Forever young: Childhoods, fairy tales and philosophy

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Abstract
Fairy tales play a substantial role in the shaping of childhoods. Developed into stories and played out in picture books, films and tales, they are powerful instruments that influence conceptions and treatments of the child and childhoods. This article argues that traditional fairy tales and contemporary stories derived from them use complex means to mould the ways that children live and experience their childhoods. This argument is illustrated through representations of childhoods and children in a selection of stories and an analysis of the ways they act on and produce the child subjects and childhoods they convey. The selected stories are examined through different philosophical lenses, utilizing Foucault, Lyotard and Rousseau. By problematizing these selected stories, the article analyses what lies beneath the surface of the obvious meanings of the text and enticing pictures in stories, as published or performed. Finally, this article argues for a careful recognition of the complexities of stories used in early childhood settings and their powerful and multifaceted influences on children and childhoods.

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Introduction

For somewhere in my youth or childhood, I must have done something good. (The Sound of Music)

Childhood is a contested notion. Concerns about what constitutes childhoods have been well researched from biological, sociocultural, political and moral perspectives. This article conceives childhoods as socioculturally produced, without clear boundaries, and as constantly re-negotiated and shaped by multitudes of fairy tales and stories produced and developed for children, but rarely by children. It first considers historical perspectives and origins of stories, derived from fairy tales, and then analyses them through the philosophies of Foucault, Lyotard and Rousseau. The article argues that fairy tales as representations of childhoods maintain a special place throughout the educational discourse, transformed into the current forms of stories, film and picture books. As formative pedagogical tools, they not only shape children and their childhoods but also represent childhoods in particular ways to teachers, parents, the wider community and society.

Three types of stories are analysed in this article: two stories selected from the New Zealand government's story book series *My Feelings*; the blockbuster American movie *Toy Story 3*; and *The Secret and Mysterious Process of Education*, an underground story that some kindergarten children were exposed to in totalitarian Czechoslovakia during the 1970s and 1980s. Methodologically, these stories were selected by considering the diverse nature of the stories and the different countries, cultures and childhoods they represent. This selection encompasses two government-funded, supported and distributed picture books (from the *My Feelings* series), a commercially successful story (*Toy Story 3*), and a secret, underground story, that undermines the official discourse (*The Secret and Mysterious Process of Education*). The diversity of the stories enables an examination of various (adult) views on childhood and how these views can implicate complex treatments of the child and childhoods. The examination of relationships between texts and images in the stories and the messages they present about children and childhoods attempts to uncover what lies beneath the obvious meanings of the text and enticing illustrations of the stories. The analysis thus exposes some of the complexities and multifaceted implicit messages of these stories and the importance of carefully considering multiple perspectives and layers of stories shared with children.

The power of fairy tales

Fairy tales are powerful stories, and as tools and productive technologies of control, they can shape the discourses of childhoods (Zipes, 1997). In their confrontation of ethical, philosophical and educational dilemmas, fairy tales can be seen variously as a sanctuary of freedom, thoughts and fantastic imagination (Zepke et al., 2003). They can be secluded islands of freedom, of 'childish' speech in a sea of adult conformity, allowing adults an acceptably 'childish' reprieve. Modern fairy tales arise from an oral tradition of sharing stories and tales that were not originally intended for children (Zipes, 1979). What are considered nowadays as fairy tales were previously known as folk tales (Degh, 1981), wonder tales (Warner, 1994) and oral tales (Dorson, 1966), and a rich and diverse tradition of fairy tales existed in diverse forms, centuries ago, before the 'science of folklore' (Dorson, 1966: v) emerged. Fairy tales are the polished, adjusted, treated, converted, translated and decoded forms of such traditional tales, refashioned for children (Degh, 1981). There is much literature focused on the rationale behind the evolution of fairy tales (Zipes, 1988), their interpretations (Levorato, 2003; Mallet, 1984; Tatar, 1992), the transformation of their form (DeCordova, 1994; Giroux, 1999) and their influence and power (Ali, 2009; Zornado, 2001). Within European and many indigenous traditions, adults, usually elders, told fairy tales that were passed within the families.

