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Abstract

Recounts the efficacy of folk-tales in teaching reading and language skills to reading-disabled and emotionally disturbed children and adolescents.

Additional Keywords

Children with disabilities—Education; Folk literature—Study and teaching; Mentally ill children—Education; Reading—Study and teaching; Reading disability

Touch Magic

THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING FOLKTALES TO EMOTIONALLY DISTURBED, DISABLED READERS

SANDRA J. LINDOW

Over the past decade or so there has been a great deal of talk in Academic circles about the serious implications of living in a culture that is becoming demythologized. That is, the foundation of cultural education no longer automatically includes the myths and stories on which our human and intellectual values are grounded. Children are growing up not only bereft of our rich Judeo-Christian, Greco-Roman cultural heritage but also bereft of stories in general. Not only have they never heard of Moses and Zeus; they have never even heard of Rapunzel and Rumpelstiltskin. In a culture where mass communication of story is dominated by TV murders and car chases, it has become uncommon for children to hear stories told. It is often the case that children grow to adulthood without being able to identify the underlying structure of a story and thus lack an important cognitive skill for making sense of their own lives. Writer and Storyteller, Jane Yolen, in her excellent book *Touch Magic: Fantasy, Faerie and Folklore in the Literature of Childhood*, makes a powerful case for teaching folklore to children. Since reading her book in 1989, I have been actively involved in researching, and teaching story structure and folklore. This paper explores the educational foundations for teaching folktales as a part of the reading curriculum and cites a few of the tales I have found most effective.

I am a reading specialist. I work at the Eau Claire Academy, in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, a Residential Treatment Center for emotionally disturbed adolescents. The youngest are eleven, the oldest, eighteen. To my school come some of the most disturbed and unmanageable youngsters in America. Prior to coming to us, each has failed in an average of six placements. At least 90% of the girls and 65% of the boys have been physically, psychologically or sexually abused. Most have been abused by family members, those in whom there should be the greatest trust. When one reads the files of Eau Claire Academy students, one wonders how so much failure can be packed into so few years. Many of our students are chronic run-aways who have attended school very little. It is not surprising that more than a quarter of them are severely disabled readers. As well as reading disabled, my Reading Lab students also tend to be learning disabled, developmentally delayed, attention deficit, and culturally illiterate. In a demythologizing culture, my students are the most critically demythologized.

This, then, is my problem. Through careful testing and evaluation we find out what our new students do know,

what they can succeed at, and begin from there. Most make good progress and thrive in the caring, structured environment we create, many making at least two months progress for every month spent in the program. Some students, however, do not do equally well in all skill areas. For example, they learn to decode words without making the necessary transition to reading as a meaning-producing activity. Reading for them is just words and not at all that delicious interaction between the minds of writer and reader that is the foundation of learning through literature.

These individuals are poor comprehenders, what Mary Elizabeth Mueller calls the "Silent Illiterate" (Mueller, p. 41). Mueller's descriptor, "silent" is particularly apt. Not only are these individuals "silent" because their problem is often unidentified in elementary school, but also because they themselves seem cognitively silent. They appear to lack a mediating sense of self, a voice inside that processes information consciously. They are deficient in what reading specialists call "metacognition." Their behavior is usually impulsive. No voice of self speaks calmly inside their heads. Nor can they usually visualize what others describe to them. Visualization, of course, is the basis of upper-level, content-area reading, for example, reading about the sciences. Part of the problem may be psychological or neurological, but much of it is a direct result of a lack of knowledge about language and its connections with the real world. These students live in a universe devoid of metaphor, allusion, and indeed virtually all of those reference points we call culture. Thus, though they may be decoding at a sixth-grade level, their actual reading skills are stuck somewhere between the second and fourth-grade levels. They are so bereft of cultural literacy that I have often wondered how they could have gotten to adolescence with so little ability for understanding language. In their oral communication as well as in their reading, they are so lacking in insight and imagination that they have often seemed like feral children.

