PERCEPTION OF PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS ON FAIRY TALES

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Abstract: *Fairy tales illustrate differences in gender. Male characters are adventurous, warriors, engaged in restoring justice, while female characters are passive, obedient, presented as victims and dependant on the male characters. The paper presents a mixed research, its objective being the analysis the students' perceptions on fairy tales. The participants of the study are 129 from six different classes of fourth grade. For the analysis, Children's Fairy-tales Perception Questionnaire was applied. The results show that boys view the female characters as being passive, pleasant and beautiful and the male characters as brave and powerful, in line with gender stereotypes. This research is useful for teachers and school counsellors for a better understanding the students' perception on fairy tales.*

Keywords: *fairy tales; gender differences; students; primary school;*

1. Introduction

Gender refers to differences between men and women based on sex differences. Gender related differences are built socially and historically, strengthened by psychological, institutional and cultural means (Nelson, 1995). Gender identity refers to the conscience of belonging to female and male sex, with everything this implies in origin society, being an important aspect of self-concept (Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2010).

1.1. Gender differences in fairy tales

Gender differences refer to physical, psychological, mental and behavioural differences between men and women. Gender differences are also influenced by the expectations and different social experiences which boys and girls face since birth. Those expectations relate to three aspects of gender identity: gender roles, gender typing and gender stereotypes.

Gender roles concern those behaviours, interests, attitudes, aptitudes and personality traits a culture promotes as being adequate for boys, men and girls, women. Every society or culture define and impose their gender roles. Throughout history, the majority of cultures expected women to devote their time to care for the children and house Men were supposed to ensure livelihood and family protection (Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988). Women had to be obedient and careful, while men were supposed to be active, aggressive and competitive. Nowadays, especially in the Western countries, gender roles have become more flexible and more miscellaneous.

Gender typing refers to the acquisition of a gender role. Traditionalist parents encourage gender typing. On the other hand, in the families where parents have egalitarian vision regarding gender roles, stereotypes are more flexible (Iervolino, Hines, Golombok, Rust & Plomin, 2005). Gender stereotypes are preconceived generalizations related to female and male behaviour; for example, all women are (view as) passive and obedient, all men are aggressive and independent. These stereotypes exist in many cultures and are a close cause for typified gender behaviour (Campbell, Shirley & Candy, 2004; Costa jr., Terracciano, & Mccrae, 2001).

Gender inequality refers to different treatment of men and women for the reason that some are men and the others are women, thus being a birth criterion, which is sex. In modern society, birth inequalities are considered illegitimate and society prohibits and explicitly rejects them through ideology, legislation and institutions specifically designed to combat them (Pasti, 2003). Although we are talking about inequality between women and men, it is usually who are discriminated (Lorber, 2010). Social scientists have accumulated evidence that show that stereotypes about men and women influences daily interactions and generates inequalities in terms of jobs, salaries, authority and family responsibilities (Ridgeway, 2013). For example, women often receive a lower salary for the same work or work comparable to men and are often stuck in their possibilities to advance (Lorber, 2010).

As they grow up, children spend more time interacting with other children. Interactions between children occur largely during the game. Gender role is a central development process during the middle childhood. Relying on mature cognitive skills, children begin to display elaborate knowledge about these roles; more flexible, differentiated concepts appear later in this period (McHale, Crouter & Tucker, 1999).

The fairy tales tell fantastic events that are attributed to characters or forces in the field of the unreal. They bring joy in the lives of children, fulfil their desire to play, strengthen emotional power, develop imagination and memory, expand and intensify the child's social relationships, and provide a basis for linguistic formation (Kready, 1916). As cultural products, fairy tales propose a pattern of heroic behavior (Norel, 2012) and illustrate gender differences. Boys are adventurous, rescuing, fighters and capable; symbolizes ingenuity and perseverance. Feminine characters are passive, subjected, represented as victims, and dependent on male figures (Cekiso, 2013). Feminine characters are appreciated for their physical appearance, feminine beauty being a dominant theme of fairy tales. Instead, the number of references to masculinity of beauty is much smaller, men being appreciated for courage, physical strength and intelligence. While physical beauty is rewarded, the lack of beauty is punished (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003; Cocoradă, 2014).

