

Role of School Libraries in Promoting Cultural Heritage Through a Collection of Distinctive Folktales: Experience From the UAE

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Abstract: *This paper discusses the role of school libraries in the provision of distinctive collections of folktales and the importance of folktales in the development of students' cultural awareness. This study evaluates the influence of folktales and the result of methodology taken in the school library during a specific period.*

Keywords: *Folktales, Folklore, Fairytales, School library, Middle school, Senior school, Culture, Heritage, Tradition, Learning engagement, Indian folktales, Arabian folk.*

Introduction

Folktale is a traditional narrative. Usually, its origin is anonymous and handed down orally. Folk tales also called fairy tales or folklore of cultures having no written language. It is a story, myth or legend forming part of an oral tradition. The folktales cover animal stories, epics, fables, fairytales, legends, myths, etc. Folktale is transmitted by word of mouth and consists, as does written literature, of both prose and verse narratives, poems and songs, myths, dramas, rituals, proverbs, riddles, and the like. That is, the folktales have been passed down through the oral tradition. Folktales can be powerful tools for teaching children about diverse cultures, (DeVries & Zan, 1984; Lickona, 1992; Noddings, 2002) and the perceived heroes and heroines within them (Mello, 2001).

Folktales act on children as a mirror to reflect their own culture, at the same time providing a window to learn, imbibe and respect others' culture. The preservation of heritage, tradition and natural history has its own value. Reading of folktales will help in understanding the

cultural values of various communities and strengthen community relations. The influence of folktales is alive and great even today. Despite the advent of contemporary literature, folktales are unique and different from other types of literary fiction in many ways. This research proposal discusses and evaluates the importance of folktale collection in school libraries, some techniques to promote reading folktales effectively, and how it helps students in the development of their moral behavior.

Origin and development of the Folktales

‘Of the origins of folk literature, as of the origins of human language, there is no way of knowing’ (Encyclopedia Britannica). Today’s available literature is not primitive in any sense. So, there's no way to know the origins of folk literature. Depending as it does upon the transmission from person to person and being subject to the skill or the lack of skill of those who pass on and to the many influences. This might be physical or social, that consciously or unconsciously affects a tradition. If we observe the present-day results of the folktale practices extending over many thousands of years, we can assess only the history of continual changes of folktales. Khelef (2010) defines folk tales as a “type of narrative formed by the integration and narration of a real event with imaginative adventures.” Foster (1967) says that it is sometimes better to listen to the books than read them.

Folktales: History and characteristics

‘Folktales are rich oral histories grounded in cultural tradition and life experiences’ (Samuel, Stephanie 2005). The folktales might have taken place long ago in a faraway place. This might have existed from ancient times. Talking animals, giants, fairies, princes, and princesses, as well as farmers and ordinary folks, are featured characters that give life to stories. The main characteristic of folktales is transcending the generations of people who passed on those stories. The original folktales might have been transmitted orally from an unknown storyteller to another unknown storyteller and were eventually written down, but it continues to evolve, and are shaped according to the conditions of the times. Children can understand different languages, dialects and how culture has changed globally and chronologically in folktales using storytelling in children's education dates back to very early ages (Smith & Wiese, 2014).

Many folkloric genres figure in the storytelling traditions of cultural communities across the world. Within the framework of multi- or intercultural education, this has inspired the use of folktales from around the world as sources of knowledge and understanding of different cultural groups. Published collections of folks- and fairy tales, both for children and adults,

often provide support for this view as they “presuppose a connection between folklore and culture, either explicitly or implicitly” (Langlois, 2008, p. 312). Folktales reflect culture because it relates to the way of life of the people who produce it, their ceremonies, their institutions, their crafts and so on. That is folktales are influenced by the specific culture. It also expresses customs, beliefs, attitudes, and way of thinking of the people. Folktales never cease. It will be relevant, even today and will remain so in the future because the indigenous knowledge and wisdom found in the folktales keep us connected to our traditions and indeed help shape our culture. The promotion of folktales also causes the children to be given a glimpse into a world where fantasy and reality meet. Folktales can be considered an essential part of people’s cultural heritage because it presents the basis of narrative art. Reading folktales provide an opportunity to get metalinguistic awareness too.

Importance of folktales

According to this research, it is exactly in the multiplicity and diversity of children’s transactions with folktales that we can find the greatest intercultural educational potential of these materials. Folktales can promote student understanding of the personal dimensions and standards of behavior of another culture while reducing stereotypes (Bosma, 1992). As a resource for student instruction, the multiethnic diversity of folktales and the analysis of their structures and characteristics introduce problem-solving techniques to students, since folktales rely on some action to resolve a problem (Young & Ferguson, 1995). Usually, Children’s literature is a mixture of imaginative and unrealistic glimpses of morality, through teachings that may portray traditions, customs, social and civic values. These kinds of stories may not guide the children with moral and cultural values. But the folktales allow children to assimilate these values by narration and role playing. The folktales also have moulded characters by carrying many social, moral, and cultural values. That is, folktales are recognized as a source of cultural learning.

