



# Children's Thoughts on Wonder in Fairy Tales

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## Abstract

Fairy tales are a means to introduce the Polish language and social education exercises in Polish kindergartens and schools (early childhood literature education). In their methodological proposals, authors of school handbooks use fairy tales as a medium for teaching moral values. *The Goldfish* is an example of such an approach (Fałdzińska and Rączyńska, 2017). This article presents the thoughts of children aged six to nine (Polish kindergarten and primary school years one to three) constructed around the fairy tale in question, which, on the one hand, can be understood as a cautionary lesson about the importance of remaining satisfied with one's station (Tatar 2014), and on the other serves as a meta-tale, exposing a rule of the genre's poetics (Somoff, 2019). Assuming the role of observer-as-participant, intent on providing interpretations, the author of this study aims to identify children's categories of wonder occurring in Aleksandr Afanasyev's *The Goldfish* (Afanasyev, 1984). It was observed that children reflect on the rules of wonder in fairy tales (as culture-specific texts) and derive social meanings significant from the viewpoint of fairy tale categories. As such, they were not only limited to the lesson of condemning greed, which is often assigned to *The Goldfish*.

**Keywords** Fairy tales · Early childhood literacy · *The Goldfish* · *The Fisherman and his Wife* · Wonder tale · Children's response to fairy tales

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## Fairy Tales in Polish Education

Polish education has struggled with abandoning a dominant teacher-centred approach of teaching through instruction. Teachers are subject to pressure exerted by the Ministry of Science and Education on the school system, its organisation and control; advised what professional activities they are supposed to undertake, how to execute them, what questions to ask, what answers to expect and what materials to use (Klus-Stańska, 2014). The materials come from official, external sources and contribute to the students' book-centred reality. Although Polish schools are not the only ones where education is concentrated on textbooks (see Chambliss and Calfee, 1998), relying on educational packages in early-school education suggests methodological indifference and failing to consider social change (cf. Wiśniewska-Kin, 2013). The methods of teaching literary texts (where official teaching mandates are also imposed) imply a superficial understanding and thus depreciate the texts. Primarily, however, they deprive children of opportunities to take action in their proximal development area (Vygotsky, 1978) negating their empowerment.

The presence of folk and fairy tales in the Polish educational space fits the somewhat rigid framework mentioned above. For instance, this article argues that the most popular publishing house in Poland, WSiP, which creates educational packages for early childhood education, developed a method for teaching *The Goldfish* in a way that effectively limits literary engagement. The *Szkolni przyjaciele* [School Friends] package (Fałdzińska and Rączyńska, 2017) introduces this fairy tale based on Jarosław Mikołajewski's text published in the handbook for Year 1. The story is a variant of *The Fisherman and his Wife* as collected by the Brothers Grimm in 1812 (KHM 19). In the Aarne-Thompson classification system, the tale is of type 555 and deals with dissatisfaction and greed. It has been identified as an "anti-fairy tale" (Jolles, 1929). The tale's beginning is presented in an excerpt and ends when the magic fish is caught. At this stage, the authors of the handbook suggest asking simple recall questions about the remembered factual elements of the text, e.g. "What was the occupation of the fisherman and his wife?" "What did the old fisherman catch most often?" "What did he catch last time?" and "What fish was it?" The following part of the story is presented in eight comic frames. In the first one, the fisherman is happy about catching the fish, "Oh! What is it? A fish of gold! We'll have it for dinner tomorrow!" The fish reveals a secret about its power, saying, "When I am free, I've got the power. What gift will make you happy?" The second frame shows the fisherman's conversation with his wife. The old man informs her that the goldfish had offered some gifts, and the wife urges him to get a new trough immediately. "Give us a new trough, fish," says the fisherman to the fish in the third picture. The fish sends him home and tells him that a new trough will be waiting for him there. "Why should we only need a trough? We'd better have a new house!" suggests the wife but her husband responds, "The old one is quite comfortable." The fifth frame shows the fisherman's request to the fish to get a new house. "Go back, fisherman. The old house has been replaced with a new one," the fish replies. In frame six,

the woman states “A house is not enough! Give me a palace! Right now!”, but her husband responds, “Why should we need a palace? The house is so nice.” In frame seven, the goldfish listens on to the elderly couple’s conversation but does not utter a word. The fisherman asks his wife, “Why are you crying?” She confesses, “I’ve got a palace, but I am still angry and sad.” The last frame shows the couple in front of their old house, with the leaking trough at their feet. The wife contests that they have neither a new trough nor a new house or palace, while the old fisherman concludes, “But always together. You and me.”