Storytelling as a method of sharing fairy tales is an art where the presentation and performance of the story are as important as the content (Ali, 2009). Traditional fairy tales often juxtaposed a sweet, melodic element with messages that were sharp, blunt and dangerous (Zipes, 1994). They told stories about local people, rivers and mountains, thieves and heroes; some were murder ballads and unhappy love stories and some were full of violence, while others were full of compassion (Tatar, 1992). Gentle brutality, the eternal fight between good and evil, the right to marry, issues of gender, wealth, scarcity and magic were intertwined in these tales; hence, power distributions in fairy tales, between boys and girls, men and women, represented a sometimes unbalanced, localised and stereotypical view of the world (Warner, 1994). Most importantly, fairy tales, and their modern derivative stories, are recognized as important in socializing childhoods (Levorato, 2003), through the performance of the stories in relation to the local social context (Canton, 1994).

Transformation of stories

In the Western tradition, the Brothers Grimm are perhaps the best known and most important collectors of such stories. They were not the first to transform original folk tales into fairy tales, but they used a different approach to collecting, adjusting, editing and transforming folk tales into this form. The Brothers Grimm have re-written and re-issued their collected fairy tales a number of times (Zipes, 1988) and would nowadays perhaps be considered to be very skilled editors;[1] they did what is now a common practice: selected and adjusted fairy tales to what is seen as 'appropriate' to the times (Zipes, 1997). Not only the language but also ideas were polished, and 'inappropriate' material was removed from the original folk tales (Degh, 1981) to suit the educational purpose[2] of fairy tales (Tatar, 1992) and, as they are now more popularly called, children's stories. Adjusted and polished fairy tales become re-formed as pedagogical instruments of both production and manipulation of childhoods (Zornado, 2001).

In contemporary times, the transformation of fairy tales into stories of various genres (Canton, 1994) continues, as bundled products in a globalized, centralized world (Giroux, 1999), transformed, edited and tweaked for particular audiences. Some aspects of traditional fairy tales' power and charm have remained, while others have been re-developed and re-shaped into a major literary discourse for children.[3] Much literature explores various perspectives, including in psychological (Birkhäuser-Oeri, 1988; Mallet, 1984; Tatar, 1992; Von Franz, 1996), literary and cultural fields (Canton, 1994; Giroux, 1999; Levorato, 2003; Tesar, 2015; Zornado, 2001); however, few have examined them within the field of education.

Stories told in contemporary education settings, then, are fairy tales that have been adjusted for the youngest audience, usually in the form of picture books (Melrose, 2012). They are powerful, readily available instruments that shape childhoods and the act of narrating the stories is a common everyday activity. Early childhood curricula are powerful conveyers of such cultural tools and emphasize sharing children's languages as connections with their cultures and homes through stories. This article argues that stories shared with children, whether as picture books or in an animated film, present images of desirable children and childhoods and create particular conditions, to guide and challenge children to become those desirable child subjects. An examination of how such shaping takes place follows, using the selected stories to illustrate various views on childhoods and their representation.

My feelings: biopolitics and the governing of childhoods

My Feelings is a series of picture books created, funded, printed and distributed for free to all licensed New Zealand early childhood services by the Ministry of Education. On the surface, these

stories resemble fairy tales with happy endings that aim to support teachers to work with children through difficult times. They portray childhoods and children from a certain perspective that ultimately forecloses on children's sovereignty (Tesar, 2014). For example, in the story *Off You Go, Auntie Ma*, Huriana enjoys attending the crèche, but she does not want her Auntie Ma, who brings her there, to leave (Holt, 2004). Huriana enjoys Auntie Ma's company and wants her to stay at the centre with her. The story shows her change in thinking, as within 1 week Huriana develops relationships with the teachers and children in the crèche, and '[b]y Friday, she can happily wave goodbye to Auntie Ma' (Ministry of Education, 2011).

In another story from the *My Feelings* series called *When Mum Went Away*, Robbie's mum, who is a peacekeeper, is deployed on a mission (Marriott, 2004). Her boyfriend Nick looks after Robbie while she is away, but Nick does not know Robbie so well and uses the wrong mug for Robbie's favourite chocolate drink. Robbie has a hard time at school because children do not understand how his mum can be a peacekeeper and be away from home. Apart from the gender issues this book addresses, it also illustrates the subject of disabilities, as Nick, who is a former soldier, is in a wheelchair. On mum's return from her overseas mission, mum and Nick work with Robbie's teachers to support his relationship with the other children. Robbie comes to think about himself differently and is pleased with the new mug from his mum with a palm tree design.