Folktales help children to develop strong reading skills, study other cultures, model positive character traits, and discover a love of stories. The collection of folktales leads children to immerse in timeless stories and help them to discover a love of reading. The highly engaging folktales represent a range of diverse story traditions. The folktales are easy to remember and share and make it easier for children to differentiate characters, follow a plotline or recall a sequence of events. Reading folktales can also help children develop the critical reading skills of phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension needed to meet the requirements defined in various standards for reading. The education scholars have approached folktales as a source of knowledge and understanding of different cultures. Children can understand different languages, dialects and how culture has changed globally and chronologically in folktales using storytelling in children's education dates back very early ages (Smith & Wiese,

2014). They are said to teach pupils about the social knowledge and cultural mores of diverse cultural groups, including their customs, values and worldviews, hopes, dreams, and fears (Jarvey et al., 2008; Magliocco, 1992; Mindich Bieger, 1995; Santino, 1991).

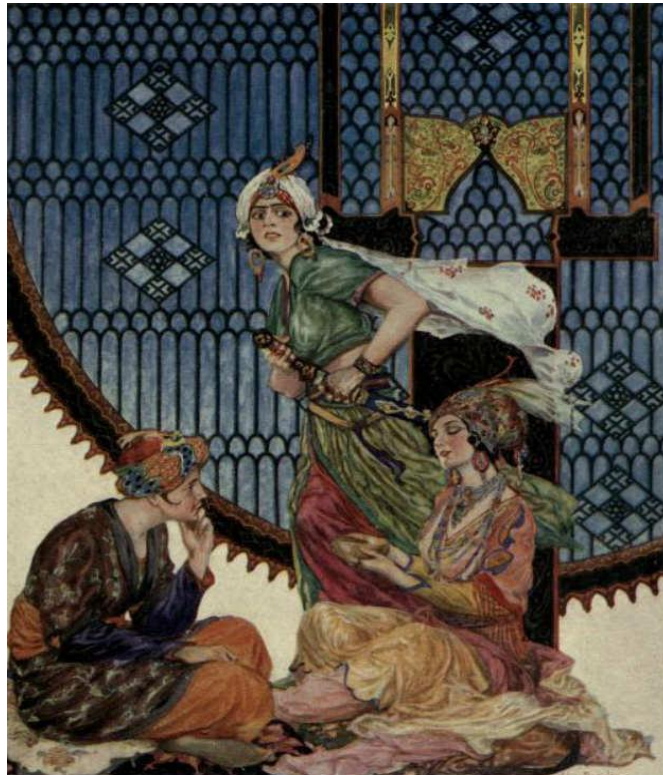
‘Folktales act as cultural transmitters’ (Leimgruber, 2010). Every culture has its own long traditions of oral storytelling. Students can learn about their own culture and transmit the same to others by studying folklore and by collecting folklore from their own families. Once the children start reading, they can find allusions to familiar folk heroes and rhymes throughout popular culture. Folktales bridge the link of popular culture and heritage with academic subjects and skills such as literacy, drama, music, civic education, and social studies. For example, *Keepers of the Earth* -Native American stories and environmental activities for children by Caduto and Bruchac (1988). Students achieve historical knowledge and skills through reading short stories about historical characters from folktales. Therefore, folktales can be employed as means to teach language arts and to instill historical values and develop desirable attitudes. Folktales are assumed to promote appreciation of the reality of human diversity and empathy with people of other cultures (Fuhler et al., 1998; Smith and Wiese, 2006; Young and Ferguson, 1995).

Folk tales in the Arabic region:

Arab civilization has some of the most distinctive and prismatic stories and legends in the world, with numerous of the stories being passed down orally from generation to generation over thousands of years. While some of these are known to be pure myths and have taken the part of the common fairytales among Arabs, numerous others still hold a hint that they really did take place, which makes these myths and legends ever more exciting.

The fantastic world of Arabic folk tales lets us immerse ourselves in the myth and lore that inspired innumerable Asian and European folk tales and folk stories. Arabian folk tales also initiate the readers into mysterious fiefdoms of innumerable wealth and unmatched beauty. They contain tales of goblins, genies and talking animals and heroic princes and goddesses that charm and delight. Arabic folk tales circulated orally for thousands of times and are embedded in ancient and medieval culture and myth including Egyptian, Persian, Indian and Mesopotamian influence. When Arabian folktales were first written down formally in the 14th century, they were contained in Syrian Arabic handwriting. Arabic folk tales are a source of entertainment and not tales for moral assignments and religious custom, unlike other counterparts. These folk tales are robust with themes of love and magic that offered innumerable gleamings of entertainment, and inspired a rich culture of fables, grand runes, literal stories, songs, and arts that have circulated the world over. One of the most prominent fairy tales from the Arabian region, the legend of Aladdin has captured the imagination of

children and grown-ups from all over the world. ‘The Thousand and One Nights’ or ‘Arabian Nights,’ is a collection of Arabian and South Asian folk tales that might be published together in the Islamic golden age. In this collection of the book of "One Thousand and One Nights", the story tells of the young, impoverished man Aladdin, who embarks on a series of adventures after being tricked by an evil sorcerer and encountering a magical genie. The wide collection of Arabic folktales is an important attraction of the U.A.E school libraries. The English version of the Arabic folktales help children from various language and cultural backgrounds to understand the Arabic culture and traditions.



“She wore a magnificent necklace of jewels.” Illustration by Frances Jenkins Olcott from *More Tales from the Arabian Nights* by Edward William Lane, published 1915.

