we can start a new chapter."


Provided by University of South Australia


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