



Social norms and gender stereotypes in fairy tales written by fourth-grade primary school students

Zeynep Demirtaş¹ and Hilal Altıntaş²

¹Faculty of Education, Sakarya University, Sakarya, Türkiye (ORCID: 0000-0002-0403-7199)

²Institute of Educational Sciences, Sakarya University, Sakarya, Türkiye (ORCID: 0000-0001-6581-4775)

Corresponding Author: Zeynep Demirtaş, zeynept@sakarya.edu.tr

Submitted: 22 June 2026 Revised: 4 August 2026 Accepted: 8 August 2026

Abstract

In this qualitative study, the social norms, moral values, behavioral patterns, and gender stereotypes reflected in fairy tales written by fourth-grade primary school students were examined using document analysis. The study group consisted of 37 students (22 girls and 15 boys) from primary schools in three central districts of Bursa, a city in Türkiye's Marmara Region. Data were obtained from the students' fairy tales and analyzed using content analysis in Atlas.ti software for coding and categorization. The analysis yielded four interrelated themes—social norms, moral values, behavioral patterns, and social messages—that together reflect how the students made sense of their social world. Social norms and moral values occupied a prominent place in the students' narratives. Values such as helping, friendship, honesty, and justice appeared frequently across both groups, alongside messages emphasizing the triumph of good, correction of mistakes, cooperation, and social harmony. Behaviors involving reconciliation, communication, emotional expression, and relationship repair were proportionally more common in girls' fairy tales, while solutions centered on struggle, rescue, achievement, and physical strength were more prominent in boys' tales. Both groups, however, shared similar social and moral values, with no marked differences in behaviors such as forming friendships and cooperating. Overall, based on the study's findings, we suggest that children's fairy tales reveal how social norms, moral values, and gender roles are understood—reflecting not just social values but also children's own reinterpretation of them.

Keywords: Content analysis; Fairy tales; Gender stereotypes; Moral values; Primary school students; Social norms

1. Introduction

A norm can be broadly defined as a shared rule or standard that guides how members of a group are expected to behave in a given situation; the literature commonly distinguishes between descriptive norms, which reflect perceptions of what most people actually do, and injunctive norms, which reflect perceptions of what is socially approved or expected, alongside the broader distinction between formal norms (e.g., laws and rules) and informal norms (e.g., customs and traditions) (Horne & Mollborn, 2020). Social norms are rules that determine which behaviors individuals consider appropriate, acceptable, or expected, and that play an important role in regulating social life. Social norms reflect individuals' shared expectations about which behaviors are acceptable in social life and are behavioral rules learned through socialization (Horne & Mollborn, 2020). In this respect, norms are important structures that guide individuals' behaviors and shape social interactions (UNICEF, 2021). Social norms are shaped by social values and learned through socialization (Özcan, 2022). Family, school, media, and various cultural products are among the primary vehicles of this process. In this process, children do not merely observe certain behavioral patterns; they also make sense of, interpret, and re-express these patterns within different narrative forms (Khimji & Maunder, 2012).

One important area in which social norms become visible is gender stereotypes. Gender stereotypes are shaped by socially shared expectations about how women and men are thought to behave and how they are treated (Ellemers, 2018). In educational contexts, such assumptions are not neutral, because gender norms may become embedded in instructional materials, classroom practices, assessment contexts, and teacher expectations; therefore, they need to be examined through gender-responsive and inclusive perspectives (Arslan et al., 2023; Mukagiahana et al., 2024). Narratives addressed to children and children's literature constitute an important field of inquiry in this regard, since picture books and storytelling practices do not only support language, reading, and comprehension, but also contribute to children's construction of social meanings,

values, identity, and moral understanding (Čigarská, 2025; Jacob et al., 2024; Öztürk & Erzen, 2023). Research on children's books shows that gendered representations are often organized around socially assigned roles, traits, occupations, spaces, and family relations. Female characters are frequently associated with domestic, relational, emotional, and caring roles, whereas male characters are more often associated with public, active, productive, leading, or heroic roles (Dumanlı & Esen, 2022; Gürşimşek & Günay, 2005; Poarch & Monk-Turner, 2001). Similarly, studies conducted in Türkiye indicate that children's books may reproduce stereotypes related to gender, family structure, occupations, personality traits, and social roles, and that these representations are often not presented from an egalitarian perspective (Batmaz, 2021; Ervansel Yüksel & Koyuncu Şahin, 2023; Yücel Çetin & Mangır, 2021). Taken together, these studies suggest that children's literature should be examined not only as a literary or linguistic resource, but also as a pedagogical space in which social norms and gender stereotypes may be reproduced, normalized, questioned, or transformed.