Indian folktales and its influence in the Arabian region

The rich culture and vast landscape of India come alive in its ancient folk tales and folklore. Indian folktales are both in verse and prose. It has an extensive range of short stories and mythological legends, which emerge from all walks of life. Famous scholar of Indian literature A.K. Ramanujan gives a unique definition of folktales in preface of his book *Folktales from India*, “a poetic text that carries some of its cultural context within it; it is also a travelling metaphor that finds a new meaning with each new telling.’ This definition of

folktales does not limit the tales to oral or written forms. He frees the folktales from oral and prosaic forms. Folktales cross all the linguistic boundaries when a bilingualist tells it or hears it.

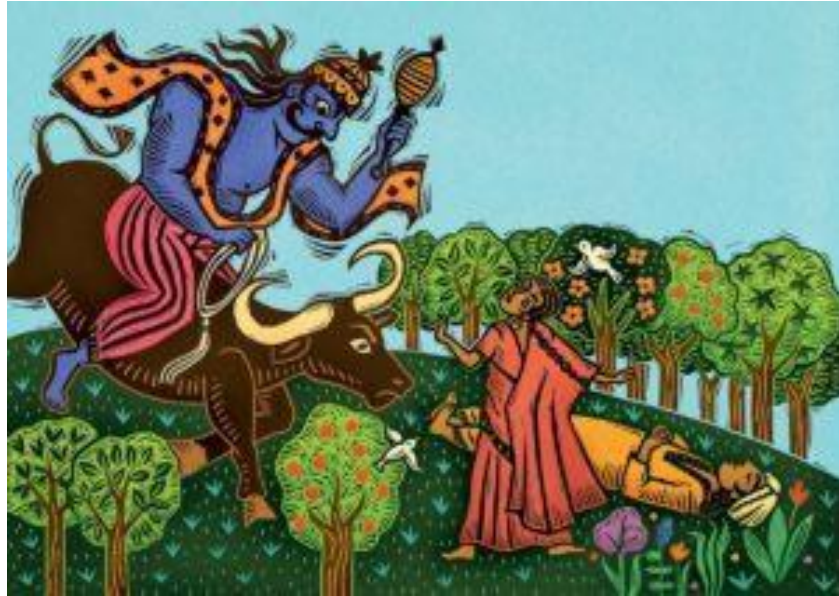
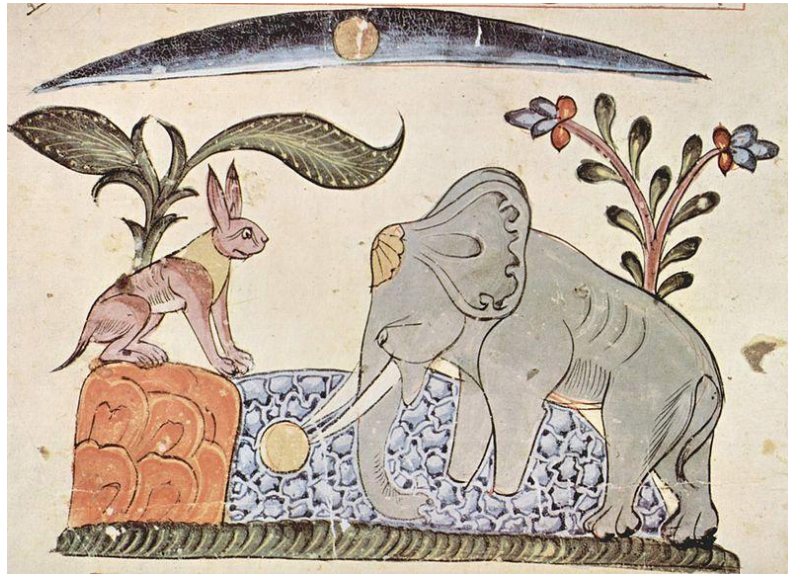


Illustration of Ancient Indian Folktales <https://mediaindia.eu/culture/revisiting-indian-folklores/>

India is one of the world's richest sources of folktales. The Indian tales are full of lofty thoughts and metaphors. Indian folktales are not merely folktales, but all forms of oral traditions mirror the culture and values of the land in which they take place. It contains proverbs, aphorisms, anecdotes, rumours, songs, impromptu folk street plays. Indian folktales discuss Indian family structure, competition, love, hatred, honesty, cooperation, and betrayal within family. The famous stories of Indian folktales are Panchatantra, Hitopadesha, Jataka, Akbar-Birbal, etc.



‘Panchatantra contains various stories of animals in verse and prose’

<https://mediaindia.eu/culture/revisiting-indian-folklores/>

From ancient times, Indian & Arabic literature and culture are known for their richness. Folktales and fairytales were passed down through Middle East communities hundreds of years ago by Indian traders. Indian tales circulated throughout the Middle East along with European tales during the 18th century. It has been continued today by reading and preserving with the support of public and academic libraries. We can see the presence and circulation of Indian folktales in every school library in the U.A.E. Children grow up reading Aesop’s fables, Panchatantra and Vikramaditya’s tales of wisdom. On the other hand, famous Arabic folktales influenced Indian languages and community by its English translation.



