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The word as a pedagogical sign: Lessons from fairy tales

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Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): Education—in all its manifestations—is a process that enables people to grow and improve. In educational institutions, this process takes place through teaching, understood as the transmission of knowledge through signs; and for the teacher, the most significant sign is the word. Its pedagogical power is so great and mysterious that, when used well, it educates. To explain this aspect, this paper aims to provide a theoretical discussion of the educational power of words through fairy tales. Specifically, we seek to identify the difference between education and teaching, the importance of words in both processes, and to present an example from a case study in which the narrated words of stories convey educational elements because they reflect goodness, truth, and beauty.

Research methods: This research is qualitative in nature, and the methods used included bibliographic review and analysis. In addition, data from a previous study of our own—a case study based on a survey technique—were incorporated and valued for the purposes of this work.

Process of argumentation: The argumentation process was characterized by the identification of central ideas, the relationships between concepts, and examples drawn from the results of earlier research.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: Among the most significant findings, we note that the influence of stories has withstood the test of time due to their richness, depth, and meaning. This influence emerges through experiences of reading or listening to stories, the words associated with these readings, identification with the characters, and the reflection of human nature expressed in them.

Keywords:

education,
teaching, words,
fairy tales,
good, truth, beauty

Conclusions and/or recommendations: In conclusion, we find that stories exert a great influence on people because of the beauty, truth, and goodness that they convey. The word that emerges from them becomes a necessary sign in education, which leads people toward their personal fulfillment.

Introduction

Plato famously defined education as the task “to endow the body and soul with all possible beauty and perfection”—that is, to help a person, through self-cultivation, reach their fullest splendor by growing in different dimensions (intellectual, emotional, volitional, social, etc.). This means that education enables the perfection of what is most human in the human person. At the beginning of *Politics*, Aristotle says that “of the living only man has speech” (I, c. 1, 1253a 10), which allows us to recognize that the word is essential to the perfective development of the human being. What place, then, does the word occupy in this process? “At the origin of education is the word” (Martínez, 2002, p. 10).

To explore this idea, we draw on a literary form: fairy tales. If stories serve as the medium through which these words are expressed, we ask the following research questions: What influence do these words have on those who receive them? Are all words educational? To address these questions, this paper aims to offer a theoretical reflection on the educational power of language through the lens of fairy tales. To this end, we identify the concepts of education and teaching and present the role of language in each of these processes. We then examine the words found in fairy tales as carriers of educational potential. The pedagogical power of words drawn from fairy tales can support the educator’s mission, who “fully exercises his magisterium when he enables the learner to freely choose to lead himself toward goodness, truth, and beauty” (Ballesteros, 1987).

Education and teaching: The importance of the word

Does all teaching educate? How important are words in this process? To contextualize this topic, we will examine education, teaching, and the role of words. In every society, there are various educational institutions, foremost among them the family and, subsequently, the school. The educational mission of both is indisputable, “because the soul goes to Hades with nothing but its education and upbringing” (Plato, 107d). This leads us to agree with Caponnetto (2016, pp. 50–51), who observes that

The salvation of men depends largely on how they have been raised. Because upbringing is the formation of the inner self and right conscience, of the most intimate and integrative part of the person, of the standards of conduct, and of the identifying style of all actions.

Education, then, is a form of help or service—an aid to a person so that, through self-direction toward the goods that perfect their nature, they may reach fulfillment (Ruiz Sánchez, 1978). In this sense, all education is conducive to personal improvement. In educational institutions, upbringing and education occur through teaching, and “what does it mean to teach if not to transmit knowledge? It means, in the first place, to provide (...) true judgments, clear perceptions and correct concepts” (Stein, 1923, p. 66). In other words, teaching is “the transmission [or communication] of knowledge through signs” (Hernández de Lamas, 2000, p. 8). Thus, teaching, essentially a pedagogical practice, has its roots in the signs through which reality is signified.

Regarding signs, Umberto Eco writes: “Everyone agrees on defining the sign as a physical unit produced by man or recognized as capable of functioning as an expression of something different” (1976, p. 13). This is why every teaching process involves three elements: the one who teaches, the one who learns, and the signified content, which is transmitted through signs. As we see, all education necessarily perfects the person, but the same cannot be said of teaching, because other factors and aims come into play. For example, education can help a person

improve and grow in many aspects, while teaching may increase one's knowledge but not necessarily in ways that perfect the person, such as teaching someone how to steal, how to lie, or how to adopt a strong ideological bias.

