The wisdom of the fairy tale in building skills for sustainable living

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Abstract

According to UNESCO, education for sustainable development (ESD) is characterized by the concern for training the skills necessary for a human individual to relate responsibly to the natural, economic and socio-cultural environment in which he lives, minimizing or completely avoiding the negative effects of actions on the quality of his life and that of others. This finality of education for sustainable development requires the prioritization of moral education and shifts the focus to the development of moral consciousness and the formation of a value system agreed and assumed by all members of a community. Because it essentializes human values, the fairy tale constitutes an ideal learning content in relation to the objectives of moral education. The wide and varied symbolism of the heroes who evolve in the fairy tale world, the situations they go through and the key tools in overcoming some crises turn the fairy tale into a source of learning with a safe and deep impact on the student, both cognitively and affective and volitional. Knowing the interdependence between the professional skills of the teacher and the training of the student's skills (Ceobanu et al., 2020, p. 277), a teacher has the duty to know what are the sources and contents of learning that optimally respond to the educational needs and interests of those whom he guides. Therefore, the teachers' conception of the educational potential of the fairy tale is a determining factor in the application or exclusion of this content from the instructive-educational/school activities. The study we are carrying out aims to determine the level of knowledge of the educational potential of the fairy tale by teachers from schools on both banks of the Prut and provides valuable data about their beliefs regarding the effectiveness of the fairy tale in training and educating the younger generations.

Keywords: fairy tale, education, sustainable development, sustainability

1. Introduction

Based on the experimental results obtained in our research, we analyze in this article the conditions under which the fairy tale, considered as learning content, could be effective in relation to the objectives of education for sustainable development. In this analysis, we capitalize on data collected in a pedagogical experiment, in which we aimed to determine the general conception of teachers regarding the educational potential of fairy tales. We will pay increased attention to the discussion about the efficiency of the fairy tale in training skills specific to education for sustainable development. The motivation for this

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analysis lies in our concern to identify all the ways in which the fairy tale could be effectively harnessed within formal education.

To be competent from the point of view of adopting and developing a sustainable lifestyle implies showing at any moment of life a correct, disciplined, balanced conduct, so that the relationship with the natural physical world, with the economic environment and with human society does not present damages of any kind. Such behavior is acquired especially in the context of education through and for values, a component that the postmodern paradigm of education, under which education is carried out today in Romania and the Republic of Moldova, prioritizes. The educational context thus created is favorable to the achievement of Objective 4 (Quality education) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted in 2015 by the member states of the United Nations Organization. Peace, ethics and responsibility, gender equality, cultural diversity, tolerance, respect are themes addressed transversally at the level of formal and non-formal pre-university education in Romania, through which the goal of quality education is mainly pursued. When we talk about the quality of education, we have to admit that its most fundamental measure is given by the human, moral and professional quality of the school graduate. This is reflected in the protective and constructive conduct of the individual manifested in relation to everything around him. To the development of the skills that describe this time of conduct, the formation of which is followed throughout the schooling period, the contents of the learning whose selection and didactic processing require increased attention contribute significantly.

Over time, starting from the appearance (in 1812) of the first collection of fairy tales collected by the Brothers Grimm, specialized literature in fields such as folkloristics, aesthetics, linguistics, psychology abounds with direct statements or suggestions regarding the educational valences of fairy tales. Considered the storehouse of perennial human values, the fairy tale could be perceived as an ideal learning content for the formation of moral conduct claimed by the specific framework of a lifestyle based on the principles of sustainable development. But the decision that this literary species becomes one of the contents that enjoys a generous space in school programs must be based on empirical studies carried out in the specific framework of formal education. An important role in the selection of learning contents is presented by teachers' beliefs regarding the effectiveness of the learning contents on the basis of which they organize their teaching intervention. These beliefs represent a strong motivational factor in the direction of the trainers' option for capitalizing on any learning content, implicitly the fairy tale, in the instructive-educational activities.

2. **The teacher's role in selecting learning contents. Theoretical framework**

According to the French philosopher and sociologist E. Durkheim (apud Nicola, 2003, p. 39) „education is the action of adult generations on young ones, with the aim of forming

them, to the latter, certain physical, intellectual and mental states necessary for social life and the special environment for which they are intended."

