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Children's Independent Thinking. Fairy Tales at School: A Resource for Teachers, According to Freudian Discoveries

Niezależne myślenie dzieci. Bajki w szkole jako źródło dla nauczycieli według odkryć freudowskich

SUMMARY

The paper presents an example of school exercise based on creative use of fairy tales in order to stimulate children's independent thinking. The aim is to use fairy tales in the teaching process as a way to develop independent thinking and creativity, both for teachers and pupils. Fairy tales, among others, the Brothers Grimm stories as well as Aesop's and La Fontaine's fables, were analyzed as the possible allies of one's creativity. In the research, the children were asked to change the ending of a very famous fairy tale as a way to practice their independent thinking. The development and use of independent thinking constitute the special responsibility of teachers/adults in their relations with children.

Keywords: children's creative skills; independent thinking; fairy tales in teaching; Freud for teachers

I want to oppose the idea that the school has to teach directly that special knowledge and those accomplishments which one has to use later directly in life. The demands of life are much too manifold to let such a specialized training in school appear possible (...). The development of general ability for independent thinking and judgement should always be placed foremost.

Albert Einstein

THE FREUDIAN DISCOVERY OF INDEPENDENT THINKING IN CHILDREN

The mainstream of pedagogy explains very often the time of infant and primary schools based on the conventional idea of cognitive development and of intelligence as an evolutionary skill. Quite recently, some other approaches have gained the favor of teachers and scholars, e.g. the *multiple intelligence* of Howard Gardner (1983) and *non-cognitive skills* of James J. Heckman and Yona Rubinstein (2001). Among pedagogical studies, we find Sigmund Freud quoted for his descriptions related to the phases of sexual development (oral, anal, phallic, genital), the importance of mother-child relationships and the role of attachment at the beginning of life, the role of fantasy in the early stages of childhood and the importance of imagination during nursery and infant school years.

In this paper, Freud will be considered in terms of his contribution to the educational field. In addition, there will be explained the issues connected with mind and its structures in order to modulate the work at school in a more effective way. The possibility to develop an open mind, the same main way for effective learning, according to Freud's discoveries (Freud 1915), can be based on the observation that the mind itself consists of a few independent works: the subconscious is independent from the conscious; dreams are independent from being awake; lapses and missing acts are independent from official and conscious speaking and acting; desires are independent from social limitations; children's thinking is independent from adult's convictions.

We find a very good presentation of Freudian discovery of independent thinking in childhood in his famous casework of Little Hans. Freud (1909) explores the debate between the parents, especially of the father and the child, in order to identify the main constituents of mind since childhood. A debate at home, between children and parents, is very similar to the one we find at school between teachers and pupils, especially in case of infant and primary schools. Here we point out three dynamic constituents of Freudian discoveries about the structure of thinking since childhood based on observations of Little Hans:

- a path towards *abstract knowledge*: when the child was four years old, he was absorbed in the exploration of the structure of both life and the world. The body itself as well as the intellectual curiosity were conceived as tools to create the first order of universe,
- *legitimate defense*: when the parents, in these early stages of life, make their educational suggestions, for instance, on masturbation, the child does not feel obliged to obey. By contrast, he willingly defends his own convictions because of the certainty of love. The child thinks he can exert a legitimate defense because it is not dangerous for love but useful to explore different solutions,
- the power of thinking in childhood is evident also in terms of the intellectual struggle between children and parents: Little Hans is able to think about

everything, for instance, about life and death *without supposed moral limitations*. If he thinks about the death of his sister he does not need to kill her necessarily. Little Hans understands that his father is in trouble when he confesses he had thought about his sister's death. Indeed, the father is unable to realize that the thought of the sister dying is a not way to kill her. Here we claim that children are able to explore troublesome thoughts, which, at the same time, is cause for concern for adults.

