

Kinky and the lost tooth: a book review in relation to child play

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A Book Review in Relation to Child Play, Learning and Development

Ask any child why they love to read, reread and sometimes even reenact their favorite book or story, and chances are you won't get a response related to educational value. As expected, children will not see behind the magical characters and imaginary places they encounter with each story they choose to immerse themselves in. According to Whitebread and Jameson (2005, p. 64), children are usually engrossed in what they are doing when they are at play. Of course, we adults know much better than that.

We know that there is much more to fairy tales and children's books than just their escapism or entertainment value. Research upon research has proven time and time again that children's literature plays an important role in a child's learning and holistic development. This is why authors of children's books put much thought (and some, much research) into producing reading material that is educational without compromising its entertainment and marketing value. But what happens when the story is written or made up by a child? Does it accomplish more or less than what the average adult-written literature does?

The main difference lies in how adults and children perceive stories, especially children's literature. Children see stories as an extension of their play activities; almost everything is, for them. What exactly goes on when a child engages himself into a story? A very appropriate way to get a "behind-the-scenes" look at what happens when a child engages into literature is by studying a student-made story and its learning effectiveness. Just the fact that this came from a child all the more changes the dynamics in this

research. The story chosen for this paper is Kinky and the Lost Tooth, written by V. Mansaray (2008):

Once upon a time there was a beautiful girl called Kinky who lived in a town called Matotoka.

One day she was playing with her friends Pukah, Krit and Kemzo, they decided to play a game called Koo-Koo! (hide and seek).

As Kinky is running to hide under the Bao Bao tree, she fell down and lost her tooth.

Kinky doesn't realize that a new tooth would grow, she felt very, very sad because she had a party to go to and she cried all day and all night!! Suddenly she heard a loud voice calling her name.

" Kinky, Kinky, K-i-n-k-y...

I am the tooth fairy. I am here to help you. Listen carefully.

Stretch your hands, close your eyes."

Kinky did exactly what the tooth fairy asked her to do.

" Now, can you open your eyes?" said the tooth fairy.

When Kinky opened her eyes and looked in her hand she saw that she was holding a pink box. Guess what was inside the little box? When Kinky opened the tiny pink box she found her lost tooth. What do you think she will do with the tooth, now that she has found it?

This story is a modern-day fairy tale, obviously because of the reference to the tooth fairy. The voice in the story is very simplistic and direct-to-the-

point, making it clear and obvious that the words come from a child's mouth (although this is a common approach and style that writers of children's literature usually employ; more like stooping down to a child's eye level to connect with them while communicating).

The lines do not rhyme that much, but the proper names used are catchy & interestingly unique, for a kid (not much unlike Dr. Seuss' famous characters). In addition, there is an evident pattern in how the proper names are coined; monosyllables repeated twice (Koo-Koo, Bao Bao, and even Kinky). This indicates that the author is of a young age. It is also noticeable that the most repeated word in the entire story is the protagonist's name, Kinky.

If one were to take this literary creation as an extension of the author's playtime, then it would also be safe to assume that the protagonist could be the author's actual self-projection. Tina Bruce (2001) has mentioned that in their play, children more often than not use the first hand experiences that they have in life.

There weren't that many descriptive words used to describe the plot settings, the protagonist, the fairy, even Kinky herself. This might imply that the child drew illustrations as he/she wrote this story, or even used his/her illustrations as his/her storyboard itself. Children are much more interested in visual and colorful images rather than in verbal imagery. A very visual book will be needed to pique the students' interest, and there could be nothing more visual than a child's active imagination.

Considering the voice used, the language level employed, and the way the story flows in logical succession, this story would be best appropriate for children transitioning from the Concrete to the Formal Operational Stages. The question the author leaves for his readers at the end implies that the author is already capable of problem solving and inferencing, which are characteristics of a child around those stages (Piaget, 1954).

Reading along the lines of Erik Erikson's theory on psychosocial development, one can assume that the author/protagonist is at the School Age stage, since the protagonist shows that there is a basic conflict between Industry vs. Inferiority (Erikson, 1959). In this story, Kinky's main problem was she had to go to a party but she couldn't because she just lost a tooth.