Yolen tells us that the first literary reference to feral children was in the tenth issue of *Systema Naturae* published in 1758 (Yolen, p. 83). Although my students are not feral children in the traditional sense (they did not grow up as junior members of wolf packs), they do come from environments where they have been so seriously deprived of language experiences that their use of language is often little better than the feral child's. Some have grown up in ghettos, others in closets. Furthermore, as Yolen suggests, because they lack the underlying linguistic structures nec-

essay for sophisticated language use, they also lack "true memory, and thus . . . [lack] the basis for thought" (Yolen, p. 87). Therefore, she suggests, in order to be truly human, we must be able to use language to organize and store information about our world. We must also be able to retrieve this information and share it with others. We are defined as unique individuals by our ability to describe our lives.

By telling stories about our experiences we create a kind of oral autobiography by which our characters are revealed.

In Yolen's words,

All children are born feral. They are *taught* to be human. When those of us who are outwardly whole meet a child or adult who has been damaged we are uncomfortable, sensing the path not chosen (Yolen, p. 87).

Certainly many of my students fit this description. Time is precious. Their stay with us only averages about eleven months. Their own biological and neurological clocks are ticking. Language and reading skills are best and most easily learned before age twelve. Between the ages of twelve and eighteen, neurological patterns are set (what we know through brain research to be a decreasing in number and a thickening in size of neurological connections). After age eighteen an adult may never be able to learn to read. It is not by accident then that a major focus of my job is providing language experience.

In the brief time I have with them, I must teach my students how to understand and, correspondingly, think about literature. Considering the chaotic nature of their lives it may be the only chance they get. What I do is to teach story structure through folklore. This makes a good deal of sense. First, folk stories have been simplified so that their structure is easily revealed. In *Touch Magic*, Yolen writes that folktales handed down from the cultures that preceded us are

the most serious, succinct expressions of the accumulated wisdom of those cultures. They were created in a symbolic, metaphorical story language and then honed by centuries of tongue-polishing to be a crystalline perfection" (Yolen, p. 18).

Second, their characters and subjects are not insulting to adolescents. There is enough love or violence to suit even the most romantic or blood-thirsty. Third, there are a great many beautifully illustrated folktales that can catch and hold the attention of even the most attention deficit disabled reader. It has become obvious to me that teaching folklore makes the most impact on seriously disabled readers in the shortest amount of time. In the words of noted children's literature scholar, Perry Nodelman, I am "teaching story."

At the 1989 Children's Literature Conference in Mankato, Minnesota, Nodelman explained to me that in our demythologized culture many children grow up knowing only one story, the one where Robin Hood, He-Man, the

A-Team, or Papa Smurf overcomes the bad guys (Gar-gamel and his cat) who are beating up on the little people (Smurfs) and wins the admiration of the thinly-clad love interest (Smurfette). Everyone then lives happily ever after, at least until the next time that bad guys come around town. This is what folklore specialists call the Hero Tale.

In the last three years, I have found that many of my students, because of their abused and limited life experiences, don't even know *that* story. So, in the time I have with them I try to provide as many types of stories as possible: creation stories, cumulative tales, fairy tales, tall tales, fool's tales, etc.

Folktales present story in its most streamlined, most archetypically and psychologically dynamic form. Certainly if these stories could last through generations of storytellers, whose suppers depended on a good tale, and nannies, whose employment depended on providing moral guidance through bedtime stories, then they must have something to catch the imaginations of even my most disaffected students. Yolen says that there are good reasons why these stories work and, correspondingly, these reasons are exactly why we should teach them.

First, they provide what Yolen calls a "landscape of allusion and state in symbolic or metaphorical terms the abstract truths of our common human existence" (Yolen, p. 19). In order to be mature readers, we need to be able to understand and use symbolic language. We need to know what the author meant when he said that the maiden was "pure as the driven snow." Furthermore, we need to have a basic knowledge of the mythology and folklore that has provided a basis for much of modern literature. We must know Arthur and Atlas, Pegasus and Puck.

Second, like Verna Aardema's *Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain*, folktales provide windows to ancestral cultures. Through tales such as Mercer Mayer's retelling of *East of the Sun, West of the Moon* and Joan Chase Bowden's *Why the Tides Ebb and Flow* we see how other cultures dealt with growing up, falling in love, growing old. From creation myths such as Gerald McDermott's *Anansi, the Spider* and Verna Aardema's *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears* we can learn how different cultures explained how things came to be. Thus, these stories work to broaden the narrow, ethnocentric base that's characteristic of most of my students.