Feminist criticism has attacked for a long time the fairy-tales promoted by Anglo-American culture, claiming that they promote gender stereotypes and strengthens women's restrictive images. Feminist texts reveal that the fairy-tales encourage passive, submissive behaviour of women and male dominance (Westland, 1993). Studies show that fairy tales represent a beauty standard that is hard to achieve, and that girls who read fairy tales often compare themselves with very beautiful princesses and fairies. Therefore, they have negative self-perceptions, a low self-esteem and many of them dream of a Prince Charming who is very far from reality.

1.1. Psychosocial development in middle childhood

The cognitive development that occurs in middle-aged children allows children to develop more complex concepts about their own person and make progress in understanding and controlling emotions. Thus, children are increasingly aware of their own feelings and that of others (Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2010). In early and middle childhood, the most significant changes are the increased capacities of children and their motivation to engage in coordinated interaction - both positive/cooperative and negative/aggressive (Hartup, 1992). Children demonstrate knowledge of gender stereotypes, and these stereotypes is relatively resistant to change (Martin, Ruble, & Szkrybalo, 2002; Wilson, Lindsey, & Schooler, 2000). Stereotypes become more flexible with age.

2. Method

This research is mixed, quantitative, by applying a questionnaire, and qualitatively by thematic analysis of students' answers related to the perception of female and male characters in fairy tales. The objective of this research is to analyse students' perceptions on fairy tales. The research questions are:

1. What are the gender differences in the perception of female characters in fairy tales?

2. What are the gender differences in the perception of masculine characters in fairy tales?

The participants of this research are 129 pupils from fourth grade, 70 boys and 59 girls aged between 10 and 12.

It was applied the Children's Fairy-tales Perception Questionnaire (CFTPQ), developed by the authors of the research. The questionnaire has 11 questions, of which 2 are multiple choice *questions*and 9 are open-ended questions. Socio-demographic data such as school, class, gender and age were also collected.

3. Results and discussions

At question `How often do you read fairy tales?` 26 boys and 28 girls answered that they read fairy tales a few times a week, 35 boys and 24 girls answered that they read once a month and nine boys and seven girls answered that they read once a year.

Table 1 Students' answers to the question 'How often do you read fairy-tales?'

'How often do you read fairy-tales?'	The boys answers	The girls answers	Total	Percent
Few times a week	26	28	54	42%
Once a month	35	24	59	46%
Once a year	9	7	16	12%

At question 'What do you think about fairy-tales?' 66 of the boys (86%) and all the girls answered that the fairy tales are fascinating. Only four of the boys answered that the fairy- tales are boring.

At question 'Do you like more to read fairy-tales or to view their screenings?', 40 boys (57%) and 38 girls (64%) answered that they prefer to read, 20 boys (29%) and 12 girls (20%) responded that they preferred to see the screenings, while 8 boys and 8 girls agreed to both reading and screening.

At question `What is your favourite fairy tale?`, we can see the students answers in Table 2.

Table 2 Students' answers to the question `What is your favourite fairy tale?`

Fairy tale	The gender of the main character	Boys' answers	Girls' answers
`The story of Harap-Alb` by Ion Creangă	M	22	7

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`Snow White and the seven dwarves` by the Brothers Grimm	F	9	8
`Cinderella` by the Brothers Grimm	F	3	6
`Red Riding Hood` by the Brothers Grimm	F	1	5
`Prâslea the Brave and the Golden Apple` by Petre Ispirescu	M	5	1
`Aleodor Emperor` by Petre Ispirescu	M	1	2
`The salt in food` by Petre Ispirescu	F	0	4
`Sleeping Beauty` by the Brothers Grimm	F	0	4
`The Adventures of Pinocchio` by Carlo Collodi	M	2	0
`Prince Charming from Tears` by Mihai Eminescu	M	0	1
`Rapunzel` by Brothers Grimm	F	0	1
`The Goat and the Snake` by Petre Ispirescu	M	0	1
`Bremen Town Musicians` by Brothers Grimm	-	0	1
`Youth without old age and life without death` by Petre Ispirescu	M	1	0
`Prince Charming with Golden Hair` by Petre Ispirescu	M	1	0
`The seven - headed dragon` by Petre Ispirescu	M	1	0
Other *	-	24	14
TOTAL	9 M / 6F	70	55

*Note: In the **Other** category we included all the titles that do not fit in the fairy tale literature but which were mentioned by the students (for example, `The beartricked by the fox`, `The ugly duck`, `The three piglets` and so on). Also, two children did not write any title.*

Analysing the answers, we can see that most of the boys had chosen a fairy tale in which the main character is masculine (`The story of Harap-Alb` - 22), while most girls had chosen a fairy tale in which the main character is female (`Snow White and the seven dwarves` - 9). In the whole sample, boys prefer fairy tales in which the hero is a boy/man, while the girls prefer fairy tales in which the heroine is a girl/woman, contrary to other studies that assert that students identify with the central character, no matter if that character is a male one, or a female one (Westland, 1993).