The textbook authors ask the following questions under the text: “What did the fisherman’s wife ask for? Did the goldfish’s gift make the woman happy?” “What turned out to be the greatest treasure for the fisherman and his wife?” The discussion of the moral proposed in the teacher’s book as the next step is completed with the following note: “The teacher explains what a moral is (a message that is conveyed or a lesson to be learned, typically presented at the end of an instructive literary work, explaining the symbolic meaning of the events). Pupils are supposed to tell what the moral of the fairy tale is.” The non-creative questions lead to the statement (often by the teacher) of the moral (Fernandes, 2008). Teacher-centred education turns potentially open questions (e.g. about a moral message) into pseudo-open questions (Sawyer, 2019). Other tasks proposed in the teacher’s book are also not problem-based, and focus on improving reading/writing skills or creating visual artwork that does not imply the assignment of meaning, such as: “Pupils cut out fish using a template. They make gold scales from sequins or gold-coated paper. They hang the goldfish on a piece of string.”

The examples above, where questions focus on recollection (Bloom, 1956), fit instruction-based teaching stemming from an objectivist paradigm. This is teacher-centred education, where curriculum areas included in the manual are implemented step by step. The questions proposed by the educational package’s authors should be juxtaposed with Robert Fisher’s (2005) observation that asking too many unproductive questions (too limited and closed-ended questions, non-diversified and trivialising, requiring only low level of thinking) weakens children’s cognitive interest and will to discuss (pp. 18–19). The presented educational material does not include higher-order thinking questions (why?) to determine motives/causes and reasoning, synthesis (what would happen if...?), which is related to problem-solving, predicting, and presenting one’s own solutions and creative thinking, and evaluation, which expresses opinions (cf. Bloom, 1956; Perrott, 1990). The shift to child-centred education would require designing alternative activities originating from theories that deepen reflection on children’s discourse in the social and cultural environment, i.e. the pedagogy of mutuality (Bruner, 1996), joint involvement episodes (Schaffer, 2022), and mediated learning experiences (Feuerstein and Klein, 1991). Such approaches authorise asking productive questions and listening to children’s creative and often surprising answers.

Using children’s interpretation skills, it is possible to de-infantilise the presence of fairy tales in pre- and early-school education. Esra Sever Serezli (2023) describes examples of such practices, enabling dialogue and using children’s knowledge. Cultural texts encourage anticipating, verifying conjectures, and taking a propositional attitude by judging, thinking and hoping how things will go (Eco, 1993).

Alternatively, they serve as a space where possible worlds can be created (Hintikka, 1975). Such a perception of fairy tales in the classroom must be coupled with a child's perception, given children are competent persons with an inherent right and ability to participate in decisions concerning their lives. This assumption must be expressed and implemented in practice (Harris and Manatakis, 2013), alongside the opportunity for children to develop their lives actively by adding sense to the reality surrounding them (MacNoughton et al., 2003). The deliberations on wonder in fairy tales (including examples of its implementation in other literary works, e.g. a story authored by a ten-year-old girl) and insights into how pupils understand and link specific fairy tale categories to the elements of the actual social and cultural world, presented below,<sup>1</sup> will be treated as a counterbalance (Freire, 2021) to the dominance of conservative teaching systems resistant to initiating social change (see Klus-Stańska, 2018, p. 94). Children and their utterances around tales form the focus of my attention in this article. With regard to the interactions I had with teachers (through their presence during the classes I conducted) via our conversations on kindergarten and school activities based on literary texts, teacher's reflective practice is also worth mentioning (Schön, 1983; Brookfield, 1995).

## Characteristics of Wonder in Fairy Tales

The category of wonder became the springboard for designing the educational setting involving children presented here. It emerged as the basis for perceiving fairy tales whose significance is revealed in terminology. In order to emphasise this, the term "wonder tale" has been proposed as an alternative to the misleading fairy tale (Warner, 2014, p. xxii). In this article, I use the term "fairy tale", following Tolkien's concept that "fairy" does not mean stories about fairies or elves but about Faërie—a kingdom or state where fairies (and other manifestations of wonder) can exist (Tolkien, 2014, p. 32). "Fairy tale" should also be juxtaposed with "anti-fairy tale", first used at the beginning of the twentieth century to denote tales that have a tragic rather than happy ending. The term has also been used to cover modern literary reworkings of fairy tales, emphasising their more negative scenes or motifs, since these appear to reflect modern problems in society more realistically. "Such negative, cynical, or satirical reactions to traditional fairy tales are interpreted as anti-fairy tales, as contradictions to the miraculous and positive messages of the original tales" (Mieder, 2008, p. 50). The discrepancy between optimism and pessimism is the first of several oppositions (including but not limited to black and white morality/grey morality or amorality, fixed points of view/shifting perspectives, independent narrative/intertextual, metafictional narrative) between a fairy tale and an anti-fairy tale, as proposed by David Calvin (2011, p. 3). The discrepancy between enchantment and disenchantment is another such opposition. I refer to this contradiction because