According to Anna Freud's (1965) works, children's minds at primary school are engaged in two main developmental lines of psychic life: they move from play to work and from the family system of socialization to the community standards. On the one hand, she observes that a creative mind is able to overcome the dictates of education; on the other hand, she points out the importance of teachers' mediation in children's experience, between internal exploration of new independent solutions and the progressive practical integration based on real external conditions.

FAIRY TALES AS POSSIBLE ALLIES OF INDEPENDENT THINKING FOR ADULTS AND CHILDREN

Freud suggests a different way of treating the pupil's mind. A child between five and eight years old has already thought about everything: life, death, birth, relationships, work and family. Very often he/she observed and concluded about the facts of life following independent paths compared to the adults whom he/she loves. The same curiosity and smart mind we find among the characters of well-known fairy tales. That is the reason why fairy tales become a favorite way towards discovering children's independent thinking, here untouched by psychoanalysis.

We need to start from a fundamental observation: tales are not directly devoted to children. Usually tales are used as materials to share daily life between adults and their children. From this point of view, fairy tales are in favor of creativity. When all does not go so well, tales can become material to control the ideas of children by introducing some moralistic theories which come from the cultural mainstream. Looking at the issue from this angle, fairy tales are in favor of the conformist development of mind.

The fact that tales are not devoted for children but for everybody is not an idea of mine. I would like to quote Jacob Grimm's reply after publishing the first collection of folk tales in 1812¹. The Brothers Grimm were accused of writing stories that were

¹ The biography of the Brothers Grimm provokes reflection as well. They had a poor and terrible childhood. Their father died of pneumonia and they were raised by their grandfather, who continuously exhorted them to be industrious. But thanks to their independent thinking they became academics, linguists, cultural researchers and publishers. When they had extreme financial difficulties, they started a project of writing the German Dictionary. Following their grandfather that was their mentor, they found their way of living.

too cruel and contained reference to sexuality, and some people did not like the fact that they entitled their tales collection *Nursery and Household Tales* (*nursery* = for children and *household* = domestic). These are Jacob Grimm's words:

(...) we should literally send children away from the household and lock them into a room. Were nursery tales invented for children? *I do not think so* and do not agree with the general idea that we should create something specific for them. We all share and approve traditional rules. What children do not understand now, will be respected in the future when they will be able to learn and assimilate it. This is what happens with true, authentic teaching. It helps to enlighten, illuminate what was already present and known (Brothers Grimm 1812, p. 16).

The use of tales as a tool of teaching on the road of learning independent thinking is an idea which is in line not only with the original idea of Brothers Grimm but also with the opinion of a very famous psychoanalyst, Bruno Bettelheim who wrote *The Uses of Enchantment. The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1976). Here, I will present an example of the use of fairy tales in a class of primary school children in order to explore the children's competence in interpreting the meanings of relationships as a proof of their use of independent thinking. The research uses the well-known fable *The Ant and the Grasshopper*. The story is a well-known fable by Aesop, adapted some centuries later by Jean de La Fontaine (1999).

Here is Aesop's version:

The Ants were spending a fine winter's day drying grain collected in the summertime. A Grasshopper, perishing with famine, passed by and earnestly begged for a little food. The Ants inquired of her, "Why did you not treasure up food during the summer?" She replied, "I had not leisure enough. I passed the days in singing". Then they said in derision: "If you sang all the summer, now you must dance". The moral is: It is best to prepare for the days of necessity.

The story has been used to teach the virtues of hard work and the perils of improvidence. The cicada should embody those who waste their time and do not put anything aside, the ant should be rather virtuous, while the other sings, she stores up food for winter. In Aesop's fables the animal's figure is an allegory, through which daily reality was told; the animals were a kind of mask, they were depicted as humanized, and with a fixed psychology expressed criticism on the political environment in which Aesop himself lived.