It is important to underline that many students (38 of 129 - 24 boys and 14 girls) have written titles of novels, stories or other literary species. We can conclude that these students did not know the characteristics of fairy tales.

Themes identified for the perception of characters are similar for boys and girls, but the sub-themes are different, depending on gender ofheroes and heroines. We identified three themes: negative perception, positive perception and ambivalent perception of characters from fairy tales, two of these themes having subheadings (table 3).

The tables 4 and 5 show the frequency analysis at questions `What do you think about female characters form fairy tales?` and `What do you think about male characters form fairy tales?`.

Table 3 Themes and subthemes identified for the perception of characters

Theme	Female characters	Male characters
	Subtheme	Subtheme
Negative perception	Passive non-involvement	Violence and hardness
	Other features	Other features
	Appearance	Appearance
	Agility and sensitivity	Courage and power
	Courage and power	Engaging in action
Positive perception	Intelligence	Agreeableness
	Gentleness and patience	Sense of humour
	Sense of humour	Other personality traits
	Other features	Physical appearance and personality traits
	Physical appearance and personality traits	
Ambivalent perception	-	-

Table 4 Frequency analysis - female characters

Theme	Sub-theme	Meaning units - boys	Meaning units - girls
`What do you think about female characters form fairy tales?`			
Negative perception	Passive	7	3
	Other features	6	0
	Total	13	3
	Appearance	3	2
	Agility and sensitivity	16	10
	Courage and power	6	3
	Intelligence	3	0
Positive perception	Gentleness and patience	2	1
	Sense of humour	2	0
	Other features	10	6
	Physical appearance and personality traits	1	19
	Total	43	41
Ambivalent perception	-	8	7

Table 5 Frequency analysis - male characters

Theme	Sub-theme	Meaning units - boys	Meaning units - girls
`What do you think about male characters form fairy tales?`			
Negative perception	Violence and hardness	1	3
	Other features	6	6
	Appearance	5	4
	Total	12	13
Positive			

perception	Courage and power	26	13
	Engaging in action	5	3
	Agreeableness	5	5
	Sense of humour	4	1
	Other personality traits	9	4
	Physical appearance and personality traits	5	6
	Total	*54*	*32*
Ambivalent perception	-	1	11

Regarding the negative perception of female characters, the students - seven boys and three girls - said they are not involved and passive: `Helpless and sillies`, `no one can defend herself, they need a male character`. Also, 6 boys wrote other negative features of feminine characters: `they should not be put in the story because they spoil everything that is for men.`, `Crappy`, `They always want everything expensive and good, especially princesses and they think them self very important.`. Thus, we can say that boys perceive feminine characters more unfavourable than girls.

Concerning the positive perception of female characters, three boys and two girls referred to their physical appearance, answering that they are `beautiful, `arranged, beautiful and neat`. These characters are described as agreeable, good-hearted, but also sensible - `they have a good soul`, `very good to the soul`, `more sensitive and cuter than the masculine`, `slightly more sensitive than the other` - 16 boys and 10 girls perceive female characters it this way. Other features noted by six boys and three girls are courage and strength - `courageous`, `very courageous and cute`, `the most powerful`. Three boys have noticed that feminine characters are intelligent - `smart. `, `Smart`. They are also characterized by two boys and a girl as gentle and patient - `a little calmer and quieter`, `They have a lot of patience`, `gentle`. Two boys have noticed that female characters are `funny`. And in the case of positive perceptions, we can see that the students, 10 boys and six girls, have identified valuable positives as `very creative and interesting, `, `essential`, `very interesting`, `fantastic`, `responsible and creative`.

It is worth noting that a boy and 19 girls described the feminine characters taking into account both physical appearance and other personality traits: `good to the heart, beautiful, smart and working`, `courageous, strong, beautiful, modest`, `elegant, funny or talented`, `beautiful, hilarious and loving`, `cute and funny`, `cute and stylish`. So, according to students' perceptions, female characters are described as good-hearted and physically beautiful, girls emphasizing with these two characteristics. This tendency is called schematization: we notice better the features we have, we think we have.