As we can see, the philosopher emphasizes the role of the trainer (represented in his definition by the *adult generations*) in the process of the learner's development, up to his perfection as a human being. The first teachers are the parents, from whom we take what and how much we need for a long time, because the duty to learn starts from the first day. (Şoitu, 2019, p 229). They are joined by their older brothers through their successes and, above all, through their mistakes (Şoitu, 2019, p 101), grandparents, neighbors, the priest, the community in their hometown and, later, the specialized people in the school premises. Of all the agents which can have the role of a trainer, we will consider only the teacher. In the Durkenian definition of education, the emphasized aspect is related to the effects of his action on the learner. These must be formative. Therefore,

Development is a complex process, determined and enhanced by certain factors whose action is exerted from the inside or outside on the organism or the evolving phenomenon. When we refer to the ontogenetic development of the human individual, we have in mind its progressive growth from a physical, psychological, intellectual, spiritual point of view. This process is determined and stimulated by education in general and school education in particular. In the school space, the one responsible for the development of all dimensions of the human being is, depending on the level of schooling, the educator/teacher/teacher. His roles, within the school and outside it, are multiple. We recall the inventory made by Anita Woolfolk (apud Nicola, 2003 p.562), which includes the most frequent poses of the teacher: expert of the teaching-learning act; motivating agent; leader; guidance counselor; model; reflective professional; manager. Professor Ioan Nicola adds the role of social pedagogue, exercised when the child left the school space, but continues to be an educator for his people, actively taking part and understanding its social-cultural turmoil (Nicola, 2003, p.563). In a volume (from 1999) of school psychology, coordinated by A. Cosmovici and L. Ivan, the pedagogue A. Neculau lists and describes four functions of the teacher in the school: a) organizer of the educational process; b) educator; c) partner in education and d) member of the teaching staff. The last two functions refer to other roles of the teacher, which we can describe as: *mediator of the school-family relationship* and *mentor / learning partner* or even *model of moral integrity* for the professional community to which he belongs.

We find that the role of the teacher is not limited to the relationship with the student to mediate knowledge, but this role is defining for the profession of educator. In essence, the teacher is the leader of the didactic activity that is carried out in order to achieve the objectives provided in the school documents (Nicola, 2003, p. 562). In the absence of its intervention in order to make knowledge accessible, the information contained in school programs and textbooks remains outside the formative effect. They acquire educational value only as a result of their processing and transmission by the teacher within the instructional-educational activity in which the students participate. J. Hattie shows in his study (Visible Learning) that the most important educational contribution is that brought

by quality teaching (Hattie, 2014, p.303), but this aspect depends essentially on the general culture, the specialized culture and the psycho-pedagogical training of the teacher. The three components of the teacher's culture [Nicola, 2003, p.563] will allow him to interact effectively with all learning contents in the direction of their selection and processing, facilitating the student's conscious and thorough appropriation.

According to Ioan Nicola (2003), the selection of learning contents is based on philosophical, scientific, psychological, pedagogical criteria. Knowledge of these criteria by the tutor is the condition for a responsible and correct choice for approaching or rejecting a learning content that can have positive or negative effects on the student's development. In addition, to the fundamental theoretical knowledge in his field of expertise, the teacher has the obligation to have a good psycho-pedagogical training, so that he is able to effectively associate the learning content with the appropriate teaching-learning method, aware at every moment of the changes on which his didactic intervention must produce in the formation of the student.

Taking into account the important role of the teacher in selecting learning contents, we included in our experimental research a component aimed at defining the *current conception of teachers in Romania and the Republic of Moldova about the educational effects of the fairy tale.* We believe that the study we propose is one of the few references in the literature on teachers*' attitudes* towards the *learning contents* they teach students. Although in the last five decades, the study of attitudes in the school environment has enjoyed an increased interest from researchers, the vast body of studies to which we have had access totals research on teachers' attitudes towards new elements that define the school framework (for example: the use of technology, open educational resources), towards new legislative provisions (integration of students with special educational needs into mainstream school) or towards students and their parents. A considerable number of studies concern teachers' attitudes towards new learning techniques or modern methods of teaching and/or assessment. Our searches were directed specifically to previous works, in the field of educational sciences, describing the conception, attitude or interest of teachers in integrating the fairy tale into the series of learning contents, and what we could see was their absence.