La Fontaine's version is longer than the previous, and it rhymes². Below is the text entitled *The Cricket and the Ant* by La Fontaine, translated into English by Don Webb:

² La Fontaine was born in 1621. He was a very famous French poet and a man of letters; his *Fables* of animals and everyday life are masterworks of French literature. The first collection of *Fables Choisies* had appeared in 1668. The *Fables* were dedicated to the six-year-old son of Louis XIV,

The cricket had sung her song / all summer long / but found her victuals too few / when the north wind blew. / Nowhere could she espy / a single morsel of worm or fly.

Her neighbor, the ant, might, / she thought, help her in her plight, / and she begged her for a little grain / till summer would come back again. / "By next August I'll repay both / Interest and principal; animal's oath".

Now, the ant may have a fault or two / But lending is not something she will do. / She asked what the cricket did in summer. / "By night and day, to any comer / I sang whenever I had the chance". / "You sang, did you? That's nice. Now dance".

We can note some differences between the two versions.

Aesop described the ants, in the plural, as a group and not one ant in particular, so the relationship is between a grasshopper and an ant's colony. It was considered an example of reaction by the group following an idea: 'It is necessary to prepare the future conditions', but it is associated to another idea: 'The grasshopper didn't work, now she asks for help. She behaved in a wrong way, so we can't help her'. It is a hard punishment and a response to a singular individual that decides to behave in a different way or to make a mistake.

Aesop places (adapts) the story in winter, while La Fontaine describes the nature changes from summer to winter. La Fontaine presents a dialogue between the grasshopper and the ant. The ant was portrayed as a prudent, clever, and wise animal which, thinking about the future, prepared a good nest, while the grasshopper was thought of as a lazy, superficial and imprudent animal. At the end the grasshopper dies but it seems the natural consequence of her own actions. For many interpretations the ant's refusal is the only right act. Indeed, we can underline that the grasshopper is not really cautious but then she tries to ask for help, a credit, saying that she would give it back next summer. In fact, the ant was always considered the right animal, it is very rigid and uncompromising, she refuses because she does not want to lend anything. La Fontaine writes: "(...) the ant may have a fault or two / But lending is not something she will do". So in La Fontaine's thinking the ant is not perfect.

The question was whether children confirm the content of original and directions of authors or change the meanings in their own independent way. This was the aim of the exploratory application of the same fairy tale at school. Our story is proposed frequently at schools in many countries because it is considered as having an educational value in favor of a logic of accumulation. So the ant should be perceived as a more positive character because she is more prudent and finds the stockpile for the cold winter, but this is an adult's consideration and when telling the story to the chil-

and were chosen in every sense: utterly correct, balanced, choice in rhyme, natural and easy, droll, witty, wise. They were an immediate success. When he first wrote his *Fables*, La Fontaine had a sophisticated audience in mind. Nevertheless, the collection was regarded as providing an excellent education in morals for children. Eventually, the fables were learned by heart, and afterwards they were adopted by the education system, also as linguistic models.

dren, and eventually asking them “Which is the best behavior? The grasshopper’s or the ant’s?”, they easily say the grasshopper is better: children prefer the cicada because she lives a short but intense life, while the ant lives a longer but boring one. When the adults teach children who will grow up based on the logic of accumulation they say that the ant is better, but for children the grasshopper is better because she sings and has fun. Within the story, we find not only the praise for the virtue of hard work and planning for the future but a strong conflicting logic between good or evil, pleasure or necessity, life and death. The end of the story, with the ant that shuts out the grasshopper for wasting her time singing all summer, is already a judgment that separates the two characters. The trick is in the forced choice: you should choose a part (ant/grasshopper) and eliminate the other (Flabbi, Pediconi 2013).

CHANGING FAIRY TALES AS A WAY TO DEVELOP INDEPENDENT THINKING: A RESOURCE FOR TEACHERS

The part of the exercise conducted at school consisted in using the fairy tale entitled *The Ant and the Grasshopper* as a story without an established end. The grasshopper seems lazy, while the ant stockpiles food for winter. The story was read until the grasshopper had already knocked on the ant’s door saying she was cold and hungry. The task given was to choose an appropriate conclusion.