These and other stories in this government produced series present narratives of certain feelings that a child may encounter in 'everyday' life in a neoliberal context. The child is targeted as the consumer of the stories and their normalization of power and what is 'good' behaviour on the part of the children while simultaneously delegitimizing other habits or practices of the self. Foucault's (1991) notion of docile bodies provides a trajectory for considering the complex power relations that influence Huriana and Robbie in their educational settings. Stories conveyed in these picture books produce docile child bodies, as they remove children's sovereignty by guiding the children towards smooth and desirable outcomes. Through the discipline and control of teachers, children are subjected to complex surveillance, ostensibly intended for their care and protection, as is common also in early childhood playgrounds (Ailwood, 2003). Children are not always aware when they are being observed and when they are not, and so they govern themselves, behaving and acting as if they were.

Complex acts of self-governance can be traced in these *My Feelings* stories. They suggest and expect the child to behave and act upon his or her feelings in a particular, desirable pattern. Indeed, more than simply proscribing acceptable behaviour, these stories go so far as to delimit what is an admissible emotional response to particular traumatic events in the lives of young children. The stories thus aim to tame childhood by representing it in a way that produces docile bodies that follow the suggested pattern, especially since the implication in the tales of Huriana and Robbie is that mimicking their trajectories will result in a happy ending (although an ending to what is highly questionable).

In one way, this can be traced to the 19th century, when 'wild children' on the streets caused concerns and their 'larrikinism' contributed to the establishment, and subsequent enforcement, of compulsory educational frameworks (Cunningham, 2006; Shuker, 1987). Yet, following Foucault (2008), we see that the children in these stories, and, more importantly those children who read or are read them, are the locus of networks of governing the biopolitics of a particular population, in this case 'the' child. Tracing the rationality of biopolitics from the limitations on the state imposed by a 'liberalism' of political economy, Foucault (2008) explains, 'an important substitution, or doubling rather, is carried out, since the subjects of right on which political sovereignty is exercised appear as a *population* that a government must manage' (p. 22n, original emphasis). The stories, and one might go so far as to say morals, offered in the *My Feelings* books therefore operate as a

technology of government and of governing childhoods, such that they demonstrate the 'right' way to function as a child. Huriana is being surveilled by both her teachers in the crèche and by Auntie Ma from a distance; thus, her only recourse is to embrace her new environment and inure herself to the pangs of separation from her aunt. The crèche, and by extension the state, provides the apparatus by which Huriana's, and presumably the other children's, sovereignty is constrained and made docile as a population.

In Robbie's case, his behaviour is managed by a much more violent arm of the state, the military, despite its being dressed up in euphemisms of 'peacekeeping' and the concordant implications that military adventures such as the one in which his mother participates are at base benevolent exercises. This is driven home by the use of the mug, with which Robbie again enjoys his chocolate drink, given to him by his mum: a piece of kitsch which supplants any psychological or physical scars she may also have brought home with her (peacekeeping here is as innocuous as a vacation abroad, replete with souvenirs). In addition, the relationship that develops between Robbie's mother, Nick and the school suggests an expansion of the 'governmental reasoning' of the management of Robbie's behaviour and habits of self that engulf the family into the political economy of the state schooling apparatus. The idea that Robbie's sovereignty as a child could find refuge at home (and indeed this is the space in which he first asserts himself in his reactions to Nick's inability to conform to his routines in his mother's absence) is effaced, as the conditions of surveillance and management blur the boundaries of the various contexts in which Robbie exists. Whereas the state governed Huriana from within the confines of the crèche, Robbie is managed both at school and at home as a subject of biopolitics.

Stories such as those in the *My Feelings* series do not present a simple top-down notion of power that forces a child to behave in a certain way, but rather they subject a child to the complexities of biopower in a Foucauldian sense (Fenech and Sumsion, 2007). Within these power relations, multiple concerns of what the children want to read, who selects the books and the complex messages within the stories produce children as particular child subjects: the children have a choice; their agency shifts into self-governance; children are compelled by each other's behaviour; and they are supported and become their own controllers as well as being controlled. These picture books are carriers of official and subjugated knowledge, and children listen, learn and are educated through these tools of governance. Picture books tell stories that are not simple, and each child can derive an individual outcome; under the conditions and political economy produced by the state, those outcomes are easily predicted as they are inevitably foreclosed upon.