<sup>1</sup> Deliberations on wonder in fairy tale form part of a broader research project aiming at designing a methodology (alternative to the dominant one in Polish schools) for preparing educational settings based on specific categories occurring in fairy tales.

enchantment must indispensably include an experience of wonder presented as reality (Curry, 1999, p. 403). Nevertheless, the opposition is not apparent. According to Danuta Szajnert, unconventional texts that do not challenge wonder are treated as anti-fairy tales; conversely, this group covers literature pieces that challenge the obviousness of wonder and the wonder as such, in the name of defending “true” reality. An anti-fairy tale sometimes becomes synonymous with gloomy stories written to appear realistic, contrasted with the wonder and positive messages conveyed by fairy tales (2012, p. 241).

Wonder is the vital driving power of the world presented in the fairy tale and its essential characteristics. It comprises elements (characters, objects, places and incidents) whose existence or actions cannot be explained rationally (Wróblewska, 2023) but which can undergo a transformation in the story. Jack Zipes (2019) highlights that everybody and everything can be subject to transformation. Characters, sceneries and motives coexist in different ways to evoke a sense of wonder. This is the “constancy” of wonder tales and what makes them different from fables, legends, short stories and anecdotes to name but a few (pp. 45–46). The presence of wonder is necessary in differentiating a fairy tale as a characteristic work of art and as a prerequisite for the correct course of action. This is because wonder enables: (1) building the dramaturgy of the event (magic; metamorphoses of the fairy tale element; curses); (2) increasing tension gradually, solving problems that cannot be solved in any other way (supernatural intervention); (3) reaching the state of axiological balance through punishment (coming from beyond the real world) for the wrongdoers and awards and help for the protagonists (Wróblewska, 2023).

Wonder in fairy tales has its limits because not everything is possible. An analysis carried out by Victoria Somoff (2019) referring to *The Goldfish* tale, is testimony to the statement above. It was not the fisherman’s wife’s greed or generally doubtful morality that resulted in her wish to become the empress of the ocean not being fulfilled. The causes of the failure can be attributed to the attempt to interrupt the world’s order by taking control of the source of magic (pp. 110–119). The fisherman’s wife cannot become a character having donor’s powers, using the term “donor” after Propp (1968), who writes about fairy tale dramatis personae in the following way: “The category of grateful animals demands special scrutiny. They begin as donors (begging for help or mercy), then they place themselves at the disposal of the hero and become his helpers” (pp. 80–81). When writing about *The Goldfish*, Somoff states that “the fairy-tale event of miracle presupposes two participants, the recipient and the agent of magic, or a hero and donor” (2019, p. 117). The fairy tale protagonists’ story does not end with their gaining such powers either, although apparently they could deserve it. The fisherman could not become the ocean king, just like Cinderella could not become a fairy. It has to be noted, however, that neither the fisherman nor Cinderella expressed such wishes.

An attempt to take control over the source of magic by using wishes against the rules is also described in the book *Awantura w bajkach* [An Argument in Fairy Tales] authored by Agnieszka Olejnik (2018), which draws on fairy tale traditions. A villain called Magus tries to deceive the goldfish:

“Wait a moment! The Goldfish in the fairy tale grants only three wishes!”

“Yes, but the Magus is cunning. He invented the third wish, saying, ‘I want another one hundred wishes that you will have to fulfil.’ And when he reaches the last, one-hundredth wish, he will wish for another hundred,” explained the Dragon.