For the Romanian space, the situation found could be related to the fact that the current curricula of language and literature Romanian for the level of primary education do not make clear references to the fairy tale, in the sense of having been integrated into the series of literary species recommended to be studied at this level of schooling. As a result, the fairy tale is missing from some school textbooks for the primary level or occupies a space reduced to 1-6 pages in a textbook of about 150 pages. The described situation was found following the content analysis of 9 (alternative) textbooks of Romanian language and literature for the third grade, analysis integrated into our research. In the Republic of Moldova, the fairy tale is mentioned in the school curriculum (by the equivalent term *story),* but in textbooks it occupies the same limited space as in the Romanian ones. In the (unique) textbook of Romanian language and literature for the

third grade, there appear two fragments of fairy tales belonging to world literature, but do not total more than 3 pages. The data obtained from the content analysis of the mentioned curricula and textbooks justify advancing the idea that the integration of fairy tales into instructive-educational activities largely depends on the teacher's conception of the educational efficiency of this literary species.

3. Methodology

The pedagogical experiment we carried out between February and June 2023 integrated two components: *teacher training* and evaluation and *student training and evaluation.* In this article, we will refer only to the first component.

The training of the teaching staff assumed the empowerment of the participants in the segment of designing and supporting instructional-educational activities based on the dramatization of the fairy tale. The training course integrated 30 hours of instructional activities (14 hours- theoretical course, 16 hours- applications) and 10 hours of applications supported by each teacher with his students. After the theoretical training hours, the participants practiced, in teams, applications consisting in dramatizing sequences from Romanian folk tales and cults, an exercise in which they had the opportunity to intuit both the feelings, reactions, possible awareness among students, as well as the teacher's actions that were able to produce these effects. Then, daily, for two weeks, they carried out teaching-learning activities centered on the valorization of the fairy tale as learning content, a pretext for deepening or evaluating some knowledge or preparing some artistic moments for extracurricular activities.

The evaluation of teaching staff was carried out by applying an own tool, which I designed taking into account the possibility that the teachers in the research group may *disapprove*, *be reluctant* or *agree* with the idea of integrating the fairy tale into instructive-educational activities. The evaluation test was applied in three distinct moments of the pedagogical experiment: *initially* (at the beginning of the training course); *intermediate* (at the end of the teachers' training, before the period in which classroom activities were carried out with the students), *final* (after the lesson-type applications were carried out, at the level of the students' class).

The evaluation tool integrated 14 items of different types: 4 items with built answer (open/free) and 10 items with selected answer, as follows:

1. After the time allotted to dramatize the fairy tale, it can be useful for: (Select only one answer!)

a) a teaching unit; (b) a chapter; c) one school year; d) all life.

2. For the previously chosen variant, give only three arguments in favor of using the fairy tale in school. So why do you think the fairy tale makes the lesson more effective?

3. If you are or would become an educational policy maker/school principal/methodist, would you advocate the use of fairy tales?

a) Yes; b) No.

4. If YES, offer three arguments in favor of using the fairy tale!

5. Do you appreciate that in class work you can use the fairy tale?

a) Yes; b)No

6. If YES, how often:

a) weekly; b) monthly; c) half-yearly; d) annually

7. If you were forced to use the fairy tale, you would use it for:

a) learning; b) education.

8. For which content layout do you choose the fairy tale in your activities:

a) symbolism of characters; b) antagonistic situations; c) novel tests imposed on the hero; d) similarities with real life.

9. Do you use fairy tales to exemplify virtues/values/vices/behaviors/professions/models/conflicts/well-being/love of others/love of nature/suffering/wisdom/modesty, etc.?

1. Yes; b) No.

10. Give three examples of heroes who embody certain values.

11. Give three examples of characters who embody certain nonvalues.

12. Most often, you encourage your students:

a) read fairy tales; b) to tell fairy tales; c) write fairy tales; d) dramatize fairy tales.

13. By using dramatization as a method of study, the student succeeds:

a) differentiate between real and unreal; b) discover the consequences of good and bad deeds; c) to become aware of the cause-effect relationship between events/states/ emotions/reactions; d) understand the role and effect of well-chosen words; e) memorize replicas of characters; f) find out the difference between truth and falsehood; g) to be aware of which defects are most common in people; h) learn behaviors specific to dangerous situations (lived by heroes); i) to find motivations for the effort in defense of the good.