Toy Story 3: childhood and imagination

The Pixar movie *Toy Story 3* (released in 2010) is a prime example of a tale that represents and ultimately delimits childhood in a particular, 'proper' way. The plot of this contemporary fairy tale is straightforward and follows the ongoing adventures of Woody, Buzz and their cohort of toys, when the human child, Andy, is getting ready to leave for college and no longer needs them. Part of the story takes place in an early childhood centre to which Andy donates the toys, which are 'alive'. The toys are very excited, as they look forward to finally being played with and loved again by children. When they arrive, they are welcomed as 'foreigners' by the 'local' toys who introduce them to their respective rooms. The bell rings, and the new toys are extremely excited, while the 'local' toys hide where they can. The infants and toddlers who then enter the room are portrayed as instinctive beings destroying, plundering, treating the toys in a careless manner – as 'little monsters' – rather than 'playing' with them. At one moment during the 'madness' of this destructive activity, one toy looks out through the glass door to the older children, playing with the other toys as they are 'supposed to', in a manner that is shown as the

proper, correct and expected way of playing with and treating toys. The toys then want to move to the room with the older children, but the hierarchy of toys does not allow it, and this tension becomes one of the important plot points of the movie.

The complex power relations present in the movie portray the toys' fight for space and happiness. The division of toys shows a particular view of the microcosm of the early childhood setting: the space and nature of children's play divided by age and developmentally appropriate criteria. The infants and toddlers are represented as violent, messy, uncontrollable and aggressive, not yet able to play, not caring about the toys, as little savages. They are shown repeatedly destroying the toys, and all the toys become scared of them.

Toy Story 3 was a blockbuster hit, earning more than 1 billion dollars worldwide (Box Office Mojo, 2013). The stories that this movie tells about children are that they act intuitively and must learn how to play, assuming that play and intuition are mutually exclusive. Through age-appropriate education and guidance, however, they can learn. In other words, there is a correct way to play – to hold a doll or play with a dinosaur, for example, and children need to be taught how to do it. What is more, the film portrays certain children as cruel: they behave in vicious ways, and the toys see their only way out as escaping to the older children or out of the horror of the setting altogether. On one hand, the movie argues something about children, namely that they are 'little monsters' until they are taught to behave and act as 'civilized' subjects; on the other, the film comments on the purpose and nature of education, namely that taming the child and teaching her how to play are desired outcomes of education. The audience learns that childhoods in early childhood settings are messy and violent, alongside and in tension with the image of cute, developmentally more advanced children, who obey, play and act in desirable, learnt, appropriate ways.

The children are juxtaposed within a binary of 'goodies' and 'baddies', civilized and savage, educated and ignorant. The story is powerful and seductive, conceptualizing not only goodies and baddies but also 'right', correct ways of developing, performing and being a child. The complexities are minimized by a very clear message and recommendations. As in Giugni's (2006) argument, the power raging between goodies and baddies is central to children using 'dominant cultural storylines such as goodies and baddies as a vehicle to produce their identities' (p. 97). Children are active in this process and, as Giugni contends, 'are savvy power brokers; they are political and moral agents' (p. 106).

Lyotard (1984), in his seminal work *The Postmodern Condition*, understands postmodernity through the notion of performativity. In relation to these stories, this means that the stories are performed, narrated and produced, and they embody certain regimes: regimes of truth, regimes of knowledge and regimes of government. The roles that children play in *Toy Story 3* legitimate a particular, normalized form of knowledge and course of action in early childhood contexts. Each of the roles that children have in the centre, whether as a 'goodie' or a 'baddie', produces a normative certainty around the effectiveness of outcomes-focused childhoods. Children and their childhoods are measured in terms of how well they can perform their expected roles within the limited space in which they are allowed to manoeuvre. The way that knowledge becomes important, approved and legitimated within neoliberal early childhood settings is how useful it is, or, in Lyotard's (1984) view, how well knowledge performs or allows the child in the centre to perform her or his desired roles. So the performance has only a limited relationship with what the child learns or is, but focuses instead on how well, or not well, the child is able to perform it.

