

Happy Ever Afters: a Storybook Guide to Teaching Children About Disability

Kathy Saunders

Reviewed by Roland Tormey

Stories are an integral part of the day-to-day life of children and adults. Children read stories and have them read to them, while adults make sense of their lives and their day through telling stories and jokes. To a substantial extent, such stories provide a narrative frame of reference within which we make sense of ourselves. Nikolas Rose, for example, has suggested that:

“...human beings actually live out their lives as ‘narratives’, that we make use of the stories of the self that our culture makes available to us to plan out our lives, to account for events and give them significance, to accord ourselves an identity.” (1999: xvii)

There has been substantial research into the effects of stories on young people in Western cultures. This research has been multifaceted. Much of it, like that of Zipes (1983a; 1983b; 1997) and Allen (1999) has probed the traditional stories of the Grimm Brothers and Andersen and has identified the ways in which these stories are anti-democratic (through their glorifying of the rights of kings and princesses and their use of a ‘might makes right’ ethic) or sexist (through their portrayal of weak women who need to be saved by dashing sword-carrying men). Such research has led to a range of attempts to ‘sanitise’ stories or make them more appropriate for the contemporary world through providing mechanisms for vetting stories (e.g. INTO, 1993). This work is clearly of interest to development educators who can be guided by it in relation to their dealing with gender, human rights and, by extension, other development issues.

Sometimes, such attempts at ‘sanitising’ children’s stories can miss a crucial point: children are not simply receivers of messages, they are actively involved in the production of their own understanding of the world – their own narrative – and, rather than removing ‘offending’ material from their sight, it is often more productive to engage them in debate and discussion in order to maximise what they can learn from such material. Not only is this a more educational approach, it also allows the learner to come to their own decisions rather than having perspectives foisted upon them, albeit for the

best possible reasons. It is worth remembering the warning of Freire: “Manipulation and authoritarianism are practiced by many educators who, as they style themselves progressives, are actually taken for such.” (1999: 79)

Of course, it can be difficult to promote discussion and dialogue, particularly where the issue in question is one that is emotionally charged and few issues are more emotionally charged than the focus of Kathy Saunders’ book: disability. It is all the more valuable therefore that the approach which she takes is one of promoting and supporting discussion and debate around the images and messages of disability which are presented in both classical and modern children’s stories and does so while taking seriously the emotional dimensions of such discussions.

Saunders identifies the inherent ambiguity around disability. On one hand, disability is a bad thing and can be used by adults to be a bogeyman with which to scare children (‘Why did you do that? Do you want to end up in a wheelchair?’). On the other hand, disability is about the person who has a personality as well as a disability and is not defined by their wheelchair or seeing-eye dog. Writing as a disabled mother, Saunders brings personal experience to her writing that adds to its immediacy, its clarity and its emotional impact on the reader. She explores many of the issues that appear in children’s writing arising out of this ambiguity, before ultimately providing a framework for thinking about and discussing with young people the images and messages about disability that their stories contain.

From a development education perspective, in which the local and global are linked, Saunders’ book provides a worthwhile mechanism for asking ourselves to what extent we are effectively dealing with rights issues, such as disability rights, at home as well as overseas. It also provides a motivation and a mechanism to question if educational work on, for example, war or landmines produces representations of disability which may impact upon young people’s understanding of people with a disability in their own locality. Finally, it provides a model for taking seriously the need to engage in debate and discussion in development or human rights education rather than to impose our understandings on the world upon young people.

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