“That’s horrible! He must be heartless! The poor Goldfish will not stand it!” (p. 69) The Magus’ attempt to deceive the Goldfish fails. The characters wonder why the fish did not fulfil his wish, “How come the fish did not want to fulfil the Magus’ wish? I thought she has to grant wishes, whether she wants to or not...” (Olejnik, 2018, p. 87). Finally, the wrongdoer gets the answer: “You made a mistake keeping the Goldfish in captivity. You would know if you were familiar with *The Goldfish* tale. But you said you did not care about us and our fairy tales. [...] The Goldfish fulfils wishes only when it is set free” (p. 89). The donor emerges as the guardian of the mechanism of wonder related to actions for good. Ten-year-old Karolina Tomalska (2002) employs a similar concept in her story:

The leaf says it could grant three wishes. Leni expressed the first wish: to have a bicycle, and the leaf realised it. The second wish was to have many friends, but the third wish was different – Leni said he wanted to have many wishes, but the leaf noted that one could not be fulfilled, so Leni threw the leaf through the window, and the leaf went to sleep. That is the end of the story. (p. 46)

Wonder in fairy tales is natural because the presence of supernatural phenomena or objects does not surprise anybody; they are taken for granted (Caillois, 1987, pp. 32–35). Fairy tales originating in oral communication and those belonging to literary culture create “secondary worlds with ontological background, accepting supernaturalism as inherent to reality” (Tatar, 2019, p. 24). Nobody is surprised by magic *happening* partly due to separating the world in the story from reality with the classic “Once upon a time” opening (*ibid*). This opener suggests that “an accurate relationship with reality does not claim to create appearances of reality but is constantly aware of its status as a story and ritualised narrative” (Tiffin, 2009, p. 13).

In the early education context, when children are invited to participate in a ritualised narrative, the formula seems symbolic. A fairy tale is empowering in that it opens the way towards considering oneself and the world. Wonder becomes an active and process-based category, where “[it] is an emotional and active process we negotiate through storied experiences, one that demands change in us *and* the world” (Bacchilega, 2017, p. 10). The ritual of experiencing based on the genre’s wonder gives rise to pedagogical possibilities that can contradict behaviourism based on forcefully imposed moralising. As Maria Tatar (2019) writes, a fairy tale demands the temporary suspension of disbelief and the acceptance that the evolving story is the product of human invention—an experiment meant to entertain and inspire ever more intensive thinking (p. 24). Keeping in mind the multi-faceted nature of wonder, we know that it can be explored by children by carefully observing the characters in action (who they are, what they do or do not do and why, what they could do if...). Asking questions to characters other than the protagonist is part of the cognitive approach to fairy tales (Nikolajeva, 2019). Re-directing the attention to the donor of wonder in Afanasyev’s tale activates higher levels of thinking. In reference

to the findings of Bruner (1966), who argued that the educational process is built on what allows us to reach children's feelings and fantasies, or what activates their thinking and gives a certain uniformity to our dispersed knowledge of ourselves, where wonder emerges as a category opening a broad range of opportunities to act from a knowledge-building perspective.

## Children's Deliberations on Wonder in Fairy Tales

This study aimed at identifying children's interpretations of fairy-tale-like categories in Afanasyev's *The Goldfish*, determining how pre- and early-school children decipher meanings required interpretation and action. Wonder in fairy tales became the input category for designing an educational setting. The study population included children aged six to nine, from a community school in a city of 700,000 inhabitants: one kindergarten group, one Year 1 group, three Year 2 groups and two Year 3 groups. The number of subjects was similar for all groups (ca. 15 children). Video recordings during sessions with transcription added afterwards became the research material. Graphic visualisations (drawings) to help overcome the difficulty of purely verbal interpretation completed the children's utterances.

The study was qualitative, assuming the role of an observer-as-participant engaged in the interpretation (Angrosino, 2007). A participant perspective, opening the way to seek "possibilities to improve practice by initiating and negotiating its positive transformation" (Piekarski, 2018), entailed the need to create teaching conditions encouraging children's deliberations on a fairy tale as a work of art for the sake of the study. The approach represented by Bruner (1991) is pivotal for this purpose, where, "narrative organises the structure of human experience—how, in a word, 'life' comes to imitate 'art' and vice versa" (p. 21) and "narrative comprehension is among the earliest powers of mind to appear in the young child and among the most widely used forms of organising human experience" (p. 9).

The sessions<sup>2</sup> were structured as follows:

1. Conversing freely on fairy tales where characters make wishes.
2. Telling the story of the goldfish based on Afanasyev's *The Goldfish*. Since I was not reading but telling the story, I kept eye contact with the children and developed an atmosphere of complete, emotional reception.
3. Attempting to answer why the fisherman's wife's last wish was not fulfilled.
4. Graphic visualisation of the two wishes and conducting non-categorised interviews with the creations' authors. During the ensuing classes, questions derived from other children's answers were also asked, promoting openness to new questions and issues (Sawyer, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Children gave consent and it was highlighted that giving answers and showing their drawings was voluntary.