‘Jataka tales are the stories about the previous lives of the Buddha, in both human and animal form.,

<https://mediaindia.eu/culture/revisiting-indian-folklores/>

On the internet, countless lesson plans for using folktales to foster cultural understanding are available today. In these sessions, the folktales are often said to represent the ways of life and values of 'the people' of different cultures. That is, the video format of folktales in different languages (with suitable subtitles) also helps children to access various cultures.



'Akbar Birbal' <https://moralstories26.com/tag/akbar-birbal-stories/>

Promotion of cultural heritage through folktales

'Folktales are often approached as multi- or intercultural educational tools to introduce pupils to the literary, social, and cultural heritage of diverse cultures' (Young and Ferguson, 1995). Numerous partake of the idea that through reading folktales children won't only gather knowledge, but also more empathy and have knowledge of other lives. However, we cannot consider only the introduction of folktales as the promotion of 'diverse' cultures. But it can easily reify reductive notions of cultural difference. In this study, we can see that the continuous critical approaches on folktales through involvement in various related activities will provide children more opportunity to understand diverse cultures deeply. The Critical approaches on folktales help children to get awareness on various national and international cultural issues along with the relief from conservativeness.

The promotion of the cultural heritage among students can only be through a healthy collection of the distinctive collection of folktales. That is, the availability of various folktales from different countries is very important. In the school libraries in the U.A.E., we can find the availability of folktales from China, Japan, Korea, Africa, Latin America, India, Europe, Native America, and the Middle East. A wealthy collection of the folktales leads to the

healthy choices among students. All these folktales show various cultural backgrounds and reflect different customs among students.

Many research shows that children's cultural schemata, mainly based on their family, community, past experiences, and socialization, are shaped by factors of age, gender, ethnicity, class, and socioeconomic status. Children may not be fully influenced by a particular culture; they make different selections from the multiple possibilities offered by the text. The collection and promotion of distinctive folktales leads to the development of opportunities to engage children's valuable and diverse experiences and knowledge in cultural heritage. By the effective implementation of various activities, we can achieve this in the school library. Writing 'short stories' and 'book reviews' on folktales can provide opportunities for rewriting one of the stories in their own words with emphasis on the moral and civic values learnt and connecting the story. By creating short movies on storytelling, students can bring individual custom, traditions along with use of their mother languages. Through the effective participation in different activities, we can expect children to develop their knowledge of perennial cross-cultural folkloric genres as an important basis of cultural literacy.

Methodology

As part of this research, a cultural reading program was conducted in the school containing children's literature rooted in folktales, fairytales, and religious stories from diverse cultural traditions. The context of the study was the school library sessions. Around 600 children from primary and middle school groups (ages 9–13) participated in the same. English, Hindi and Arabic language folktale books were provided for the same. Most of the students in this research are children of Indian expatriates and hence the reference of Indian & Arabic language books predominantly.

Students have read at least three 'other language' titles along with English language folktale in this reading program. Primary children mostly selected animal fables and, middle-school students have mostly chosen Akbar-Birbal stories and the Arabian night stories. The research aimed on this intervention program was to promote diverse cultures along with the stimulation of their cultural literacy. This study has given an opportunity to understand how folktales can stimulate children's cultural literacy within ethnically, religiously, regionally, and socio-economically diverse classrooms.

The principal research question guiding the study is “role of school libraries in promoting cultural heritage through a collection of distinctive folktales in the U.A.E. school libraries”. The study employed with the application of various methods to promote the reading of

folktales between April 2021 and May 2022. The implementation of various clustering techniques with the efficient support of technologies promoted the reading of folktales in school libraries. Through various techniques, the role of school libraries in the development of moral behavior among students was shown through the folktale collection. This study showed how the common elements in folktales serve to increase children's empathy with people of other cultures. The use of folktales allowed students to experience one of the ways a society develops a sense of moral behavior in its children.

1. **Acquisition of folktales of different languages from authentic publishers:** During this research period, the selection and acquisition of folktales and fairytales have enhanced and purchase of necessary collection for library according to libraries annual budgets was done. Along with the library purchase, the donation of folktales from parents have helped the library as a valuable source of enriching book collection.
2. **Reading Challenge:** Reading challenge provided goals and incentives to a targeted student group for the last one year. Reading challenge has provided a set of goals for students for the academic year 2021-22. The students have typically targeted to borrow folktale books along with other reading books.
3. **Online quizzes:** The active participation of students in folktale quizzes have been helping to keep an open discussion among students. By participating in quizzes students tend to read the folktales more and raise their grades by simply preparing questions. Conducting quizzes in the library help students to place in the right attitude for reading folktales.
4. **Collaborative approach on book trailers/storytelling videos:** With the help of technology, students created short movies to tell their folktale story. This collaborative approach helped to share various cultural values and traditions with the application of mother languages.
5. **Poster making activities:** Designing posters on folktales helps to reflect various languages and cultures. The greatest advantage of poster making is that it facilitates collaboration and understanding along with providing creative thinking and extensive research and reading on folktales.
6. **Book talks/Book reviews:** Students get opportunity to criticize and rate the folktale books through book reviews. Through the book talk, children become closer to the story and share more knowledge on values that reflect in the books. Book reviews on folktales give more visibility and a greater chance of finding more readers.

