

## FAIRY TALES IN THE EDUCATION ON CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

**Prof. Dr. Viara Gyurova**

*Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" (Bulgaria)*

**Abstract.** The topic of children's rights, their understanding and assimilation by children and adults is among the main topics in civic education. It hides an increased emotional charge, therefore requires the application of non-traditional approaches and solutions, so that specific legal information is not simply be assimilated, but a sensitivity and value attitude to children's rights and their realization and protection (in case of violation) be developed. Such an approach (educational tool) is fairy tales. The article offers some answers to methodologically important questions: Why are fairy tales an adequate and effective tool for teaching and educating children's rights? When and where could they be used as such a tool? For what purposes can children's education be used? How can the educational potential of fairy tales be achieved – how fairy tales should be used and on what principles should their choice be done?

**Keywords:** civic education; children's rights; fairy tales; methodology of children's rights education

Children's rights issues are among the most sensitive concerns of humankind. Like all other human rights, they emerge on the agenda in the most difficult moments of human life, usually when someone's (in this case – children's) rights are violated. This is how the most important international documents on the rights of the child have been initiated – as a *reaction* of prominent individuals to injustices towards children, which has triggered the support of influential organizations. But that's another topic.

Education on the rights of the child also has a *preventive function*: to form notions, values and attitudes towards people in general and children (as a specific social group) in particular, and also towards their rights (based on knowledge), which should lay the foundations of behaviour that does not violate anyone's rights. In case of violation of certain rights of a child (or children), the culture of children's rights, developed as a result of such education, sets the basis of specific adequate actions for protection and restoration of the violated rights, which is a manifestation of the *reactive function* of this education and culture.

If we consider E. Schein<sup>1)</sup>, every culture is a multidimensional creation, which is accounted for based on visible products of human activity and specific behaviour, established on certain values and beliefs. In this context, children's rights culture (in children and adults) is characterized by visible products (creative works dedicated to children's rights, visible relationships between adults and children as well as between children themselves, founded on respect, understanding, dialogue, cooperation, etc., i.e. behaviour that is based on appreciation and consideration for the rights of the others (children and adults alike). At the core of such behaviour, there are established values – the perception of the child or “the other one” as a supreme value, as a citizen of a democratic community such as school and family, and more broadly – as a member of social communities (including internet friends and followers). In older students and adults, the existence of a culture of human and children's rights presupposes manifestations and behaviour consistent with the awareness of one's civic positions – as a citizen of the state, of the European Community, of the world. Such behaviour may be (due to certain considerations) only demonstrative, i.e. merely responding to the expectations of people who are important to the child and / or the adult (parents, teachers, other experts, leaders). In order to be a sincere and real component of a children's rights culture, this behaviour should be based on established beliefs that respect (consideration), protection and defence of children's rights is indeed the right behaviour and value worth manifesting and developing<sup>2)</sup>.

Such beliefs are formed and developed throughout a person's life. They are the result of both accidental (unplanned) impact of various social factors and purposeful influence – from adults to children, from children to children – in informal communities, as well as from adults to adults – especially through their involvement in organized activities (seminars and other trainings) that are related to children's rights. In these organized forms of education (curricular and extracurricular), fairy tales play an important role as a means of purposeful intellectual and emotional impact, leading to reflection<sup>3)</sup> and conclusions about selected behaviour in different situations, related to children and their rights.

### **Why exactly fairy tales?**

Fairy tales are not only interesting and pleasant pieces of reading which help adults to put children to sleep, nor just an engaging pastime. When used methodologically correctly, they could help to achieve a number of pedagogical and, in case of adult education and training, andragogical<sup>4)</sup> goals. They are a very suitable tool for forming competencies and culture of children's rights:

– *Because they embody justice and represent the triumph of the victory of the good over the bad* – someone is in trouble and is successfully defended by someone else. There are many examples, including: fairy tales of kidnapped / enchanted princesses rescued by their prince (e.g. the tales of Rapunzel, Sleeping Beauty or

Snow White); tales of fairies and good witches helping characters who are unjustly restricted or distressed, yet unable to defend themselves (e.g. the tales of Cinderella, the Golden Girl, etc.); fairy tales in which, just when everything seems hopeless, a strong good hero suddenly appears and defeats the evil (the tales of the Little Red Riding Hood, the Seven Little Goats, etc.);