There is also a problem when considering 'childhood' in a narrow, proscriptive/prescriptive way, for Lyotard (1984) not only refused to accept the axiomatic subject of childhood as binary, he went so far as to reject its idiom. The child is not an object upon which to delineate correct and proper ways of doing, being and constructing reality. On the contrary, as Smeyers and Masschelein (2000) argue, 'the reality of the child is not an object of knowledge or of understanding, but what

escapes all objectification, not the anchorage of our power to govern, but that which marks its impotence' (p. 155). That is to say, we do not know precisely what it is we mean when we speak idiomatically of childhood, as, according to Lyotard (1984), we (adults) cannot know the heterogeneity of the reality of the child, or following Giugni, of her agency. We are limited in language when we speak of 'the' child or of one 'childhood' – and by extension of one 'correct' childhood. Thus, ignorant of the reality of the child, we fall back instead on easy, uncritical binaries, such as the early childhood 'monsters' who presumably 'attack' the foreigner toys in the film, in contrast to the docile, 'educated' older children who 'know' the right way to play. The clever conceit the film makes here is not simply that the children do not know what they are doing (even the 'goodies' at one point had to learn how to play the right way), but that it is the veteran toys themselves who understand this dynamic and who reproduce its effects by segregating themselves from both Andy's toys and the 'baddies' who run roughshod over them.

Indeed, what is perhaps the film's most damaging argument is not what it implies about either childhoods or the nature of education, but what it says about imagination and specifically imaginative play. In a phrase, the film exemplifies the idea that the children in the early childhood setting do not even have the capacity to play, let alone to 'play well' or 'play nicely', and that any imagination they display while encountering the toys is not 'playful' but rather menacing and destructive. The reason given for this inability to 'play' is, interestingly, the age of the children. Prior to the entrance of the children to the playroom, Rex, the Dinosaur, hops excitedly, shouting, 'Play! Real play! I can't wait!' When the comic violence perpetrated by the children ends and the toys regroup, Mr Potato Head sums up the problem: 'But these toddlers – they don't know how to play with us'. Rex echoes this sentiment when he concludes, 'They're too young'. Thus, the children's interactions with the toys are delegitimized as 'false' play, and any suggestion that their actions are in fact a form of play is foreclosed upon, as is any space in which they can deploy imagination.

What makes this scene problematic is that it assumes that there is a reality to childhood that we can know and study (and that there is indeed one form of that reality) and that any behaviour that manifests itself in opposition to that reality is illegitimate. In other words, the children in this scene are not displaying any 'imagination'. In this article, we argue that the children are in fact demonstrating an important form of imagination, one that allows the children to discover and create in a way that speaks to their own, heterogeneous constructions of reality. Lyotard and Thébaud (1985) offer that imagination, in a way that transcends the Kantian critique of judgement, is discernible by its 'power to invent criteria' (p. 17). Thus, while the children fail to adhere to the rules of developmentally and chronologically more advanced – and more socially acceptable – versions of 'play', that does not mean that they are not, in their own realities, playing. In fact, the children in this scene are displaying more imagination than that of the toys, who are in themselves imaginary subjects, for the children are inventing their own criteria, while the toys are clinging to a prescriptive form of 'reality'. As Nuyen (1998) puts it, 'the domain of imagination is not the actual world but possible worlds. To acquire imaginative knowledge is to acquire the capacity to transcend the actual world and to enter the realm of possibilities' (p. 174). *Toy Story 3* asks its audience to enter a possible world in which toys think, talk, move and develop consciousness; yet, the children in the film are portrayed parodically as unthinking, unimaginative and unconscious. The film as a developed fairy tale works productively in that it asks the audience to consider a reality in which things (in this, case toys) are self-aware. At the same time, however, it wrongs the very childhoods that it depicts (in contrast to the example of Andy, who, according to Rex, 'Never played with us like that'), avoiding the multiplicities of childhood that are – or should be – possible. Far from opening spaces wherein children and childhoods can imaginatively invent criteria, the film produces the familiar and dangerous trope of one, true childhood, one that closes off imagination and play – even in a room full of talking toys.