Third, Yolen believes that folklore and mythology provide a way for people to create reality for themselves from the raw stuff of their experience. The events in the tales function on a symbolic level and influence the way we "process" experience (Yolen, p. 17). In the words of noted child psychologist, Bruno Bettelheim, "The fairy tale is a verification of the interior life of the child" (Yolen p. 18). By this Bettelheim means that the child responds to the various archetypal events in the tales, and this gives the child a chance to order his or her own experiences at the same time. This process is primarily accomplished

through day dreaming (Bettelheim, p. 7). In this way, folktales play an important role in the making and molding of mentally stable individuals and become "a marvelously adaptable tool of therapy" (Yolen, p. 17).

In the last ten years, a whole new school of therapy has developed wherein the therapist helps the client rewrite life experience in a more positive, life enhancing way. Thus, healing takes place through a process of "restorying." One particularly successful method suggested by therapist, John Bradshaw, in his innovative book, *Homecoming: Reclaiming and Championing Your Inner Child*, is to write one's life story as a fairy tale and be able to describe a happy ending. Although I am not a therapist, I commonly have my students write stories about their own lives. In the rewriting process, I try to guide my students in seeing themselves as the heroes of their own lives. This is easier if they have some experience with the structure of heroic quest tales.

Bettelheim believes that the events of folktales provide "new dimensions to the child's imagination which would be impossible for him to discover as truly on his own" (Bettelheim, p. 7). Certainly, my students with their impoverished imaginations would be unlikely to conceive of saving one's eleven enchanted swan brothers by knitting them cloaks from nettles (Hans Christian Andersen, *The Wild Swans*, pictures by Susan Jeffers, retold by Amy Ehrlich) or inheriting a kingdom by pulling a sword from a stone. Yet, these stories about overcoming adversity through effort and goodness may be exactly what they need to form a personal interior language for success instead of failure.

Finally, the great archetypal stories of fantasy and myth "provide a framework or model for an individual's belief system" (Yolen, p. 18). They are what Isak Dinesen describes as "a serious statement of our existence" (Yolen, p. 18). Although my students do have belief systems of a sort, they are rarely more than a muddle of fears and misconceptions. Thus, they can benefit greatly from the creation of such a framework.

Yolen argues quite persuasively that "listening to and learning of the old tales . . . (should be) among the most basic elements of our education" (Yolen, p. 19). But is there substantiation for this claim within the reading community? The answer is definitely, "yes". With the advent of whole language approaches, educators are now looking at comprehension through new eyes—eyes whose vision has been enhanced by what we have learned about neurological development and brain organization. In her excellent article, "Remediating the 'Silent Illiterate' Through a Structured Reading/Writing Program," Mary Elizabeth Mueller brings together the work of earlier researchers to suggest four components of reading comprehension: 1) broad background knowledge which can enhance passage content, 2) an ability to generate ideas from the text and relate them to personal experience, 3) an explicit knowledge of passage structure and 4) an awareness of reading

strategies (or metacognition) that enables a student to "read to learn" (Mueller, p. 41).

Mueller goes on to say that

structural patterning has only been cited recently; therefore it has not been implemented within most elementary classrooms. As a teaching technique, it is not widespread. However, structural patterning can serve as a basis for remediation, particularly for the "silent illiterate" (Mueller, p. 41).

It would seem that teaching folktales would be triply effective when considering comprehension as Mueller describes it. Not only can the structure of folktales be easily outlined for students, but also exposure to folktales can increase background cultural knowledge as well as generate questions about values to which students can relate their personal experiences.

Gordon Pradl of NYU calls the study of the structure of folktales and narrative "narratology". Pradl says that

Significantly the words "narrative" and "story" can both be traced back to an original meaning of "to know." It is through the story that people quite literally come to know—that is, to construct and maintain their knowledge of the world. Through a story an individual creates meaning out of daily happenings, and this story in turn serves as the basis for anticipation of future events. (Pradl, p. 72)

This etymological definition of story seems to support Bettelheim's psychological definition.