5. Attempting to summarise the threads expressed in the previous task. Reading the *Bajka o zaczarowanym liściu* [Tale of the Magic Leaf]. Discussing the similarities and differences between the two stories.

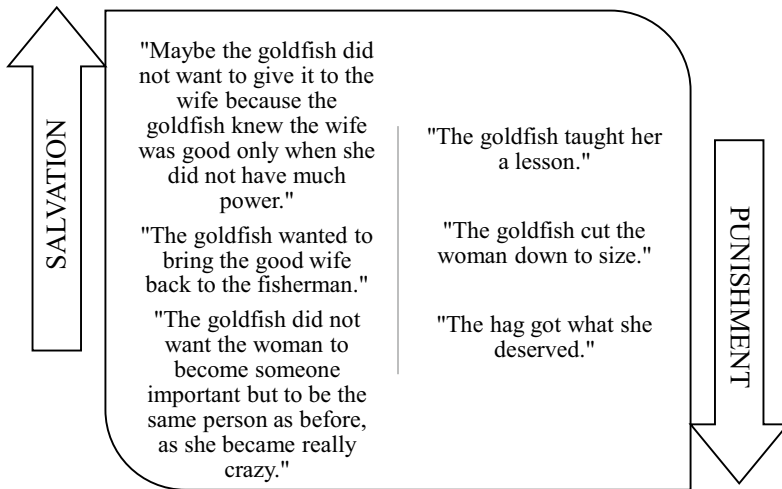
Folk and fairy-tale style aims “for clarity, exactness, positiveness and precision. There is no ‘if’ and no ‘perhaps’” (Lüthi, 1979, p. 57). Lüthi’s concept assuming the “isolation of the characters” and their “depthlessness”, where they “have no inner life, no environment, no relationship to past or future generations, no relationship to time” (Lüthi, 1982, p. 37) opens the possibility to building narration around issues “outside” the story. The children, discovering and discussing the fairy tale, extended the following relationship categories in their utterances: (1) between humans; (2) between humans and the world; (3) among humans, the world and a miraculous, supernatural power (represented in this case by the donor).

Children’s comments focusing on the fisherman’s wife turned out to be very interesting. The participants of the classes assigned some features to her that were not expressed in the tale. By completing the sentence “She was...” (not really nice, unpleasant, cruel, terrible, spoilt, selfish, greedy, unwise), they somehow assigned permanent characteristics to the character.<sup>3</sup> Some children called her “a hag” or compared her to the president of Russia, who figured prominently in contemporary media discourse (“that woman was like Putin, always wanting more”). Some utterances emphasised the aspect of the process, transformation, shifting the weight towards the circle of evil, e.g. “she became so addicted,” “she became unbearable,” “it was as if she became mad.” Failing to grant the last wish was perceived as the goldfish’s action against the old woman. Children noticed the justification of the final scene in the punishment inflicted by the donor, which they expressed spontaneously after hearing the story (but prior to hearing the question of why the last wish was not fulfilled). Listening to a story deeply rooted in culture triggered memories related to the fairy tale versions the children had known. A girl spontaneously recalled a narrative that also matched the concept of pursuing punishment:

“I know a theatre version where the goldfish turned the wife into a flounder.” Examples of justifications included in the salvation continuum (diagram below) were formulated under item 3 of the classes at the investigation stage.

<sup>3</sup> Children’s utterances were translated from Polish into English. The translation reflects the original syntax.





The punishment continuum (above) was also revealed in the children's deliberations on the hypothetical end of the fairy tale. A Year 1 girl, considering the possibility of the wife stepping down to the water kingdom, points out the necessary magical physical transformation that entails some consequences: "If she wanted to become a queen of another country, her wish could come true. If she wanted to become the queen of the seas, then she would have to become a mermaid, but I think there would be some piranhas, so they would eat her. Because she was so cruel to her husband." This suggests that, as long as the wife stays on earth, her transformation is possible. Entering the ocean (as the fish's -not human- territory?) makes her salvation impossible and turns her into a villain.

The thread of the unfulfilled last wish opened the way for assigning significance to the donor and her actions in the fairy tale. The children's spontaneous utterances on the punishment inflicted on the fisherman's wife were not expanded in more depth. Some narrations occurred, seeking justification for the donor and her needs, and for the relationship between the donor and the married couple and between the donor and the world. In the first case, children referred to a certain effort that the goldfish could not or did not want to make (she did not fulfil successive wishes because "she was tired," "she was fed up with it," "she did not have the power," "she did not want to because she had a terrible headache being fed up with it and generally she did not feel like doing it"). The effort was referred to as physical ("she kept on swimming over and over again," "it was far from the beach," "she was exhausted swimming from one place to another") and intellectual ("but she had to think it over to make it happen"). Some children suspected boredom ("How long can you keep on doing the same thing? She became bored of it").