Secret education: childhood, freedom and society

The story *The Secret and Mysterious Process of Education* (Bondy, 1995) again depicts different representations of childhoods. Its origin lies in a unique political and cultural context and narrates a story that takes the form of a horror fairy tale of young children's educative process. It tells a secret story of what awaits a child when he or she enters the socialist school system in Czechoslovakia during the 1970s and 1980s. The story is intriguing and subversive, as it deals with children's schooling within compulsory education. While school is often celebrated as a special, positive place where children learn from teachers and become socialized in preparation for their (future) life in society, Bondy's (1995) writing represents a scene of brutal horror:

> As the doors close behind the last pupil of the school, the secret and mysterious process of education begins. Children are first hypnotized by a cobra, which the school manager carries from class to class. Then comrade teachers slice the tummies of boys and girls wide open with a slaughterhouse knife that the schoolmaster has brought …, and then for the rest of the classes that day comrade teachers mess in their tummies using different means. Only during the second to last class each day the school manager brings a mushroom that comrade teachers have soaked in ink and push it into the hollow places in the pupils' skulls, through their nostrils, using tweezers, and everything not essential and needed is deleted from the ganglia of their frontal lobes. Then the comrade teachers finally sew up all the children' tummies, and clean them with a hose which the schoolmaster operates. He tells the pupils to change their shoes and sends them all home, where apart from headaches and tummy aches, their parents will not notice anything nor do the children remember anything. This is repeated daily, five times a week, in the mornings and afternoons, and especially during citizenship classes and physical education, which are especially useful to the above-mentioned educational process. (pp. 59–60)

The Secret Education provides an example of Rousseau's (2012) anxieties about the constraints that institutions and processes place upon children and childhood. This tale targets the power, hegemony and ideology of education in kindergarten and school education at this time. It also reflects the desire of the state system to inculcate a discrete set of truths and knowledge to produce particular uncritical, unimaginative and docile child subjects, as repositories to be 'filled', through their heads and tummies. In the tale, teacher 'comrades' cleanse the children, and after the use of invasive methods, they send them back home to their parents. Bondy exposes children's subjection to the sheer power of the system and to its ability to mass-produce child subject positions through public educational spaces and processes: he describes to children how their subject positions are formed within the official discourse. This story contests the knowledge represented in mainstream children's picture books of that time, of happy children who are eager to learn. Its expressive and cruel approach challenges the way children were expected to see themselves in their happy, innocent socialist childhoods. Bondy's take on education as a scary, brutal, painful and invasive process does not, however, suggest that children should respond to this process. Rather, the story outlines far more: it illustrates how the purpose and process of school education is reduced to filling children's heads (and tummies) with thoughts and ideas. And because these stories about education are brutal, inappropriate and 'untrue', they remain secret, subversive and outside of mainstream education.

Rousseau's *Emile* focuses on one child's education and builds on (and heavily disagrees with) other views on childrearing, for example, John Locke's (1970). Rousseau (2012) argues, 'childhood has ways of seeing, thinking and feeling peculiar to itself: nothing can be more foolish than to seek to substitute our ways for them' (p. 127). He demonstrates his concern about the ways in which adults corrupt children/childhood in his analysis of their false search for the adult within a child. In other words, children are innately good and uncorrupted, as they are in harmony with nature, and it is the education that they receive from adults (often parents) that spoils their

development. The entire institution of education is problematic in Rousseau's view because institutions and the adults that operate them corrupt childhood.

Two interesting critiques of *The Secret Education* can be extracted from reading Rousseau's (2012) *Emile*. In the first place, the tale demonstrates the ways in which institutions and processes constrain a child's freedom. To elaborate, freedom is a central value for a Rousseauian childhood, and freedom is defined as Emile/the child's ability to enact his desires. Rousseau argues, '[t]he true free man wants only what he can get, and does only what pleases him. This is my fundamental maxim. Apply it to childhood and all the rules of education follow' (p. 126). Building upon the central belief that childhood should nurture the development of freedom, Rousseau argues that when a child receives knowledge from external forces, socially constructed norms or agents of a political apparatus such as those in *The Secret Education*, a child is not free, but rather a dependent recipient of knowledge. Any educational process that demands children be 'obedient', 'obligated' or 'commanded' should be 'banished', according to Rousseau (p. 127). Thus, the form of education represented in *The Secret Education* should be banished as well since it hypnotizes children, removes them from their natural awareness, and essentially kills off their ability to think, create or generate ideas.