– *Because they show that everyone can become a hero in certain circumstances* (in this case, when defending their own or other people's rights) – e.g. the animals from the fairy tale “The Town Musicians of Bremen”, who overpowered the robbers, or the fairy tales of heroes defeating dragons and monsters; the little brother taking care of his sister (“Hansel and Gretel”, “Brother and Sister”, etc.), or ordinary heroes, dealing with their problems on their own (“The Boy and the Wind”, “The Wild Swans”, etc.). These fairy tales instill in children the confidence that they can be successful, that they can cope, even when someone violates their rights;

– *Because they show that modesty, perseverance and diligence are rewarded* – “The Rabbit and the Turtle”, “The Golden Girl”, “The Wild Swans”, etc. Folklore tales also abound with such examples;

– *Because they show how composure, initiative and cunningness in the name of the good can win* – e.g. the Bulgarian tales of Hitar Petar (Crafty Petar); folk tales in which the poor outwit the rich and the greedy; fables in which small and weak animals help strong animals in need, etc.;

– *Because they show the power of friendship and mutual help in difficult times* – there are many examples of friendship between man and animals, between small (usually weak) and strong animals, between heroes who have different strengths but unite in the name of a specific good deed, etc.

– *Because they provoke experiences*, and every true experience passes through the heart and awakens emotions that reinforce (and sometimes obscure) arguments of reason. The great French educator Celestin Freinet once said that in order to learn something, one must experience it. In other words, experiencing the rights of the child through appropriate story (fairy tales) leads to their understanding, lasting memory and acceptance as a value.

### **When and where can fairy tales be used as an educational tool on human and children's rights?**

In short – fairy tales can be used always, at any time in teachers's work on children's rights. Even when not purposefully aiming to form knowledge and attitudes towards human and children's rights, adults – including teachers, parents, and other important adults in children's lives – educate children in virtues and form patterns of behaviour through the fairy tales they read and/or tell. Because in all “real” fairy tales there is a happy ending, good characters who defeat the bad, weak heroes who gain strength and win, friends who lend a hand in difficult moments, a solution to the problems, even when the situation seems hopeless.

All educational activities with children can and should include fairy tales as an educational tool. Ever since kindergarten, when introduction to children's rights takes place through the prism of distinguishing between good and bad, fairy tales are the main means of showing patterns of behaviour which are, in fact, models of protection of violated rights – of people and animals, even plants (remember, for example, Little Ida's flowers) – without being explicitly announced as such.

As children move up the school ladder, fairy tales become essentially an “accompanying” means of understanding human and children's rights. Fairy tales illustrate (visualize) theoretical statements and enable making sense of specific rights (recorded in a number of documents) and related pro-legal behaviour.

The comment above partly answers the following question.

***What (purposes) can fairy tales be used for in education on children's rights?***

In practice, fairy tales can be used for many different purposes, as discussed to some extent in the analysis so far. A good guide within this diversity can be the logical “ladder” in Bloom's Taxonomy for different levels of learning – in this case, related to acquiring a culture of children's rights. Following its logic, fairy tales can be utilized:

- *for acquiring knowledge of human and children's rights* – e.g. many tales of H. K. Andersen are the embodiment of children's violated rights to a normal life;
- *for understanding* the situation regarding children and their rights through the prism of the fairy tale plot (e.g. the tale of Cinderella and the like);
- *for application* of the new philosophy<sup>5</sup> to children and their rights – many fairy tales demonstrate how children are able to make appropriate decisions (as complete human beings) and deal with difficult situations – e.g. Hansel from “Hansel and Gretel”, Elisa from “The Wild Swans”, the little prince from the fairy tale of the same name, etc.

The following utilizations of fairy tales for building a culture of children's rights are important for the education and upbringing of children regarding their rights, and also for relevant training in this subject-matter of adults working with children – teachers and other pedagogical specialists, social workers, parents, as well as various other experts involved in respecting, observing, protecting and defending children's rights. In this case, the use of fairy tales in interactive seminars (such as workshops, working groups, etc.) would contribute to:

- developing skills *for analysis* of the situation regarding children and their rights – e.g. the fable “The Animal School” exemplifies what can happen in a school where children's rights to develop in accordance with their natural talents are not respected, and all students are forced to learn everything;
- formation of skills *for synthesis* – i.e. reaching a personal position by drawing conclusions based on the behaviour of characters from various related fairy tales (e.g. about the fate of poor children and their violated rights);

– *evaluation* of the situation regarding children and their rights at a particular historical moment when certain fairy tales were written or evaluation of the adequacy of specific behaviour in case of violation of rights (based on the behaviour of fairy tale characters).

The wide range of possibilities for using fairy tales in different forms of children's rights education leads to the next question.