This leads us to recognize, on the one hand, the need for correspondence between reality and the truth that is taught, and on the other hand, the importance of signs for the teacher, among which the most important is the word. When teaching is loaded with ideology, falsehoods, or does not reflect reality, "language, which should be the realm of truth, translucent, becomes an opaque reality that distances us from things" (Ferro, 2015). It is no coincidence that the Greeks gave the word such an important place in education. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," says the Gospel of John (1:1–18). These signs make explicit the extraordinarily high value of the word, for it founds and reveals reality. "And what is 'word'?" asks Komar (2005), to which he responds:

The Greek term for "word" is *lógos*. *Lógos* means thought and word. Each thing has a meaning, and it is through this meaning that we can understand it. Beings have been made thanks to Meaning with a capital letter. To discover and penetrate it, [inner] silence is necessary (...) It is therefore necessary to be silent [internally] in order to discover meaning (p. 11).

Let us recall the words of the Book of Wisdom, later taken up again in the Christmas Liturgy: "For while gentle silence enveloped all things, and night in its swift course was now half gone, your all-powerful Word leapt from heaven." Thus, in order to teach, every educator must first contemplate so that they may later make known what has been contemplated. This means that the *verbum mentis*, or inner word, must occupy a primary place in those who will later communicate their teachings. All education is carried out through teaching, and teaching is mediated through the word. But for the process to be truly educational, this teaching must be perfective.

The word that educates. Teaching through fairy tales

In the educational institutions that we are concerned with here (the family and the school), where both teaching and education are based on the word, there is a literary element that has a particularly significant place: fairy tales. We will therefore identify how the word that teaches—embodied in fairy tales—educates when it reflects what is good, beautiful, and true. When we speak of fairy tales—also called “marvelous tales”—we encounter a curious fact: they do not necessarily contain fairies. Their most characteristic elements are their structure, functions, and characters.

Possibly, their most distinctive characteristic is that these tales are as old as humanity itself and as contemporary as history itself. It is likely that there is no person in the world who has not heard or read one of these tales at some point in life, given the unimaginable breadth of their oral and written tradition. We will then analyze the influence that these stories can have on people and the impact they can exert on their own education. The marvelous tale presents, moreover, the structure of an extraordinarily serious and responsible adventure, for it is ultimately reduced to an initiatory scenario: initiatory trials (struggles against monsters, seemingly insurmountable obstacles, riddles to solve, impossible tasks to perform, etc.), the descent into hell or ascent to Heaven, or even death and resurrection are always encountered. . . . Its actual content refers to an extremely serious reality. . . (Eliade, 1968, p. 201). It is not without reason that Lewis (2000) cautions: “one day you will be old enough to read fairy tales again” (p. 3).

This reality, transmitted from the earliest years of life through the fantastic and the magical, is precisely what a child needs, as it shapes his or her early moral imagination through wonder. But not just any morality, “but the morality with the face of the auxiliary fairy of Beauty” (Anzoátegui, 1954, p. 99). The archetypal meanings and exemplary motifs imbued with meaning, help forge character, cultivate courage, and orient the child toward what is good and noble:

The child will not only remember with admiration the character as a character, but also to the extent that the character is the living

embodiment of the values that move his/her childlike sensibility. Or to put it another way: to the extent that he/she is the incarnation of the archetypes (Pastoriza de Etchebarne, 1962, p. 202).

These stories, characterized by the hero's journey (Campbell, 1990), do nothing more than show the path of human life—the adventure of daily existence, the difficulties to be faced, and the possible solutions to be found. This is precisely the message that fairy tales convey to children: that the struggle against the serious difficulties of life is inevitable; it is an intrinsic part of human existence. But if one does not flee, and instead confronts them... one comes to master the obstacles and rises, at last, victorious (Bettelheim, 1980, p. 12). Frodo's poetry could well summarize all these mysteries of the heart:

“La copa de cerveza, el viento manso,
 la quilla de navega,
 la paz de la comarca solariega
 con su verdor, su sol y su remanso.
 Todo es ausencia, de penar me canso.
 Todo dolor al alma no sosiega,
 el odio de Sauron quebranta y siega,
 tengo sed, voy herido ya no avanzo.
 Pero vi las esfinges sobre el río,
 testigo del pasado más glorioso,
 del rey que vuelve a restaurar el brillo.
 Entonces, Sam, contágame tu brío,
 vayamos hasta el fuego tenebroso,
 sucumba el mal y quien forjó este anillo”

[The glass of beer, the gentle wind,
 the sailing keel,
 the peace of the ancestral region
 with its greenery, its sun and its backwater.
 Everything is absence, I grow weary of sorrow.