14. Role play and dramatization are methods by which participants:

a) experiences positive emotions and negative emotions during performance; b) is aware of the role of paraverbal and nonverbal language; c) build their own value system; d) issue value judgments; e)live situations similar to real life; f) become heroes, heroes of their future lives.

The calibration of the items allowed the calculation of a score for each participant. Depending on the integration of the score in a certain interval, each participant was given a descriptive level (of accepting the action of integrating the fairy tale into instructive-educational activities):

-minimal level- score below 20 p- indicates an attitude against the study of fairy tales in school;

- average level- score between 21-30 p- shows reluctance towards the idea of studying fairy tales in school;

- optimal level- score between 30-40 p - indicates a favorable attitude to studying fairy tales in school.

The scores obtained in the three tests were compared to identify the differences recorded from one stage of the training to another.

The batch consisted of 36 teachers for primary and secondary education, 23 from Romania and 13 from the Republic of Moldova; 19 participants work in urban schools, and 17 in rural schools. Regarding the training level, there were 4 beginners in the batch; 4 teaching staff with permanent qualifications; 5 with teaching grade II; 22 with teaching degree I and 1 doctoral student.

4. Results

To describe current conception of teachers about the effectiveness of studying fairy tales in school, we were interested in the following categories of information:

- information that reflects theoretical knowledge about the fairy tale;

- information that reflects the knowledge regarding the methodology of studying the fairy tale at the level of primary classes;

- information that reflects the level of awareness by the participants of the formative effects of didactic interventions focused on the reception of the fairy tale;

- information describing the attitude (opposed, reluctant or favorable) towards the practice of studying fairy tales in school.

These were reported to the descriptors of the three levels (minimal, medium, optimal) related to the three attitudes (disagreement, reluctance, agreement) of the teaching staff towards the degree of integration of the fairy tale in instructive and/or educational activities.

The analysis of the scores obtained by the participants indicated that all scored above 20p, so none could be assigned the minimum level.

Differences were recorded from one assessment to another, in terms of the number of participants who proved the skills that describe the optimal level of reporting to the idea of introducing the fairy tale into the series of learning contents.

Table 1. Results of repeated testing of teaching staff

LEVEL	INITIAL TEST	INTERMEDIATE TEST	FINAL TEST
OPTIMUM	15	18	19
MEDIUM	21	18	17
TOTAL	36	36	36

The statistical analysis was carried out by applying the Wilcoxon test and indicated that there are no significant differences from the initial to the intermediate test, or from the intermediate to the final evaluation, but there are such differences between the results of the initial and the final test.

The qualitative analysis of the answers of the teaching staff from the research group reveals significant information with the help of which we can describe the current perspective of teachers and professors in Romania and the Republic of Moldova regarding the effectiveness of fairy tales in education.

We will first appreciate the fact that none of the participants showed an attitude against the action of including the fairy tale in the current lessons. On the contrary, they claim that monthly and/or weekly contact of students with the fairy-tale world is beneficial. The option is marked, at the initial test, by 44.5% of the participants, at the intermediate test, by 63.9%, and at the final evaluation, by 72.2%. The other options that the participants could have opted for are: semesterly (which they opted for: initially 36.1%, at the intermediate test 30.6% and at the final 25% of the teaching staff) and annually, the option with the lowest percentage ((19.4%, 5.5%, 2.8%, respectively) in teachers' options in all three tests.

All teachers in the research group would use fairy tales more in educational activities (63.9% -initial, 69.4% intermediate, 66.7% -final) than instructive (36.1%, 30.6%, 33 ,3%). But the percentage values show that about a third of the participants would use the fairy tale in learning activities as well.

Even if in the role of educational policy makers, initially 11.1% of the respondents would not have advocated the use of fairy tales in school education, at the end of the experiment their percentage was reduced to 2.8%. This dynamic shows the fact that, as a result of the theoretical and practical activities within the training course, the teaching staff became aware of the formative effects that exposing children to the ideational content of the fairy tale can have. This awareness motivated the unanimous affirmative answer given by the participants in the final evaluation to the question related to the use of the fairy tale in the classroom ("Do you appreciate that you can use the fairy tale in the classroom activity?").