However, focusing solely on the texts presented to children is insufficient to understand how children perceive social norms and gender stereotypes. The narratives children produce themselves are also an important source of data for understanding these processes. It has been noted that children's narratives bear traces not only of individual experiences but also of the cultural environment and sociocultural norms in which children are embedded (Westerveld et al., 2022). Recent international evidence reinforces this view: when children construct their own stories rather than merely reading texts written for them, gender is actively represented and, at times, reworked in the narratives they produce (Malisiova & Kompoti, 2026). Furthermore, narratives function in children's meaning-making regarding their physical and social environment and can reflect their processes of constructing meaning about the social world (Burris & Brown, 2014). Studies on children's written narratives support this view. Trepanier-Street and Romatowski (1986) found marked differences between the roles attributed to female and male characters in primary school students' writing, yet showed that both groups reflected gender norms learned in society. Similarly, Khimji and Maunder (2012) demonstrated that children's stories are shaped not only by individual experiences but also by cultural practices, traditions, and social experiences. In a recent study, Ryan and Khosronejad (2025) found that authorial choices (language, characters, plot, and the values embedded in the narrative) in stories written by primary school students reveal how children accept, resist, or neutralize social and cultural conditions; the researchers further showed that male characters in the stories examined were represented as knowledgeable, rescuing, or troublemaking, whereas female characters were represented in more passive positions, indicating that children's own written texts can also reproduce gender stereotypes. Using a similar method, Gürkan (2021) examined the free-topic creative writing of 82 third-grade primary school students through content analysis and found that gender-based stereotypes were reproduced in students' topic choices, the gender frequency of the characters they created, character traits, and occupational and domestic roles; students predominantly created characters of their own gender, and public/occupational roles were more frequently attributed to male characters while caregiving and domestic roles were more frequently attributed to female characters. These findings show that children's written narratives bear traces of social norms, moral values, and cultural expectations. Recent studies conducted in Türkiye support this finding, showing that primary school students are not merely exposed to gender-related stereotypes but are also individuals who reproduce these stereotypes in the narratives and images they themselves produce. Indeed, a study based on classroom teachers' views found that primary school students hold stereotypes on various issues, particularly gender, and that these stereotypes are reflected in behaviors such as exclusion and non-preference (Ağgül & Yılmaz, 2023). Similarly, a study using children's visual narratives revealed that gender stereotypes are evident in their products (Uzkuş, 2025).

In recent years, the question of how children learn and reproduce social norms has gained increasing importance in childhood sociology and narrative research. According to Corsaro's (2018) interpretive reproduction approach, children are not passive internalizers of social norms; rather, they are active social agents who interpret and reproduce these norms in line with their

own experiences. Similarly, it has been argued that the narratives children produce are not merely products of individual imagination but also domains in which social values, cultural expectations, and social experiences are reconstructed (Gasser et al., 2022; Ryan & Khosronejad, 2025). For this reason, fairy tales written by children offer an important field of research for examining how children make sense of the social world and reproduce social values.

Within this framework, fairy tales written by children can be regarded not merely as linguistic products but also as cultural texts revealing how children perceive social relationships, moral values, social norms, and gender roles. The fact that elements such as helping, friendship, justice, bullying, conflict, conflict resolution, and gender roles can be found in children's fairy tales makes these narratives important data sources reflecting children's social and cultural worlds of meaning (Khimji & Maunder, 2012; Trepanier-Street & Romatowski, 1986; Westerveld et al., 2022). Indeed, peer bullying is an increasingly addressed theme in children's literature scholarship, and it is emphasized that it offers children the opportunity to make sense of the roles of bully, victim, and bystander, to develop empathy, and to generate solutions (Demir & Uzundal, 2025). This suggests that the frequent inclusion of bullying and conflict themes in students' own fairy tales can be regarded as a social reflection.