***How can we make the most of the potential of fairy tales?***

In children's and adults' education on the rights of the child, fairy tales can be used in various ways:

– *to be read and told* – most often in order to illustrate a specific situation related to certain children's rights (realized or violated);

– *to be retold* – often in order to imaginatively re-create a plot from another position (e.g. the animal school or the giant's house may be "seen anew" in contemporary authors' tales as schools where children experience certain situations related to their rights, etc.);

– *to be re-enacted* in role-playing games – for this purpose, it is useful to develop role-playing cards defining the behaviour of each character in order to achieve a predetermined goal related to enacting and subsequently – commenting on role-playing behaviours in the context of children's rights;

– *to serve as the basis of targeted discussions (reflections)* related to issues related to children's rights and freedoms;

– *to serve as the basis of drawing* – illustrating fairy tales (for the younger ones) or drawing ideas on how specific children's rights can be manifested, protected or guaranteed.

In order to maximize the effectiveness of the use of fairy tales in children's and adults' education on children's rights, it is advisable to take into account several principles:

1. *Appropriateness* – this principle is directly related to the main question "Why?": Why do we choose exactly this fairy tale / these fairy tales – what specific purpose is addressed by our choice?

2. *Considering the differences* – a principle directly related to the questions: "What are the participants (in the target group)?", "Whom is the training for?". The participants in the training may differ in many characteristics, but for the specific purpose – education on the rights of the child, the following differences should be considered:

– *demographic, social and cultural (including ethnic and religious) characteristics* – taking these differences into account is at the basis of exercising reasonable caution and avoiding fairy tales that would cause tension due to specific issues they provoke or problems they are associated with;

– *age* – in this case, the choice of fairy tale(s) takes into account the age

characteristics (including sensitivity) of the target group, which are related to the perception of the content and the ensuing analysis and conclusions. It should be noted that there are topics and fairy tales which children would not understand and others which adults would find unacceptable (or would approach negatively);

– *the level of prior competence* on the topic of the training – it determines to what extent and how the choice of fairy tale(s) depends on prior knowledge (What do participants already – probably – know?), corresponds to and builds on this prior knowledge (What must – should – they know?).

3. *Time adequacy of the choice* – this principle is related to the question “When is the training conducted?” and requires consideration of different dimensions of time:

– the historical moment and, respectively, the topics, human and / or children's rights that the participants (especially older students and adults) would find particularly sensitive;

– the timeframe of the course or the specific class (its duration) – and, respectively, how long it will take the participants to get acquainted with the text of the fairy tale(s) and manage with the analysis or comprehension for the purposes of the specific task (or tasks).

4. *Considering the specific potential of the text regarding effectiveness* – this principle is directly related to the expected results from the work with the fairy tale(s) – to provoke a discussion on a specific topic/rights, to be used creatively – not just read or retold, but, for example, re-enacted as a sketch/a scene or a pantomime, illustrated, etc.

Taking into consideration this potential of fairy tales as well as the principles of their adequate utilization for educational purposes would ensure the effectiveness of the process of education on children's rights – i.e. achieving the set goals and ensuring the genuine joy and satisfaction of the participants from the process in which they were involved. Thus, they would be triggered to continue extending their knowledge and developing their culture of children's rights. The latter will help children and adults view their activities and behaviour so as to children's rights are at the center of their pursuits and behaviour, and this, in turn, will make them empathize with the fate of children not only within their environment but also outside it – in the broadest sense, with children around the world.

## NOTES

1. SHEIN, E. (1997). Organizational Culture & Leadership – <http://www.tnellen.com/ted/tc/schein.html> – 10.5.2007
2. For more information see & Gyurova, Viara. Culture on children's rights as a chance and challenge for teachers. Sofia, Komlives – LM Ltd, 2002, 2nd chapter.  
1. The essence of the culture of children's rights, p. 76 [In Bulgaria]

3. Reflection – purposeful reasoning on the results of an action, specific thesis, an opinion or a position (most often expressed in writing).
4. Andragogy refers to the training of adult (i.e. of legal age) learners.
5. “The old philosophy” regarding children and their rights perceived the child as an inferior human being, as someone who is “not yet-” – not old enough or not big enough, not enough smart, strong, knowledgeable, capable, etc., to make the right decisions related to one’s own life and rights. The new philosophy perceives the child as a complete human being (as defined by J. Korczak – not as a future person, but as a person already). This means trusting children to make decisions that are up to their strength and adequate to their level of development and maturity.

✉ **Prof. Viara Gyurova, DSc.**

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6477-6268

Faculty of Education

Sofia University

Sofia, Bulgaria

E-mail: viara\_gyurova\_22@abv.bg