The methods of receiving fairy tales, which teachers and teachers recommend to students, are reading, telling and dramatizing fairy tales. But 47.2% declare, in the final evaluation, that they also recommend the exercise of writing fairy tales to students. The choice of teachers to dramatize fairy tales is based on the numerous benefits that this method offers to students. In their series, the first three places are: 1) discover the consequences of good and bad deeds; 2) becomes aware of the cause-effect relationship between events/states/emotions/reactions; 3) learn behaviors specific to dangerous situations (experienced by heroes). Another set of benefits for students of receiving fairy tales through role play/drama consists of the following acquisitions: *becomes aware of the role of paraverbal and nonverbal language; they build their own value system; they experience situations similar to real life.*

The content elements that encourage teachers to use the fairy tale for educational purposes are the similarities with real life and the rich symbolism of the characters, and the context in which they feel they can use the fairy tale in the lessons is the one in which they have to exemplify values, virtues, models, behaviours, love towards others, love

towards nature, but also conflicts and ways to solve them. In this way, the fairy tale becomes useful to the student for life, as claimed (in the final evaluation) by 41.7% of the participants (while 25% of them believe that the usefulness of the fairy tale would be limited to a learning unit, 19.4% to a chapter, and 13.9%, indicate the period of one school year).

The formative effects that teachers attribute to the fairy tale are multiple and varied:

➢ the development of thinking, imagination, the spirit of observation, curiosity, intelligence, the ability to express freely or to logically present some events; emotional development;

➢ formation of critical behavior; of one's own value system;

➢ adopting the winner's mentality.

Also, teachers believe that, helped by the fairy tale, the child:

➢ differentiate between good and bad, distinguish between real and unreal, truth and falsehood, qualities and defects;

➢ learn rules of conduct in society; acquires decision-making and decision-making techniques;

➢ he sense the process of permanent change to which the material world is subject and discovers its ephemerality;

➢ discover that deeds have consequences, that good is always victorious, but to acquire it, it is necessary to fight both with one's own weaknesses and with external obstacles;

➢ acquire models of moral conduct;

➢ is encouraged to choose the good, to always remain optimistic;

➢ experience the satisfaction of being victorious over evil;

➢ get familiar with different human types;

➢ intuit the need to acquire values that can guide one's life in order to be happy;

➢ discover who he is as an individual and where he fits into the world around him.

In addition, the fairy tale facilitates the child:

➢ self-knowledge.

➢ his motivation to choose the good is stimulated;

➢ his inventiveness is encouraged.

As characteristics of the fairy tale, which can have a formative impact on the student, the teachers list:

➢ the fairy tale offers a moral/teaching about the triumph of good;

➢ provides behavioral models;

➢ it mirrors the real world; provides models for dealing with difficult situations;

➢ antagonism facilitates the reception of values;

➢ presents an easy-to-remember narrative structure;

➢ the presence of the fantastic is fascinating to children;

➢ it offers the image of an ideal world where human values have a place of honor;

➢ the narrative is timeless, which makes its meanings always valid;

➢ the language of the fairy tale is accessible to children;

➢ collective characters illustrate team spirit;

➢ provides models of independence and encourages the child to become autonomous;

➢ responds to man's need for "story/fabulous";

➢ it is a literary species approved by children, which offers parables and teachings in their meaning;

➢ values traditional aspects in opposition to the wave of modern attitudes;

➢ it is an imaginary world in which the student feels safe, to experience various behaviors and experiences;

➢ it can function as a moral grid;

➢ positively influences the emotional state;

➢ illustrates problem solving and ways to differentiate between right and wrong;

➢ it values well-being, love for nature and fellow human beings.

In a structure with a conclusive aspect, one of the teachers participating in the experiment appreciates that, by reading fairy tales, students experience enthusiasm, love and respect for life.

In the view of the teaching staff in the research group, male heroes with a considerable power to illustrate various poses of good are Harap-Alb[1], Prince Charming[2] and Praslea[3], and the female models are found in: old man's girl[4], the clever poor girl[5] and Cinderella[6]. Antiheroes have the role of highlighting, by contrast, the values embodied by the positive characters. Thus, the sparrow, the kites and the wolf or the grandmother's girl, the stepmother (the teacher) and the Mummy of the Forest are embodiments of human defects against which man must learn to take a stand in order to curb their manifestation or diminish them.