A second element of Emile's education is the important role of social relationships broadly and teacher–pupil relations specifically. Rousseau (2012) argues, '[t]he proper study of man is that of his relationships. So long as he is aware of himself only as a physical being he should study himself in his relations with things. That is the task of childhood' (p. 139). In *The Secret Education*, teacher 'comrades' are depicted as agents of the complex apparatus of power – cutting, slicing, slaughtering, filling, stuffing, hypnotizing and so on – that depends on hierarchical relationships. Unlike the idealized teacher in *Emile* who places within the child's reach that which will awaken the desire of the child and cultivate his or her natural curiosity, teachers in *The Secret Education* are corrupted and interfere with the bodies, brains and minds of children.

The teacher here acts on external and restrictive institutional practices that constrain the development of children's freedom. Through these hierarchical, rather than relational, interactions between teacher and child, *The Secret Education* produces dependent children within a controlled society rather than independent thinkers. The story outlines the production of obedient, docile children that can be fixed or rooted into future society's socially constructed roles and categories, which Rousseau (2012) characterizes as both a type of 'social servitude' and an 'oppressive misery'. Finally, the brutality that is exercised upon childhoods in the tale speaks to the physical and symbolic violence that children are subjected to in education systems that reify totalitarian ideologies and strip children of their natural curiosities and engagements with the world, things and relations around them.

This Rousseauian perspective provides a critical alternative view of education and childhood. *The Secret and Mysterious Process of Education* suggests a top-down model of schooling where knowledge is acquired by an artificial act. Rousseau (2012), on the other hand, suggests that the specific time of childhood calls for carefully considered methods and techniques; an emergent curriculum; knowledge of each individual child; an education without verbal lessons, where a child learns from his own experience; and for a return to nature. The overarching concept that Rousseau portrays as essential in a child's education is freedom, unlike in Bondy's story, where children's brains and tummies are stuffed with useless knowledge (a truly scary story for a preschool child entering school)!

Concluding comments

In the postmodern educational context, of competing discourses and diverse philosophies and pedagogies, children's realities cannot be represented with one particular, desired outcome or one

particular kind of story. Stories that are written, shared and narrated, mostly by adults, represent children and childhoods in particular ways: as good or naughty, as victims or perpetrators and as living smooth childhoods where every problem can be resolved. Adults create particular expectations of children and childhoods through the stories they tell (Zornado, 2001). Following this analysis, perhaps if children were to tell and share stories about their experiences of childhoods and subjectivities, the concern would shift from governing childhoods through adult-shaped stories to hearing about children's ways of navigating their tensions and problems and how they might shape and govern their own childhoods, through *their* stories.

The stories we have analysed are shaped for and focus on informing, influencing and tweaking a child and childhoods. They demonstrate how stories represent conceptually difficult and challenging notions of how children should behave, or not, or they inform children about how their childhoods should look and be. Stories within picture books, films and tales are easily accessed and incorporated in everyday storytelling performances. At the same time, the form, illustrations and design can hide powerful messages, multiplicities and understandings that can become disseminated without the reader's (or even the author's) intention. Children's stories are thus powerful resources arising and embedded in complex discourses that are not neutral, always political, and implicate children, their communities and society.

This article has argued for a critical consideration of the messages that fairy tales and stories may carry. We emphasize that such messages are often hidden under the surface of enticing and seductive words, pictures and stories. In *Toy Story 3*, the older children are depicted as ethical beings who develop a notion of care for toys through their education, something the younger children lack. Rousseau's care for a child is explored through the tension of whether the child is inherently good or not and how it becomes corrupted by institutions and society. Foucault, on the other hand, denotes care as a form of control and biopolitics, while in a Lyotardian sense the stories impart knowledge that enables children to perform imaginatively and help them develop the efficiency necessary to achieve the goals they are set in a neoliberal society. Without a doubt, fairy tales and stories powerfully portray children and shape childhoods. They encompass their own, secret messages that are often not visible, nor clear. Their elusive invisibility and hidden, complex meanings create the unpredictable, and often irresistible, power of children's stories and picture books, on children and on their childhoods.

Funding

Notes

1. … who however 'breach the copyright' and did not always necessarily acknowledge their sources.
2. This is only one of many aspects and purposes of fairy tales.
3. The enquiry would probably also lead to the discourses around 'culturing the child' (Ruwe, 2005), the 'erosion of childhood' (Suransky, 1983) and the 'disappearance of childhood' (Postman, 1994).

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