Some students show stereotype flexibility, highlighting ambivalent or contrasting features. Eight boys and seven girls think that female characters can have both positive and negative characteristics (ambivalent perception): `beautiful and interesting, and some are ugly and evil.`, `good only the positive ones`, `Sometimes fearful, sometimes smart, sometimes courageous.` Summarizing, we can say that most boys perceive feminine characters as passive, uninterested, agreeable, good-hearted, and the girls also perceive them as agreeable, but especially taking into account physical beauty accompanied by features such as kindness, modesty or diligence.

The male characters, in terms of negative perception, are seen by a boy and a girl as violent – `too violent`, `a little harder. ` Six boys and six girls have identified other negative features - `lazy and liars.`, `I find them boring`, `Mean`, `I do not like so much because they are a little more cowards than the female characters`. Analysing the positive perception of

male characters, we observe that the physical appearance is noted by five boys and four girls - `very attractive`, `beautiful`, `very beautiful. That is the reason for what the female characters fall in love.` As for the courage and power of male characters, 26 boys and 13 girls have noticed these characteristics - `courageous`, `strong`, `always strong and fearless`. Unlike female characters, male ones are perceived by five boys and three girls as being (more) involved in the action of fairy tales: `I like male characters because they help female characters`, `They are useful in stories`. Five boys and five girls have noticed that male characters are agreeable: `very good and respectable`, `good and `kind-hearted`, kind-hearted`. Four boys and a girl think these characters are funny: `very funny`, `funny, more fun than girls.` We also find answers from students, nine girls and four boys, who could not be introduced in a specific sub-theme: `great`, `interesting`, `romantic`. Five boys and six girls have highlighted both physical appearance and other personality traits: `cautious, beautiful and always help people in danger`, `beautiful, brave and always ready to save princesses`.

For the ambivalent perception, a boy and 11 girls surprised that male characters can be both positive and negative: `angry or sometimes happy.`, `Good but some of them are cunning.` , `Good or bad, scared or courageous.` So, male characters are seen by most boys and girls as courageous, powerful and fighting. If hero and heroine demonstrate differences, those differences fit gender stereotype and they are amplified by the biased perception of students, girls and boys.

Table 6. Synthesis of the positive and negative assessments

Evaluator group	Group with positive rating		Group with negative rating	
	Heroines	Heroes	Heroines	Heroes
Girls	41	32	**3**	13
Boys	43	**54**	13	12

The negative perception about female characters is strongly negative for boys, compared with negative perception of girls (Table 6). Concerning the perception of male characters, the boys' positive perception is strongly positive compared with the perception of girls. The differences confirm the theory of social identity. In line with this theory (Hogg, Abrams, & Brewer, 2017; Turner, & Tajfel, 1986), the perception of belonging to a group (in our case, boys or girls) can trigger discrimination between groups by favouring the membership group. Attraction to one's own group is simultaneous with the minimization of the other group. For boys, favouring your own group is stronger that out-group denigration, but this trend is not confirmed in the case of girls. For both categories of participants, the positive evaluation of heroes in fairy tales is high frequent than negative, result being explained by the charm and magic of fairy tales and the attractiveness of the events and characters described. Both girls and boys identify with in-group and discrepant comparisons without group produce high self-esteem and prestige. Favouring your own group maintains and protects your own social identity. We highlight that in our research, discrimination of our group, heroines for boys and heroes for girls, occurs not in a real situation, but towards imaginary characters, placed in fairy-tales.

Although the results are interesting, confirming previous research and introducing new data, they should be viewed with caution. Thus, the number of traits attributed to the characters may be influenced by the students' writing speed, *vocabulary size* or by their interest in fairy tales.

4. Conclusions

This research aims to analyse how primary school students perceive male and female characters in fairy tales. The responses show that female characters are perceived as passive and dependent on male figures, confirming gender stereotypes and other studies. Feminine beauty is a dominant theme of fairy tales, and in student responses, especially in girls'responses, we find that female characters are seen as beautiful, elegant and graceful. Male characters, on the other hand, are characterized by students as courageous and powerful.

This research offers the opportunity for teachers and school counsellors to analyse girls and boy's perception of fairy-tale characters. Fairy tales are important sources for the socialization of children's gender attitudes and can increase the stereotypes. In this context, teachers and parents need training to recognize the gender biases and their impact on children behaviours. Based on these results, they can help students to have a critical perspective on fairy tales, analyse character behaviours, expose students to counter-stereotypic models and create alternatives for gender equality.

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