The utterances focusing on the relationship between the goldfish and the fisherman and his wife referred to serious problems (one of the spouses was described as making the donor feel tired or bored) and other cause-and-effect relationships ("The

wife did not want to share anything with the fisherman, which made the goldfish so angry that she felt offended," "she was fed up with the fisherman asking only for things for his wife and not for himself"). The potential power that the wife could gain over the goldfish was the most frequently mentioned reason as to why the wish was not fulfilled ("the fish did not want the woman to have power over her," "the fish did not want the wife to rule her," "if the witch—can I call her a witch?—if the witch ruled the fish, the fish would be very miserable," "she would exhaust the goldfish if she were the mistress of the sea"). The relationship between the goldfish and the world reflected concerns that the donor projected to the entire underwater world and, hence, by not fulfilling the wife's last wish, she prevented an inevitable disaster ("perhaps the fish did not want anybody to rule her and the wife would eat all other fish," "she would rule the kingdom in such a way that she would kill the beautiful goldfish and other fish as well," "the fish thought the wife would rule in a wrong way, would eat fish, but the goldfish ruled well"). Thinking of potential wishes that would or would not be fulfilled by the goldfish (item 4 of the classes' agenda) inspired children to consider how wonder in fairy tales works. Each group had to answer the question: "Think of two wishes. One that the fisherman could tell and the goldfish would fulfil. And another one that the fish would not fulfil." The range of wishes that could be fulfilled included those concerning satisfying biological needs, such as eating ("let them get some tasty things to eat, not only bread," "a delicious cake,"), clothes ("let the fisherman have new clothes," "let the wife have beautiful new dresses"), needs relating to work ("a boat for the fisherman," "robust nets") or gaining social status ("a beautiful house with six floors and golden stairs," "bigger kingdom," and "new kingdom"). Most wishes formulated by the children were contained in the resources donated by the donor in the fairy tale—the wishes applied to either more detailed or more extended use of those resources.

During sessions, some participants pointed out that the goldfish actually fulfilled the wife's rather than the fisherman's wishes, although the fisherman was the one who expressed the wishes and was the only person in contact with the donor. When formulating the wishes, the children could decide who the recipient would be (they mentioned the fisherman, his wife or both). This way, the participants extended the relationships inside the story. Some children voiced their own wishes ("a pony," "a brother or sister," "one thousand colourful felt-tip pens," "a Ferrari," "let my skateboard in the game never break down again"). Simultaneously, when the researcher asked what would have happened if the characters had wished those wishes, some proposals of "extending" the world occurred (e.g. "it could be so that the fisherman had a computer, and then he would also need the Internet"), along with transferring children's wishes onto the fairy tale characters.

Extending the world in the story and approximating it to the real world was also apparent in the wishes assigned to the wife and the fisherman, e.g. "she could be a hotel manager, but I think there is no hotel there [...]" "she could wish for work in a hospital and earning money this way; the goldfish would accept it." A Year 1 pupil proposed extending the world towards a superhero pop-culture vision: "The wish to become a Spiderman would be fulfilled. If she wanted to become a queen, she could be a Spiderman equally well." The boy pointed out that, in this case, the wife would have to be bitten by a radioactive spider. She

would then be exposed to specific biological forces that would become effective in both Marvel's universe and the story in question.

Children's understanding of the category of wonder opened the way to exploring the old couple's relationship. Pupils suggested that the fisherman should ask for

a "good" or "better" wife (e.g. "Dear goldfish, I want my wife to be nicer" – a wish suggesting that a woman's internal transformation is possible). The emotional sphere was also included: "It would come true if the fisherman wanted a good, nice and loving wife from the goldfish." One statement contained the adjective "new" describing the wife, meaning that the female character in the fairy tale has no chance at transformation.