There was the social demand of going to a party (where it is assumed that everybody else is going), but then again missing a tooth (especially if it was a front tooth) would mean she would be somewhat inferior to the other kids. The eventual resolution of her problem, however, is still interestingly abstract; it took the tooth fairy's magic to give Kinky a happy ending.

The tooth fairy is one of the most popular characters children encounter in their young lives; and surprisingly, it can be a social tool in more ways than one. This story says a lot about how a child seems to cope with the stress and social repercussions losing a tooth brings in a child's life. Kinky's dilemma could or could not be reflective of the author's real life struggles; but whatever the case may be, it is still a real issue many children face at this stage. Kinky's story can be used to teach children of an appropriate age how

to cope with their self-identities and with seemingly stressful situations that need their own decision and action.

We can further examine Kinky's story by comparing and contrasting it with a published book (presumably written by an adult). Taking for example Selby Breeler's 1998 book *Throw Your Tooth on the Roof: Tooth Traditions All Over the World*, this book takes the focus away from the child and focus more on other children around the world. By depicting how other children around the world cope with losing a tooth, Breeler introduces the child to world geography and being conscious of other nationalities and customs at the same time.

Breeler does not take away the magic by refuting the validity of the tooth fairy, but instead affirms the child by showing that some children in other countries also believe in the tooth fairy, or an equivalent entity. The author also assures the child that he/she is not alone in losing his/her tooth, that it's normal. Breeler ends the story with reassurance, leaving the child reader with hope for renewed confidence: "Teeth fall out every day, all over the world. What do you do with yours?"

Moyles (2005, p. 9) discusses that "play in educational settings should have learning consequences." In this light, every piece of children's literature should have some educational merit. Mansaray's and Breeler's stories could be used within the class curriculum to stress several learning points, especially those related to reinforcing the child's self-confidence and social awareness. In that way, these resources can actually be used to support

children's learning and development. The authors may actually consider extending their work into other literature by expanding these stories into series that tackle different issues and conflicts children face from day to day.

A good way to implement these resources in the classroom setting is to allow each student read, analyze and interpret these stories in their own ways.

Bettelheim (1989) theorizes that when children get to read about the problems, victories and failures experienced by the heroes and heroines of fairy tales (and in this case, children's books), they are given the chance to get a greater sense of meaning and purpose, and in effect prepare them for their own conflicts in their own lives.

Bandura (1977) reinforces this by his theory on social learning: " Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action."

This just emphasizes the need to lead children of operational age to learn how to analyze situations, identify the conflict/s, and then come to their own conclusions and solutions. Children find it easier to do so when they have a model (in this case, a symbolic one, found in the literary protagonists) they can relate to and follow.

Another way one might employ these sample resources is to let the students have a chance to be able to relate or connect their own personal experiences with those of the protagonists'. Bowlby's Attachment Theory (1969) comes into play here, revealing that if the educator or parent lets the child use a

literary protagonist as their own attachment figure, then one can promptly use that attachment to direct or lead the student to the learning point at hand.

Children, especially those in the operational stage, need someone with whom they can identify. Johnson's treatise on the interrelation of child development with learning and literature backs this up in quoting that "knowledge cannot be given directly from the teacher to the learner, but must be constructed by the learner and reconstructed as new information becomes available" (Ryan & Cooper, quoted in Johnson, 2003). Johnson later on concludes that "learning is not the result of development; rather, learning is development."

By looking through Bandura's "sociocognitive glasses", so to speak, this interaction between the child and the literary protagonist plays an important role in the child's intellectual development. This means that what a child learns socially is related to what he/she learns cognitively, and vice versa. What a child learns by interacting with other people adds to his/her own schema and thus increases his/her understanding in some cognitive processes. (Bandura, 1977)

Mansaray's story about Kinky and the lost tooth in itself has little educational merit; but if one would look at it by using sociocognitive theories, then the educator/parent can certainly use such output from the child as clues and tools for further sociocognitive learning. Using a story that uses the child's own language and vocabulary, and that is based on the child's own personal

conflicts and issues, proves to be a very important tool in child development. Not only does the child get to learn about certain subject matter, but the educator/parent can also use it to teach very important life lessons as well.

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