7. **Celebration of International days:** Celebration of the international days help students to get an awareness on social and cultural issues. Conducting special discussions and speeches on the role of folktales develops cultural awareness among students. International days are occasions to educate various culture and tradition along with addressing global problems.
8. **Survey among students and parents:** Surveys can be powerful tools to help school library gather valuable data and suggestions from students. By conducting the surveys, libraries can get students' aptitude along with the suggestions. Student survey data that is responsibly collected has the chance to influence library decisions and initiate a change in perspectives. Similarly, data that is gathered at the various levels have a significantly greater degree of impact to the decision in the library.

To determine the influence of folktales, a survey is conducted among students. The active participation of students from grade 4 to grade 10 helped to complete this survey. There is no study conducted of children in kindergarten and lower primary level (Grade 1-3) engaging with elements in these folk tales as representative of culture and heritage. The participants did interpret elements such as setting based on their own, culturally diverse, experiences and knowledge. The survey reflected students' perception on the folktale collection and opinion to enhance library practices. Survey analysis has been demonstrated in this paper with the help of graphs and pie charts. The survey data indicate that children as young as 8 up to 15 can grasp the multiplicity of folktale character traits which may prevent simplistic negative or positive stereotyping.

Findings:

- Well-planned learning engagement activities with proper plan of action helped drive students' research and learning.
- Having gotten exposure to diverse cultures and traditions through folktales, students are more inclusive in their approach to the people they interact with.
- The implementation of different learning engagements has helped to develop a new reading folktale culture, thereby increasing the book circulation.
- Book talks and book reviews helped to cultivate a folktale reading culture.

- The implementation of 'Arabic Reading Challenge' brought amazing results in the reading of Arabic folktales and promotion of the host country language.
- Conducting surveys among students and parents helped to bring parents' involvement in the school library through their valid suggestions and also allowed students' voice and choice in library collection.
- Celebration of international days (World Book Day, International Writers Day, International Mother Language Day, etc.) by organizing cultural events with different dressing styles and traditional foods has given an amazing result in terms of getting awareness of other languages and culture.
- The preparation and presentation of online quizzes in the school library helped to bring a positive attitude among students to choose folktales.

Statement of the Research Problem

Folktales have been observed to be the most common of all types of literature in language classes. The important feature of folktales is that it allows children to experience adventures they cannot attain in real life. The folktales impart courage and wisdom in overcoming problems, through the vision of the heroes' conquering monsters, giants, dragons, and other evil forces. During this research period, came across a few challenges in promoting folktales;

- The current generation does not have enough knowledge about traditional cultures and customs and their value to society.
- Students' have limited ideas about various cultures, values, and traditions of different communities.
- Children do not have the opportunity or involvement to understand the importance of diversity from a local and international standpoint.
- Less interest in mother languages / regional languages.
- Lack of awareness of national / regional customs and traditions.
- Reading opportunity of home languages is lesser than the international languages in the school library.

- Insufficient stock of folktales in school library, be it physical books or in digital format
- Some children have less interest in folk stories or think they are irrelevant, especially kids of middle and senior age group.
- During the distance learning time (the pandemic period), the majority of students opted for digital resources (e-books) for reading.
- We cannot deny the significance of original folktales and their cultural, aesthetic, and moral values. In certain instances, when these are rewritten, there could be some conflict with its original essence.
- There is no participation from kindergarten and lower primary (grade 1-3) students in the survey and this study. So, there is no evidence of their engaging with elements in these folk tales as representative of culture and heritage.

Conclusion

This proposal highlights how folktales help students to experience, from within the school library, the different ways in which they can develop a sense of moral behavior. Upon researching across primary and senior school, the roles of folktales and fairy tales span from teaching literacy to ethnography. Folktales offer children the opportunity and skills to cope with such challenges, both personally and academically.

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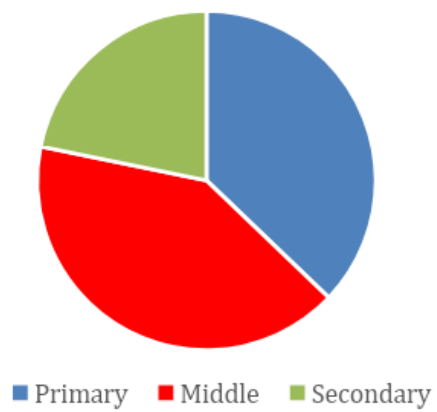
Statement of Originality

This statement certifies that the paper above is based upon original research undertaken by the author and that the paper was conceived and written by the author alone and has not been published elsewhere. All information and ideas from other sources are referenced.