5. Discussions

Looking at the diversity of the educational effects of the fairy tale affirmed by the teaching staff participating in the experiment following the support, for two weeks, of some instructive-educational activities of receiving the fairy tale through dramatization, we can affirm the compatibility of this learning content with the objectives of education for sustainable development.

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[1] The protagonist of the fairy tale "Povestea lui harap-Alb", written by Ion Creangă.

[2] The hero of several Romanian folk tales and cults.

[3] The protagonist of the Romanian folk tale, "The Brave Sparrow and the Golden Apples", collected by Petre Ispirescu.

[4] Main female character from the fairy tale "The grandmother's girl and the old man's girl", written by Ion Creangă.

[5] Main female character from the Romanian folk fairy tale, "The poor girl who is clever", collected by Petre Ispirescu

[6] The main female character from the popular fairy tale Cinderella, (in fr. Cendrillon) whose variant is very well known in the European space is the one written by Charles Perrault.

A first aspect that deserves to be pointed out in this direction is the fact that the fairy tale offers the model of a world where moral values are in the place of honor. The antagonism contributes to highlighting them and makes it easier for the child or adult to understand the need to develop a moral conduct in relation to the world around him. The fairy tale "The grandmother's girl and the Old Man's Girl" (Ion Creangă) masterfully capitalizes on this valuable function of antagonism. The actions of the old man's daughter are opposed by those of the grandmother's girl, and from the contrast thus created a strong message is born that urges the adoption of a conduct in the spirit of all moral values. Through the systematic exercise of applying values, man comes to the conviction that doing good is defining his being, and in this awareness will be the motivation of his choice to serve good in all its forms of manifestation. An attitude defined by respect for the natural environment and for people definitely leads to a decrease in the potential for conflicts to occur, to deplete goods and resources, to affect the quality of people's lives now and in the future. The fairy tale "The Story of Harap-Alb" (Ion Creangă) can be used to illustrate this attitude. When he encounters a wedding of ants on a bridge, Harap-Alb turns around and crosses the river through water to protect them. The bees are built shelter from a piece of dry trunk, and with Setila, Ochila, Flamanzila, Gerila and Pasari-Lati-Lungila they form a close friendship, although each is different in his own way. Acceptance of diversity, tolerance, empathy are other essential values for a sustainable life, which the fairy tale generously cultivates.

Another aspect as valuable as the one presented previously is the rich symbolism of the elements that define the world of the fairy tale. The characters, the hero's tests, the magical items, the unique spaces where the action takes placethey are symbolic and can carry rich meanings, relevant according to the objectives of the educational situation. Similarities with the real world are easy to notice, the teachings are obvious, and their appropriation does not require additional effort because they are realized through affective reception. In this regard, we mention the situation in which a child or a young lecturer of the folk fairy tale "Prâslea the mighty and the golden apples", impressed by the hero's gesture of forgiving his brothers who planned to kill him, understands that forgiveness is the unique way to form a culture of peace and collaboration, important objective of education for sustainable development.

In addition, the conflicts present in the fairy tale world or the violent confrontations are themselves modelsof attitude towards all forms of evil. Because the entire action of the fairy tale is under the sign of the symbolic convention, the violent episodes in the fairy tale are also understood as exemplary situations and not as truthful facts. Therefore, the concern that the fairy tale might negatively influence the behavior of the receiver is not justified.

Conclusions

The wisdom of the fairy tale can be successfully harnessed in the context of formal education, and not only, to develop skills, a conduct and a mentality in accordance with the principles of sustainable development. Those who develop educational programs and projects focused on achieving the goals of ESD could find in fairy tales ways to materialize the values in which humanity is intended to live in this century.

The receptive attitude of teachers from Romania and the Republic of Moldova towards the capitalization of fairy tales in school education encourages authors of curriculum and school textbooks to expand the space allocated to this literary species among learning contents. The reluctance of some teachers can be discouraged by integrating into the curriculum of the psychopedagogy discipline a module dedicated to fairy tale and its efficiency in education.

In general, studies of teachers' beliefs about the effectiveness of learning contents in relation to some educational objectives are beneficial because they provide arguments for a more rigorous selection of them.

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