The pupils were not influenced by the original story. Removing the story ending gave the children the possibility to choose a *personal conclusion* for the story, a free space to exercise their independent thinking. Later, they were asked to provide their favorite character and to give the reasons for such a decision.

As we know, in La Fontaine’s version, the ant, envious of the grasshopper’s enjoyment, chooses to hunt down her friend. When the cold weather comes, the grasshopper begs the ant for some food. The ant refuses and the grasshopper starves. The children’s conclusions are very different.

Here we show some significant conclusions reached by children, structured around four issues, that are very representative of the independent minds of pupils compared with the conclusion of the author of the original story. The constituents of children’s independent thinking we found, based on four groups of answers, can be named in the following way:

- competence in friendship,
- looking for a compromise,
- it is a long way towards peace,
- the crisis of thinking.

1. Competence in friendship

In the original ending the ant, envious of the grasshopper's enjoyment, chooses to drive away her friend. Here the children give a completely different final.

The ant: 'All right, come in, we're going to eat.' "Gnam Gnam".

The ant said: 'In the spring we want to make a more spacious nest.'

The grasshopper answered: 'Next spring I'll help you myself.'

I prefer the ant because she has been generous to allow the grasshopper enter into the ant's home.

Later the grasshopper came into the ant's house.

After a while the sun came out and the grasshopper said: 'Let's go out and play!'. The ant: 'All right, come out to play.'

They played with a ball and then they met a dog.

The grasshopper asked him: Will you come with us?

The dog said: 'Yes'. They went into the ant's house and lived happily ever after.

I prefer the grasshopper because she noticed the dog.

Here the children have no objection to letting the grasshopper into the house. Their answers are based on the present situation and do not take into consideration the past as an objection. There are not any recriminations or hostility. What happened during the summer is not a problem: the children do not look for revenge, they only look for a good solution for both animals. The two characters live peacefully together, working to obtain a mutual benefit. The children introduced a new moral into the story, very different from the original one: here friendship is presented as a source of benefit.

2. Looking for a compromise

Similarly, in this second group of answers, we will find some finals very different from the original one that consisted in an exclusion of one character from the other.

The ant invited her [cicada] to stay for a month, but one day she was annoyed and sent her away.

The cicada took a false penny and painted it gold with a brush, then she showed it to the ant saying: 'If you want it, you have to take me in as a guest.'

After a year they went to the beach and played and were happy.

I prefer the cicada because she is more astute and clever in my story.

In the countryside she saw a fruit tree. While she was going to pick the fruit there was a thunderstorm. It was windy and the fruits broke off the branches and flew away. She stopped, saw a shelter and went in. Inside the hut she found the fruits. When the storm stopped, the cicada went to the ant's home and said: 'Hello ant, do you know that I found a house full of fruit? Do you want to come and live with me?'

The ant replied 'yes,' saying 'I want to go with you.'
They went to the cicada's house, ate food and lived happily ever after.
I prefer both because they become friends.

In these two endings there is a clear element: the children think about a possibility of a new start for a good relationship. They know that relationships could have difficult moments, could suffer because of punishments (in a story the cicada was asked to go out), could gain moments of charge (if you want the money you take me as a guest) or recovery (Do you want to come and live with me?). They do not need to be idealistic, they work to have satisfaction anyway. Here children's thinking is a logical work to obtain justice involving all partners.

3. It is a long way towards peace

Here we look at a kind of answer in which the struggle between the characters is relevant and revenge seems to win. But the end is again in favor of friendship. Realistically, our children have the idea that the way towards peace can become long and difficult sometimes (Pediconi, Rossi 1994).

But later there was a heat wave.
The ant moved into another house and then the cicada knocked, knocked, and eventually someone opened the door, but there was nobody. The cicada said: 'It was the wind!'
Then she saw a big ant drinking chamomile. After a while the big ant said:
– Come in, come in, what do you want from me?
– But where is the ant? – the grasshopper asked.
– We moved house and I came back here because it's hot!
– But what do you want from me? – the big ant asked.
– I have no food, nothing to eat, and here there is a lot of food!
– You can come and live with me!
– Really? – the grasshopper said.
– Yes, really.
– Eeeeh!
I prefer the ant because she is so kind.