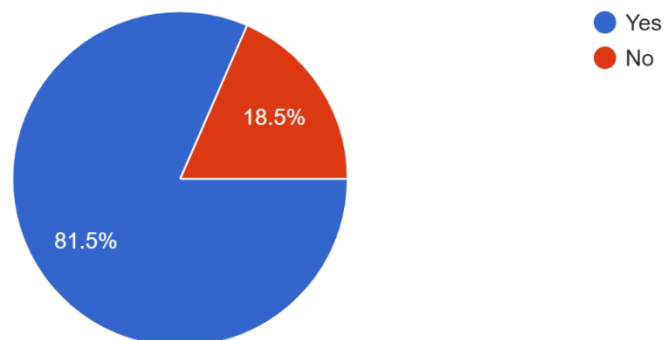
Appendix

Survey Questionnaire and Responses

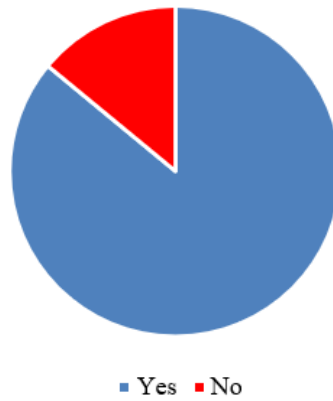
Level of participation



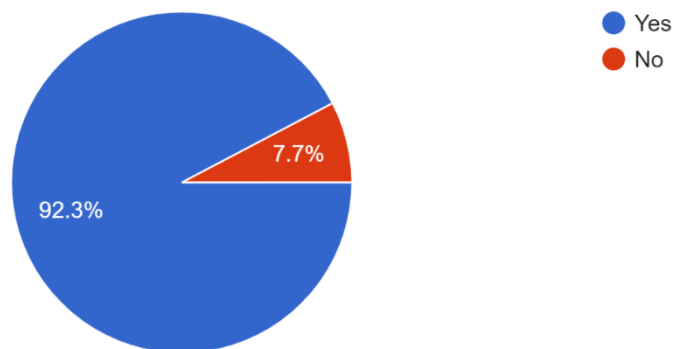
Do you like to read folktales and fairytales?



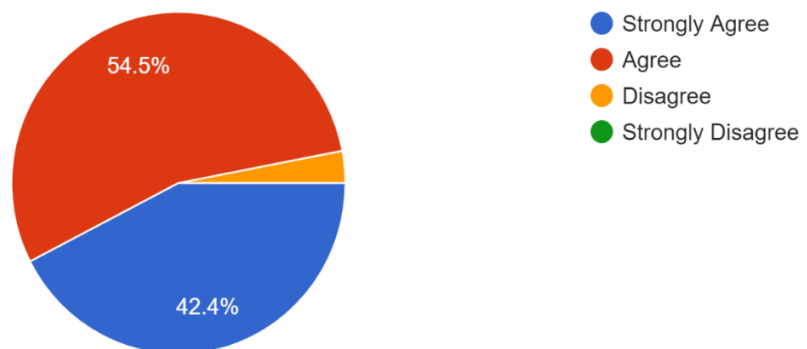
Have you ever borrowed a fairytale / folktale book from your school library?



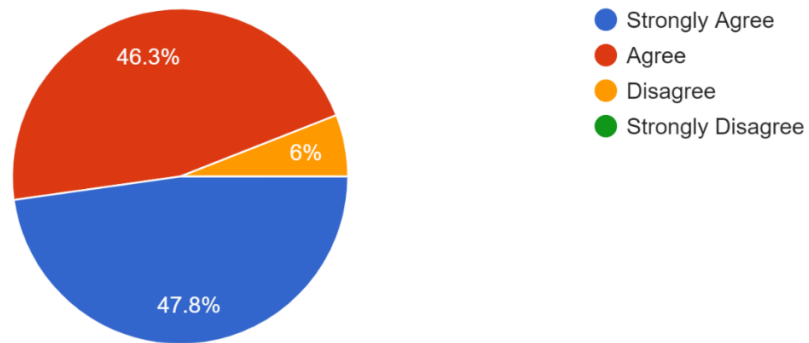
Do you know that fairytales and folktales come from all over the world?



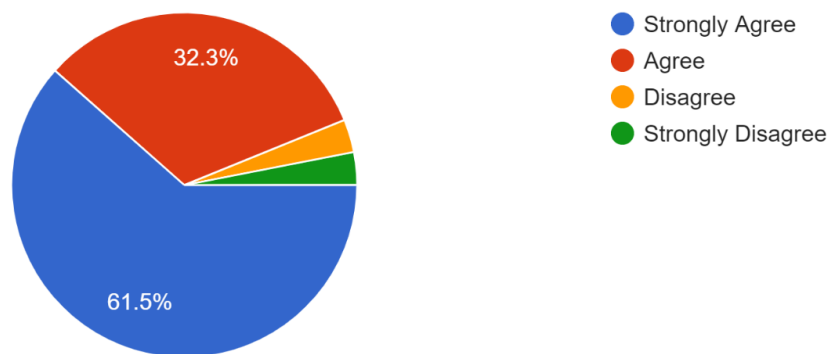
Folktales and fairytales help for moral instruction



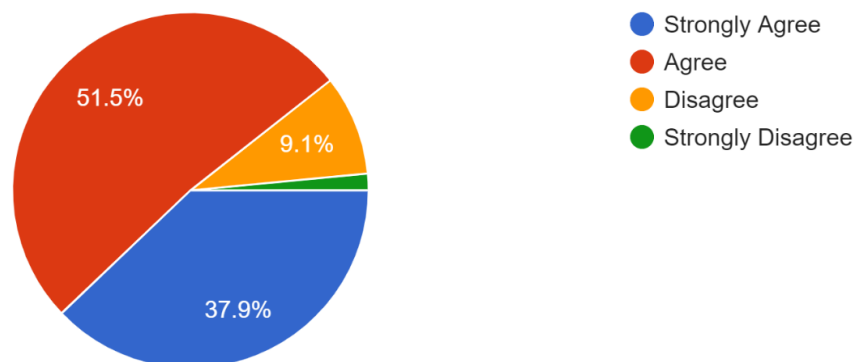
Folk and fairy tales promote diversity and cultural understanding