Pradl goes on to discuss how children's concepts of story structure develop. He cites Arthur Applebee in his study of the stories children tell and children's responses to the stories they read.

His study shows that a child's idea of a story parallels other cognitive abilities and is related to general growth in ability to take others' perspectives. (Pradl, p. 73)

In this way telling stories to children and allowing them to tell their own stories causes a gradual increase in the linguistic sophistication of children's narrative that can be charted through six different stages from "heaps" of unrelated perceptions to what Applebee calls "true narratives" (Applebee, p. 58). Pradl stresses the importance of educators' awareness of these stages. He concludes by saying,

Narratology, then, is fundamentally related to teaching and learning at all grade levels, and even beyond the classroom. From the study of reading comprehension to the building of models of artificial intelligence, the more we understand the nature of narrative, the more we understand about ourselves. (Pradl, p. 74)

How can educators best use story structure to guide their students toward a grasp of "true narratives"? Although linguists and folklorists can outline the structure of folktales through an almost algebraic notation (A = ailing king, B = the youngest of three brothers, D = damsel in distress, H = the Heroic Quest), this approach seems only valuable for scholars and would certainly be confus-

ing and pointless with remedial reading students. Rather, the most promising approach to story structure appears to be the use of story grammars (Fitzgerald & Spiegel, 1983.)

Since all stories revolve around a conflict of one sort or another, story grammars outline meaning by focusing on a problem and the resulting attempts to solve that problem. A folktale story grammar might look something like this:

Setting: Once upon a time

Place: Magic forest

Characters: Goldilocks, Mama Bear, Papa Bear, Baby Bear

Goals / Problem: Goldilocks gets lost in the woods and enters the Bears' house without permission.

Attempts: When the Bears come home and find the house not as they left it, they are upset and try to find who has done this to them.

Solution: Goldilocks is found sleeping in Baby Bear's bed and is subsequently chased away.

Reaction: Goldilocks vows to stay out of the Magic Forest and promises to stay out of strange houses.

In 1988 in an article published in *WSRA Journal*, Martha Kinney and John Schmidt conclude that using story grammars helps students "visualize plot development: where the action came from and where it was going" (Kinney, p. 51). What I do as a pre-reading exercise is to remind my students to look for the elements of story grammar as I read a tale to them. This focuses their attention. When I have finished reading, my students retell the story by using the story grammar for structuring their thoughts. Thus, they are helped to focus on the most relevant details.

In another article, Cheryl Mayes suggests that

Research seems to support the notion that teaching students to be aware of the structure of texts aids comprehension. When readers are not cognizant of the structure of texts, comprehension is impaired because it is more difficult to retrieve and integrate material. (Mayes, p.26)

Thus, story grammars provide an explicit framework for storing information for those who do not easily develop an implicit knowledge of a story's linguistic relationships.

Furthermore, those stories that have emerged out of our oral tradition, are easily outlined with story grammars primarily because convoluted plots, purple prose, and stream of consciousness are not popular characteristics of tales told round a campfire.

Thus, the reading community does indeed support Yolen and Nodelman on the importance of story structure. It is apparent that both remedial and developmental readers need stories in order to mature as readers. It is also apparent that, whereas good readers are able to internalize the underlying story structure through experience, poor comprehenders need those structures shown to them. Cheryl Mayes suggests that "any instruction or guidance

that results in an awareness of cognition will more likely result in better understanding of reading texts" (Mayes, p. 26).

Working with emotionally disturbed disabled readers requires what Yolen calls "tough magic". That is, you cannot receive something without first giving something. (Yolen, p. 70) It is hard work and success is not always guaranteed. However, I am convinced that folk stories and story grammars provide a powerful tool for teaching my students to comprehend what they read.

Although improvement may not be either magical or immediate, I have seen a real increase in my students' comprehension, literary appreciation and sophistication. I do not believe that it is my expectation alone that makes my students seem more human when they in passing make reference to an acquaintance as being like the poor fisherman's perpetually dissatisfied wife (Grimm, "The Fisherman and His Wife"). By knowing the story and seeing the pattern, they have touched the magic of language. By sharing their recognition they have in Yolen's words, "touched magic and passed it on." ◊

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