Although none of the children had difficulty identifying the wishes that could be fulfilled, in the case of wishes that could not be granted, some children requested more time to think, answered in the form of a question or only after the researcher had asked for examples of such wishes. In the context of "wishes not granted," one child recalled the relationship between the spouses mentioned above: "A nice house, and a garden, and domestic animals, for instance, a cow, a horse, a goat, can become true so that they had some milk, butter, bread and wheat but the wish to become free of the wife will not be fulfilled. Because he did not want to go to the fish so, if he went to the sea and asked, he wanted to be free, but he wasn't. If I were the fisherman, for me, the wife was somewhat anxious, 'Go to the sea and tell her to do this and that!' I would rather escape from her." The children wondered about the woman's dominance over her husband and the possibility of restoring balance (liberating the woman from her madness/addiction and the fisherman, who was the wife's voice in the relationship with the donor). Some proposals to "deceive" the wife emerged:

"It could be that the husband would not tell her about it, and all would be fine. And he would say he didn't catch any fish because there were sharks."

"But he would lie!"

"So, he should not call the goldfish for the last time or call her and not wish for anything or wish for something and pretend in front of his wife?"

"Perhaps."

Ideas concerning power dominated among the wishes that the donor could not or would not like to grant. The children mentioned the wife's or – in some cases – both spouses' ambitions. Power applied to (extending) space ("she couldn't rule the world," "ruling the whole world would not come true because people would be sad, there would be no happiness, people would be slaves," "the wish will not be fulfilled for his wife to be the queen of everything, to have the stars, and the moon, and all the planets obedient to her," "she could not rule the galaxy," "she could not take the whole universe"), passing time ("her wish to be the queen of the whole time will not be granted," "her wish to stop time would not be fulfilled," "she could not be the mistress of death" – direct wishes concerning immortality are related to this), and the relationship with the donor ("the wish

that the goldfish became the woman's servant would not be fulfilled," "the goldfish will not accept the woman's ruling over her"). All pupils mentioned that the woman's rule over the donor was unacceptable, and substantiated their opinions, i.e. the woman did not deserve it or she would pose a hazard to the existing world.

The power over the donor emerging in the children's reflections also applied to the fisherman. Although the wife's ambitions in this respect would not be fulfilled under any circumstances, some guesswork developed in relation to the old man. A boy said, "He should wish for all these things for himself." Deliberations on an alternative course of action resulted in the question of what would happen if the old man made the last wish for himself. Some answers emphasised the donor's goodwill, e.g. "If he were a good man and shared his things with other people, and he had the last wish, the goldfish would grant it. If he were a good man and didn't want to rule the fish only to satisfy other people, he could become [the master of all fish and all seas" – author's note]. Other answers highlighted that the fisherman would not express such a wish: "But he did not want anything," "He would not like to rule anything; and even if he did, he would not harm anybody." A literary allusion was made to a protagonist from another fairy tale: "He was a good and modest man, he was as kind-hearted as Cinderella."

The comparison inspired the exploration of dependencies and potential relationships between characters from both stories: "What would happen if Cinderella met the goldfish?", "What would Cinderella ask the goldfish for?", "Could Cinderella control the goldfish, and would she like it?" Cinderella's potential wishes revealed insights into the category of a fairy-tale protagonist and their relationship with the world: "The goldfish would help Cinderella go to the ball," "If Cinderella said she would like to harm her sisters, the goldfish would not fulfil the dream; but if Cinderella wanted to go the ball, the goldfish could grant the wish," "But she would not like to harm her sisters, only make them stop bullying her." Children mentioned the similarity between the donor and the fairy godmother and the animals that helped Cinderella execute the tasks imposed by the stepmother. The stepmother's behaviour was compared to the fisherman's wife's behaviour, indicating that the stepmother would like to control the magic creature, which would not be possible.

In addition to the threads mentioned above, underlined by the longing for power, children suggested other wishes that, in their opinion, would not be granted by Afanasyev's protagonist. Another category was related to the donor's impaired function: "the goldfish could not lose her power, she couldn't stop being a magic creature, even if he [the fisherman – author's note] wished for that." This could also happen owing to another character with magic powers (to grant wishes in this case) appearing in the tale ("it would not come true to have two goldfish," "a goldfish copy is not possible because such clones tend not to work well," "it would be possible to conjure normal creatures but not magic ones. Because magic creatures are naturally born and cannot be copied," "a bird granting wishes could not exist there," "the wife could not become a sorceress," "the wife could be like Doctor Strange because he was a sorcerer"). In some utterances, the occurrence of another donor was assigned to the wife having magic powers: "The wish would not be granted for the fisherman's wife to have all powers, to multiply fish, to multiply goldfish." Many children agreed that the wish for another "spare" wish would not be fulfilled: "The goldfish

would not grant someone's wish to have a million wishes," and "one cannot have an unlimited number of wishes." None of the children with which the unlimited wish option was further discussed accepted the granting of that wish. A boy tried to find substantiation in a physical dimension:

"And if the fisherman asked for an unlimited number of wishes for his wife?"