The literature on how gender is represented in children's narratives points to systematic differences in the narrative preferences of girls and boys. In Rogers's (2020) study conducted with children aged 7–12, it was found that some of the gender-related stories children told reproduced the gender hierarchy (difference narratives), while others questioned or resisted this hierarchy (alternative narratives); girls and older children were found to be more likely to produce alternative narratives that challenge gender norms. Similarly, Lahtinen (2025) found that in preschool-aged children's fictional narratives involving parent-child conflicts, boys more often narrated hostile resistance behaviors, whereas girls more often included reparative acts such as solidarity and apology. In a study conducted in Brazil, Brito et al. (2025) found, through oral narratives obtained from conversation groups with primary school students aged 9–11, that children held binary and oppositional gender perceptions of girls and boys, classifying behaviors, attitudes, and objects as specific to girls or boys according to traditional female and male roles. A similar pattern is observed for written narratives specifically: in a study conducted with fifth-grade primary school students in Indonesia, Anggraeni et al. (2026) found that narratives written by girls were stronger than those written by boys in terms of organization and adherence to grammar and spelling rules, and also elaborated plot and setting elements more richly, whereas boys produced shorter, action-oriented narratives and scored slightly higher than girls in characterization. However, not all findings in the literature point to gender-based differences. Fang and Low (2026) found no significant difference between girls and boys in social imagination (attributing thoughts, feelings, and intentions) in preschool children's oral narratives based on wordless picture books, and suggested that this skill develops independently of gender in early childhood. These partly contradictory findings suggest that gender-based patterns may vary by age group, narrative type, and data collection method, making it important to investigate the contribution that primary-school-age children's own fairy tales can make to this discussion. These findings underscore the importance of the present study by showing that children's fictional narratives may differ by gender not only in content but also in characters' reactions to conflict and relational attitudes.

Although there are many studies in the literature examining gender representations in children's books and traditional fairy tales, research on how social norms, moral values, and gender stereotypes are constructed in fairy tales written by children themselves remains limited. There are also studies that indirectly address this issue in the Turkish context: Şahin et al. (2023) evaluated third- and fourth-grade primary school storybooks for violence and fear elements, while Armoni (2023) examined middle school students' views on gender equality through a process drama approach. However, these studies focus on materials presented to children or examined indirectly through drama, rather than directly analyzing children's own original texts. Yet children's own narratives are original data sources that can directly reveal how they perceive their social environment and how they internalize social values. For this reason, examining students'

fairy tales in terms of social norms, moral values, behavioral patterns, and social messages will offer a child-centered perspective to the literature on how children make sense of social values.

In line with this purpose, the study sought to answer the following research question: “What are the social norms, moral values, gender-based behavioral patterns, and social messages found in fairy tales written by fourth-grade primary school students?” It should be noted that the analyses reported below concern descriptive, gender-related behavioral patterns identified in the students' own narratives—such as the relative frequency of particular themes in girls' and boys' fairy tales—rather than a direct analysis of gender stereotypes in the sense of character agency, occupational roles, or rescue roles. For this reason, the more cautious expression ‘gender-related behavioral patterns’ is used throughout the Results and Discussion sections, and interpretive claims are limited to tendencies observed within this particular sample.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design and used document analysis to examine the social norms, moral values, behavioral patterns, and social messages reflected in fairy tales written by fourth-grade primary school students. Qualitative research aims to reveal individuals' experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making processes regarding a particular phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

2.2. Study Group

The study group consisted of fourth-grade primary school students enrolled in schools in three central districts of Bursa province, Türkiye. Data were obtained from 37 students, comprising 22 girls and 15 boys.

Maximum variation sampling, one of the purposive sampling methods, was used to determine the study group. Maximum variation sampling allows the different dimensions of a phenomenon to be revealed by bringing together individuals with different characteristics that may be related to the research topic (Patton, 2015). To maximize variation, the three schools were deliberately selected from central districts of Bursa that differ in socioeconomic profile, ranging from relatively lower to higher socioeconomic neighborhoods, and two classrooms were included in each school so that classroom composition and teacher practice would also vary; the socioeconomic characteristics of the school catchment areas were accordingly treated as the main source of variation among the sampled schools, rather than as a separate sampling criterion. Accordingly, a total of six classrooms from three different schools in three central districts of Bursa province were included in the study.