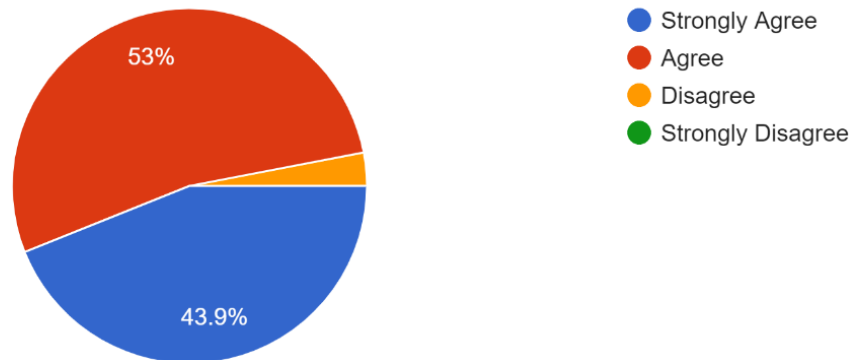
Folktales have a country of origin



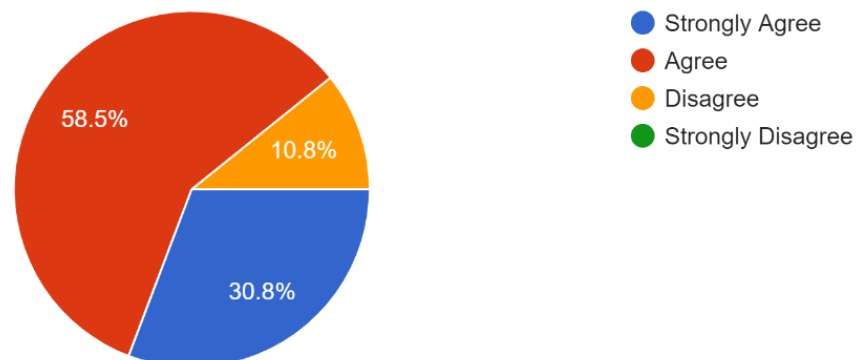
Folk and fairytales are important for the children to read



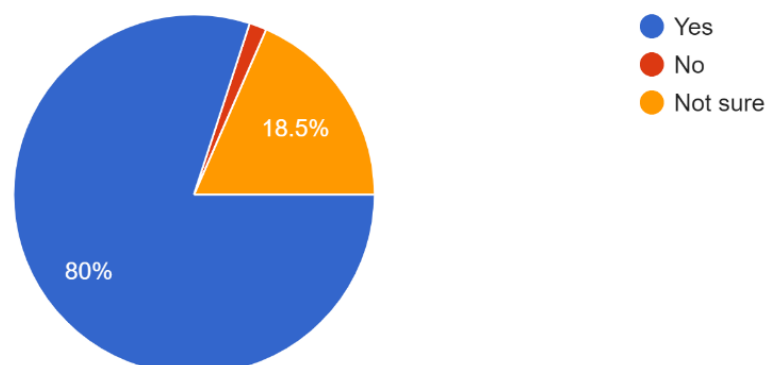
The use of folktales allows students to experience one of the ways a society develops a sense of moral behavior



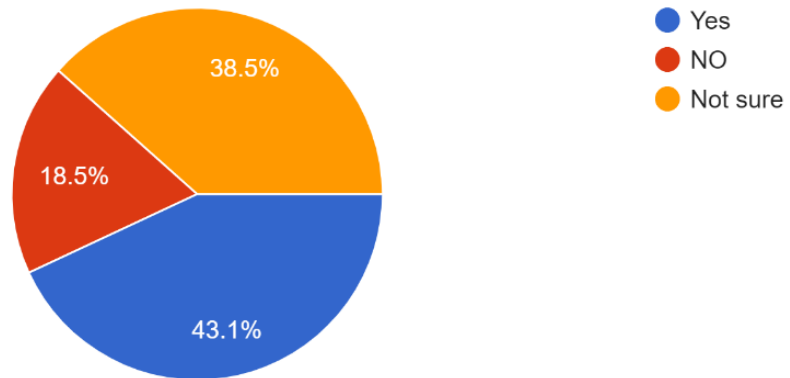
The implementation of various activities with the efficient support of technology promoted the reading of folktales in school library



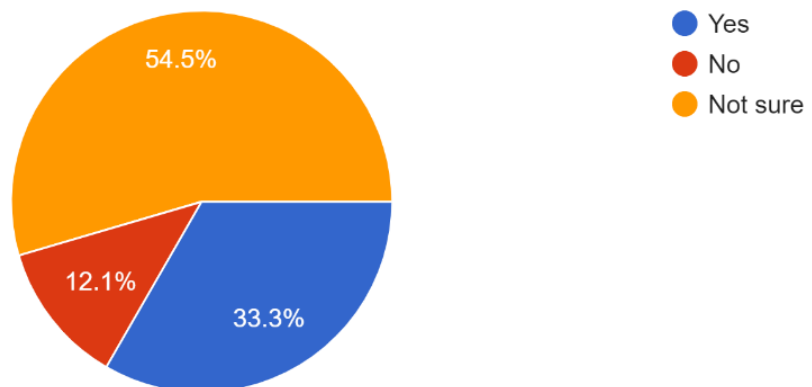
Do you think folktales are relevant for children?