The way to return to the relationship is longer for both animals. However, a happy ending is expected.

4. The crisis of thinking

Only one pupil out of nineteen has given no chance to the cicada.

The ant did not answer because she was angry with the cicada: she struggled all summer, while the cicada sang! The ant said: 'No, no, no, you've sung all summer, however, I struggled to prepare for the winter. If you're hungry and cold, go to someone else, I'm too mad at you!'
I prefer the ant because she is right in the text.

At the end *the cicada dies* because she enjoyed life rather than being serious and prudent. It may be incredible but this ending was written by a child who was diagnosed with *autism*. He has written the answers using a typewriter. The pupil declared he already knew the story and expressed his preference for the cicada that enjoys her life. But at the end, she has to die. Is this a punishment for having enjoyed herself? For sure his story shows the ant punishes the cicada by abandoning her.

CONCLUSIONS

The paper presents an example of school exercise based on creative use of fairy tales in order to stimulate children's independent thinking. It represents an application of Freudian discoveries into the international pedagogical research field.

Analyzing their newly-created conclusions, based on the Freudian discovery of structure of mind, we found four aspects of children's creativity: they reveal a competence in building friendships; in case of conflicts they are looking for a compromise, even when it is a long way towards reaching peace. We find in our children the some features that Freud identified in Little Hans: children's conclusions are based on distinct *abstract knowledge*, indeed they connect intellectual curiosity and openness to relations; they are able to link *legitimate defense* with the desire to make peace; their solutions are very often *without supposed moral limitations* (Contri 1997)

Comparing the conclusions of pupils with the original end of the story it seems very instructive that the only child in the class who goes along with La Fontaine's proposal is the autistic child. If *autism* is a condition in which a person finds it very difficult to communicate or form relationships with others, we can use this correspondence to reveal a sort of hidden feature of the original tale conclusion in terms of a punitive and disruptive ending.

Our children show that if the ant appears unpleasant and hostile, as La Fontaine described her, it is not favorable. But the kids describe a new, generous ant, who responds to the request for help. Even though the grasshopper sings all summer, this does not distract the children from the creative construction of partnership between the ant and grasshopper.

La Fontaine's version is only one of many conceivable endings. The children's creative endings are not merely an exercise of imagination, but by writing new conclusions the children provide their own solutions. They find independent paths in facing difficult relationships. Their teachers can consider them as creative thinkers in terms of providing independent solutions.

Fairy tales can become a very precious tool for teachers. Indeed, the development and use of independent thinking constitute the special responsibility of teachers/adults in their relations with children. For them and for all adults independent thinking becomes very good news: it is a sort of principle of progress and a source of hope for the future.

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STRESZCZENIE

W artykule przedstawiono przykłady ćwiczeń szkolnych opartych na twórczym wykorzystaniu bajek w celu stymulowania samodzielnego myślenia dzieci. Celem jest wykorzystanie bajek w procesie nauczania jako sposobu na rozwijanie niezależnego myślenia i kreatywności, zarówno dla nauczycieli, jak i uczniów. Bajki, m.in. opowiadania braci Grimm, a także bajki Ezopa i La Fontaine'a, zostały przeanalizowane jako ewentualne pomoce w rozwijaniu kreatywności. W badaniach dzieci zostały poproszone o zmianę zakończenia bardzo znanej bajki – jest to sposób na ćwiczenie niezależnego myślenia. Rozwój i wykorzystanie niezależnego myślenia stanowią szczególną odpowiedzialność nauczycieli/dorosłych w ich relacjach z dziećmi.

Słowa kluczowe: umiejętności twórcze dzieci; samodzielne myślenie; bajki w nauczaniu; Freud dla nauczycieli