2.3. Data Collection Process

The research data were collected through the fairy tales written by the students. During data collection, students were asked to write an original fairy tale without any guidance. Specifically, students were given a single open-ended prompt—“Write an original fairy tale of your own; you may choose any characters, setting, and ending you like”—and no further guidance regarding theme, characters, or storyline was provided beyond this prompt. No restrictions were placed on the theme, characters, plot, or message of the fairy tale they were to write. In this way, it was intended that students would freely reflect in their narratives on their own imagination, experiences, and perceptions of their social environment. The fairy tales were written individually by students in the classroom setting without teacher intervention; data collection was completed within two class hours (2 × 40 minutes) in each classroom. The necessary ethical approval and consent procedures were completed prior to data collection, and the details are presented in the Ethics Statement section at the end of the article.

In this study, the students' written texts served as the primary data source, and document analysis was used as the data collection method. Document analysis involves the systematic examination of written materials containing information about the phenomenon under

investigation, and is widely recognized as a rigorous, low-cost source of qualitative data that can be analyzed with the same techniques applied to interview or observational data (Bowen, 2009). In this study, the fairy tales written by the students were treated as such documents, revealing children's meaning-making processes regarding social norms and gender.

2.4. Data Analysis

The data obtained in the study were analyzed using content analysis. Content analysis is a method that enables the systematic identification and interpretation of meaning patterns in written materials (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

In the analysis, the students' fairy tales were first read repeatedly to gain a holistic grasp of the dataset. Subsequently, expressions in the texts considered related to social norms, moral values, behavioral patterns, and social messages were coded using open coding. Following the open coding process, codes with similar characteristics were grouped, and categories were formed. In the final stage, the relationships among categories were examined, and the study's themes were identified. The frequency values presented in the tables refer to the number of unique students whose stories contained the relevant code; because a given student's fairy tale may have been coded under more than one code, the student frequencies reported for a theme should be read as the number of students carrying that code rather than as the total number of codes within that theme. Because the number of girls ($n = 22$) and boys ($n = 15$) in the study group differed, percentages proportional to the total number of students in the relevant group were calculated in addition to raw frequencies for gender comparisons, and the interpretations in the Results and Conclusion and Discussion sections are based on these normalized percentages. In the excerpts reported in the Results section, each quotation is followed by a participant code identifying the student's number and gender (e.g., S23/B refers to the 23rd student in the data set, a boy; G denotes a girl).

The Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software was used for coding and categorization. Through the software, expressions in the texts were coded, relationships among the codes were examined, and themes were formed.

2.5. Validity and Reliability (Trustworthiness)

To enhance the study's trustworthiness, the four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) – credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability – were addressed throughout the research process. To enhance credibility, the analysis process was reported in detail, and direct student expressions were included in the tables so that readers can trace the connection between the raw data and the interpretations offered. To strengthen dependability, the data set was independently coded by a second researcher with expertise in the field, and the two sets of codings were then compared; inter-coder agreement was calculated using the formula proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), $\text{Reliability} = \text{Agreement} / (\text{Agreement} + \text{Disagreement}) \times 100$, yielding an agreement rate of 91%, a value above the 80% threshold generally accepted as indicating reliable coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Following this comparison, the codes and themes were reviewed again in light of the research questions and finalized after necessary adjustments, thereby contributing to the confirmability of the findings. To ensure transferability, the study group, the socioeconomic and geographic characteristics of the sampled schools, and the data collection process were described in detail so that readers can judge the applicability of the findings to other, similar contexts.

3. Results

The social norms, moral values, gender-based behavioral patterns, and social messages found in the fairy tales written by fourth-grade primary school students are presented in the tables below. Because of the difference between the numbers of girls ($n = 22$) and boys ($n = 15$), percentages proportional to the total number of students in each group are reported alongside raw frequencies in each table, and the interpretations below are based on these normalized percentages. The

analysis yielded four main themes: Social Norms, Moral Values, Behavioral Patterns, and Social Messages. The Social Norms theme brings together the ways in which the students' fairy-tale characters relate to rules and authority, ranging from compliance and its violation to the restoration of social harmony through friendship, cooperation, and reconciliation. The Moral Values theme captures the values that characters enact or come to embrace over the course of the narrative, such as helping, empathy, honesty, compassion, and perseverance. The Behavioral Patterns theme focuses specifically on how characters' emotional, social, conflict-related, and problem-solving behaviors differed between girls' and boys' fairy tales. Finally, the Social Messages theme reflects the moral, social, emotional, and achievement-oriented messages that the narratives appear to convey to the reader. Although these four themes are presented separately for clarity, they are closely interrelated: the same narrative episode often illustrates a social norm, embodies a moral value, and simultaneously conveys a social message. First, Table 1 presents the findings regarding the social norms identified in the students' fairy tales.