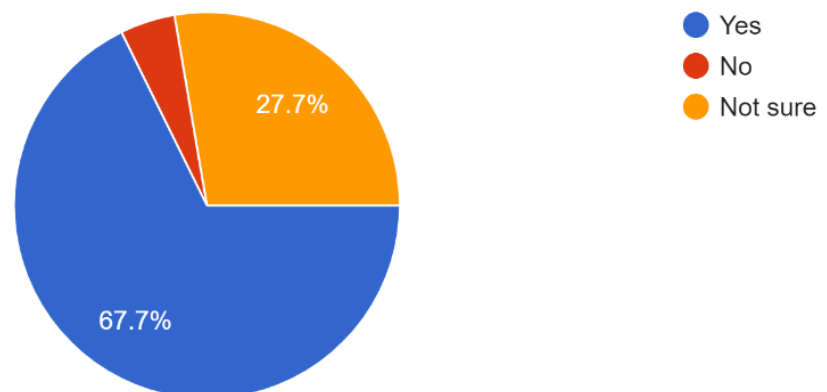
Less availability of various language books is a challenge in the promotion of folktales



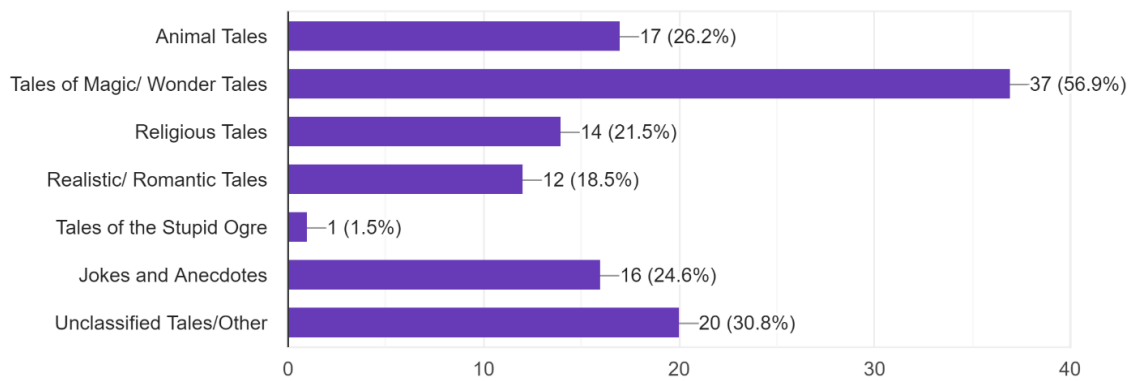
Sufficient digital versions of folktales are available in the school library



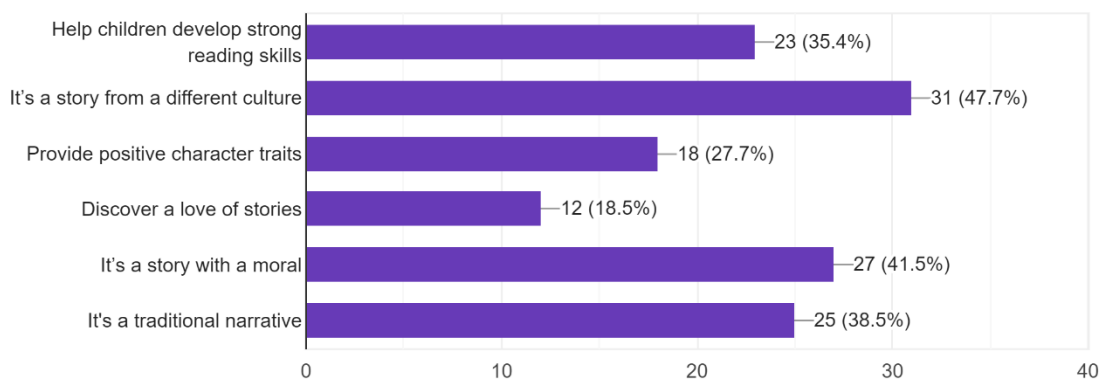
Sufficient folktale/fairytale books are available in your school library



Your favourite(s) folktale category



What best describes a folktale book to you? (Multiple answer)



Biography

M. O. Raghunathan MLISC Librarian, GEMS Modern Academy, Dubai, United Arab Emirates has been working in a multicultural environment since May 2007. He is of Indian origin, working in the Middle East region for the past 15 years. He has more than seventeen years' experience in the field of education and is a well-experienced librarian in CBSE, IGCSE, ICSE and IB curriculum. He has transformed the GEMS Library Network from the traditional system to 21st Century Library Network through collaborative and partnership approaches. Raghunathan has achieved many appreciations and awards in his professional life. Nominated for the IASL 2016 School Librarian Award, Finalist in the ELF School Librarian Award 2017 & 2021, Nominated for the ELF School Librarian Award 2018. Presented papers in IASL2015 Maastricht-The Netherlands, SIBF-ALA2015 Sharjah Conference, ILN-GCC Symposium 2018, Library Seminar 2017 at Ahmedabad-India, Young Scholars Congress 2019 Thiruvananthapuram-India, IASL2019 Dubrovnik-Croatia.