No pain to the soul finds calm,
Sauron's hatred breaks and reaps,
I am thirsty, wounded, and can go no farther.
But I saw the sphinxes over the river,
witnesses of a most glorious past,
of the king who restores the shine again.
So, Sam, give me your spirit
let us go to the dark fire;
evil succumbs, and he who forged this ring.]
(Caponnetto, 2014, p. 74)

The fairy tale shows the darkness but also offers us the way to conquer it. As Chesterton (1998) said, such tales do not only present us with dragons; rather, they “offer a St. George to slay the dragon.” Happy endings, always affirmative and optimistic, generate nothing but hope and openness to the transcendent. Do not the stories in which warriors cross forests and thresholds to reach their beloved speak of courage? Or of hope when fairy godmothers appear to help princesses who have suffered misfortune? Or of sorrow when orphaned girls must live under the dominion of their wicked stepmothers? Or of fidelity when a friend accompanies the hero on his epic adventure?

Perhaps most significantly, they speak of human nature:

Fairy tales, on the other hand, uncover true reality. That of the human person and that of the cosmos. That of the revelation prefigured in enchantment and that of the salvation inferred through so many singular episodes. The reality that the miracle is possible, that heaven and earth are joined by an invisible and solid drawbridge, that inanimate beings may come to life, and that men resemble stones when their hearts have hardened (Caponnetto, 2016, p. 103).

And when we speak of fairy tales, the phrases “Once upon a time...” and “and they lived happily ever after...” appear in every story. It is worth recalling their importance:

These tales have stood the test of time in part because they are fascinating to young children. Nothing in recent years, on television or anywhere else, has improved on a good story that begins with “Once upon a time...”. But I believe they have stood the test of time for another reason: they appeal not only to children’s imaginations, but to their moral sense as well. They have the power to impress themselves upon young minds and remain as lifelong guides (Bennet, 2001, p. 6).

To illustrate the pedagogical influence that fairy tales can have, we refer to a study of our own (Galiano Moyano, 2024, pp. 113–134), carried out a couple of years ago. It was based on a case study examining the impact of these tales on the lives of a group of adolescents. Methodologically, we conducted a brief qualitative analysis of data obtained through a survey administered to a random sample of 60 young people between 17 and 25 years of age from the city of Valladolid (Spain), representing different genders and levels of education.

While the overall research findings were highly interesting, we will address only those relevant to the topic of this paper. To analyze the data, we used a pre-established system of categories synthesized from the reviewed literature and connected to this presentation: experiences of reading or listening to stories, words associated with reading stories, and the influence these stories have on people’s lives. Regarding the experiences of reading and listening to stories, the following information was gathered:

- Who reads the stories? I (49%), mother (32%), father (13%), others (5%).
- Where do you read the stories? home (66%), school (26%), library (5%), others (3%).

As we can see, most participants recognized the importance of these reading experiences in their homes, mainly before bedtime. They recalled these moments as stimulating imagination, offering escape, and providing experiences of joy and happiness.

When mom reads aloud, I feel like doing great things, doing good and correcting what is wrong, because it seems easy to show my face and easy to show courage. Oh, endless images before my eyes happen when mom reads aloud (Bennett, 2001, p. 110).

When asked to rate their experiences of reading and listening to fairy tales using a Likert scale (where 1 is the lowest value and 7 the highest), the mean score was 6.30, which indicates that these experiences were highly valued. The results reflecting the value of the words associated with reading and listening to stories are as follows: according to participants, the terms associated with reading and listening to fairy tales were fantasy (80%), wonder (77.78%), joy (75.56%), magic (71.11%), learning about life (51.11%), courage (48.89%), sadness (11.11%), fear (11.11%), other (6.66%), and disappointment (2.22%). In this regard, it is noteworthy that the highest-scoring terms associated with reading wonderful stories were those with positive connotations (wonder, joy, courage), rather than those with negative connotations (fear, sadness, disappointment).

Finally, when participants were asked about the influence exerted by fairy tales, the results were as follows: imagination (95.56%), creativity (82.22%), hope (48.89%), problem-solving (31.11%), self-esteem (28.89%), communication (24.44%), joy (22.22%), confidence (17.78%), other (13.33%), hopelessness (2.22%), resentment (2.22%), not at all (2.22%). As with the previous results, it is worth noting the difference between terms with positive connotations and those with negative connotations. This relationship between the experiences of reading and listening to stories, the high value that participants attribute to these experiences, the words rich in positive connotation, and the influence that they generate shows that these stories not only teach but also educate.