"The goldfish would not fulfil it because if she did, the whole world would be in her things."

"What do you mean?"

"In the wishes. There would be no space for anything else."

The children most often argued that "it would be unfair," "you shouldn't do like that, it's not fair," and "the goldfish would not let herself be deceived like that." The donor appears to be

"a provider" but also "a guardian" of justice and the rules of how wonder operates. The same arguments were repeated after hearing *The Tale of the Magic Leaf*.

## Conclusion

The designed educational activity revealed categories filled with meanings, as the child participants discovered and discussed the story. The utterances made by kindergarten and early-school children constitute the core of issues and notions that could become the basis for developing a concept of classes where the analysis of a fairy tale and the rules of its world trigger the analysis of social and ethical issues. Deliberations on *The Goldfish* were encouraged by creating a child-centred learning environment, going beyond recollection objectives, which dominate educational packages (focusing on "why" rather than on "what if") and the readiness to listen to pupils carefully. The linearity of children's thoughts hardly applies in this case as the text's components were re-interpreted many times. Nevertheless, the most frequently mentioned threads by the children can be enumerated. The pupils' proposals mostly consider the relationships between humans (not only spouses), setting borders/limits, addiction, enslavement and liberation, and justice at the micro-, mezzo- and macro-level (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Greed as an unbecoming attitude (and a negatively formulated moral, "greedy persons cannot be winners", often expressed by the authors of educational materials constructed around *The Goldfish*) is only one of the elements discussed further. Children's utterances revealed the search for its causes and effects, both for the female character and for the rest of the world.

Children's ideas formulated as potential wishes expressed by the fairy-tale characters suggest that six-year-old children can explore the rules of wonder applicable in the story they heard. Moreover, they sought allusions and comparisons between this fairy tale and other ones, including literature works, films and theatre productions, referring to the category of wonder, villains or protagonists and the values of fairness or justice. In children's optics, Afanasyev's work combines the potential to approach values (Tatar, 2014) but also to discover the rules of the genre—including that of the anti-fairy tale's- poetics (Somoff, 2019). I consider fairy tales and anti-fairy tales as literary works of art, which fulfill an aesthetic function by attracting

attention to themselves, in addition to encouraging thinking about ourselves and the world we live in. In the context of wonder, seeking the “limit”, (namely wishes that cannot come true) revealed that children favour the freedoms and powers assigned to the donor. They did not accept immortality—the characters in fairy tales “lived happily ever after until they died”. Some solutions could be considered as matching the anti-fairy tale concept (e.g. a computer, a car), and threads from Marvel could suggest a fascinating merger of tradition with pop culture. Constructing reflections on the fish’s motivation could also give grounds to re-writing the story from her perspective.

*The Goldfish*, which deviates from traditional stories in that the final state does not contain “an added value”, is not a celebration of optimism for the human characters in the tale, as it inverts the “rags to riches” norm and, in fact, becomes anti-materialistic. Instead, it could perhaps be considered a “victory” of the wonder world in the fairy tale, which did not surrender to corruption and did not grant the wife’s final wish. The story does not contain a thread of initiation, overcoming obstacles and transformation though initiation is both a staple theme and a structural feature of wonder tales (Vaz da Silva, 2008, p. 487). It is interesting to note what strategies children would suggest in re-writing the story of the fisherman, his wife and the fish, assuming that wonder tales depict only the ascending part of the hero’s life pattern.<sup>4</sup> Such a change would fit the genre’s life process. A new version of the *Little Mermaid* movie (a part of the great fairy tale industry to which children are constantly exposed, and one which teachers can either ignore or use as an opportunity to build educational situations) was screened quite recently. Originally, it was a literary anti-fairy tale, both of whose movie versions are, ironically, structurally closer to a standard fairy tale rooted in oral tradition than Andersen’s narrative (cf. Bendix, 1993).

As Gert Biesta (2006) emphasises, education is the space to introduce new beginnings. In response to a given beginning implemented by someone else, every human can come into the presence of their irreplaceable uniqueness. Children’s deliberations and interpretative actions related to *The Goldfish* can become an argument for the renewed presence of the text in the educational space. A new beginning for fairy tales (including folk and literary tales) in schools and kindergartens is an invitation to a human coming into presence.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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<sup>4</sup> It would be interesting to find out whether children would change the age of the fisherman and his wife.

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