On this point, countless studies demonstrate how literature enhances the development of creativity, imagination, and oral and written expression (Bettelheim, 1980; Colomer, 2002; López Quintás, 2010; Pérez-Rioja, 1997; Rubio Torres & Fernández Arias, 2019; Selfa Sastre & Balca, 2020); how it promotes the development of skills and the acquisition of virtues through moral growth (Carreira Zafra, 2020; Kazmierczak, 2018;

Kristjánsson, 2020); and how it contributes didactically to teaching (Bozkirli, 2018; Martínez-Ezquerro, 2022, 2020; Tejerina Lobo, 2006). This influence—an influence that has stood the test of time because of its richness, depth, and meaning—reveals fairy tales as carriers of content and form that teach and, at the same time, educate.

Fairy tales, a path of good, truth, and beauty

In fairy tales, isn't every hero's journey a pedagogical journey? "Man," says Plato, "has lost the perfection, conceived for him, of the origin. Now he is perennially in search of the primordial form that can heal him again" (Ratzinger, 2006, p. 15). In that search, the characters embark on a path, impelled by forces that challenge and encourage them, encountering diverse difficulties until—often with the help of someone or something, and with great effort—they achieve the goal they set at the beginning. "The journey is also a figure of man's life: *homo viator*, as medieval people used to say. We find ourselves *in via*, that is, on the way, on pilgrimage, on a journey" (Ferro, 2018, p. 156). It becomes clear, then, that the path of *homo viator* is animated by a higher meaning, one that leads him out of himself—and educates him. And how does this education take place in fairy tales? Through beauty that is always intertwined with truth and goodness. In the Western tradition, we understand that goodness, truth, and beauty shape the human soul, and therefore, contact with them educates. We agree with Thibon in affirming that:

Beyond a certain height the universals are unified: a very high virtue always appears radiant with beauty and a masterpiece of art elevates not only spirits, but souls. The noblest characters have an aesthetic conception of morality: the good is for them an object of contemplation as well as of action: it is an action that can be contemplated. As for evil, they avoid it not so much because of the harm it can cause them but because they find its ugliness intolerable (Thibon, 1973, pp. 113–114).

Accordingly, “educational words are then those that, from the truth about what is good for man, promote virtue” (Martínez, 2002, p. 11). In this sense, truth, good, and beauty are integrated, since for words to be truly pedagogical, they must communicate truth, move toward the good, and manifest the splendor of beauty. “In what does this splendor consist? It is not so much that words are expressed with the beauty of oratory, but that the splendor of truth—*veritatis splendor*—shines in them” (Martínez, 2002, p. 11). And education, precisely, is the aid that can allow the splendor of the human person to reveal itself.

Conclusion

In the Walker Art Gallery (Liverpool, England), there is a work of art by James Sant (1820–1916), an oil on canvas from 1870, that can be summarized as an everyday scene of a mother telling a story to her child. The woman and the child, seated on a sofa next to a window, hold a book in their hands. There are—at least for me—two very significant details: the woman’s finger pointing toward the window, and the child’s expression of attentive, astonished listening. The work is titled *The Fairy Tale*. Without a doubt, it illustrates the captivating power of beauty as a bearer of truth and goodness, in this case conveyed through contact with fairy tales. In this work, we have sought to show that when words—a representative symbol of human nature—are used well, they can both teach and educate. In this case, fairy tales served as the medium through which these words are expressed.

The educational power of words, as conveyed through fairy tales, was analyzed by considering their influence, which arises from several factors. Among them, we identified the defining characteristics of these stories (guiding motifs, narrative functions, identification with characters, the hero’s journey, and happy endings), all of which reflect human nature. Another important factor concerns the experience of reading and listening to stories, which in most cases is positive, and recalling these experiences reawakens those moments. Finally, a high percentage of the words

associated with stories are linked to concepts with positive connotations (excitement, joy, and courage), rather than negative ones (fear, sadness, and disappointment).

“Whoever has perceived this beauty knows that truth is the last word on the world” (Benedict XVI, 2002). The enduring influence of literature is due to the richness, depth, and meaning it conveys. It presents stories as bearers of beauty, truth, and goodness—and the word that emerges from them as a necessary sign in education, capable of guiding people toward their fulfillment.

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