The Authority and Rule Orientation subtheme has two codes: teacher/adult authority and rule compliance/non-compliance. Together, they show how students' characters relate to adults and rules. The teacher is rarely just a background figure. The teacher notices, praises, or gets angry. A character's fate often depends on this: being called to the board and succeeding, or being scolded for ignoring warnings. Rule compliance and non-compliance were almost never shown as single, isolated moments. Instead, a violation—like skipping homework, cutting a forbidden cable, or hoarding food—was usually followed by a consequence, and often a correction. This shows that students see authority as fair, not random. Following rules brings a reward. Breaking rules brings a response that restores order. This subtheme was more common in boys' fairy tales (26.7%) than in girls' (9.1%). This suggests that boys' stories more often show direct, visible clashes with authority. Girls' characters, as the next subtheme shows, more often work out rule problems informally among peers instead of through an adult.

The Disruption of Social Order subtheme has two codes: bullying/mockery/exclusion and physical conflict/war. Together, they show how peace breaks down in the story world. The bullying, mockery, and exclusion code shows an everyday kind of harm. A character is pushed, mocked for wearing glasses, tripped, or called names for being different or shy. A bystander or victim then feels discomfort or pulls away. These scenes closely match real classroom and playground life. This suggests students draw on their own experience, not just on fairy-tale traditions, when they write about conflict. The physical conflict/war code takes the same tension further. Fire, dragons, missiles, and collapsing buildings replace everyday bullying with something much bigger. Bullying and exclusion happened at similar rates for girls and boys (27.3% and 26.7%). This shows that peer mistreatment is a shared concern for both groups. Physical conflict and war appeared for the same number of students in each group (7 students each). But it became more common in boys' fairy tales (46.7%) than in girls' (31.8%) once we compare the groups fairly, as explained above. This points to a gender difference in how conflict is shown, not in whether conflict appears at all.

The Social Harmony/Reconciliation subtheme is the largest subtheme in Table 1. It has four codes that show how the conflicts above get resolved. Forming and maintaining friendships shows character, as those who simply come together and stay together—playing, eating, and living “happily ever after.” This is the simplest kind of social bond in the stories. Cooperation and joint problem-solving go further. Characters work together toward a single goal, such as brewing a potion, planning a rescue, or escaping danger. Here, harmony comes not just from being together, but from acting together. Apology, reparation, correcting mistakes, and mediation/reconciliation all focus on what happens after conflict. In the first, a character who did wrong takes concrete steps to make up for it, such as paying for the damage, apologizing, and offering a meal. In the second, a third character steps in to calm a fight (“come on, make peace”) or explains one side to the other. Together, these four codes show that in students' stories, harmony is not just the absence of conflict. It is something children build and repair once it breaks. The pattern here differs more [Insert Table 1 Here]

Table 1
Social norms identified in the fairy tales

Subtheme and code	Girls, n (%)	Boys, n (%)
Authority and Rule Orientation Teacher/adult authority		
	"When they entered the classroom, the teacher called Bombo to the board... When he stood at the board, he was able to answer the questions. The teacher was proud of him." (S1/B)	
	"The teacher got very angry. But the child could not tell him out of fear... The teacher got angry at Mehmet, Şura, and Ahmet." (S3/G)	2 (9.1%)
	"Kazım never studies; he never listens to his teacher's warnings about studying." (S35/B)	4 (26.7%)
	"A war broke out on the ship... Cookie read the sign that said 'do not cut the cables.' Cookie and Ali immediately pulled the cables and were able to escape together." (S23/B)	
Rule compliance/non-compliance	"Şura... doesn't do her homework, and makes fun of Harry because he wears glasses..." (S29/B)	2 (9.1%)
	"Tirmuk... ate all the food... never left any for the others... The cats made a plan... Tirmuk learned his lesson and never treated anyone badly again." (S31/G)	4 (26.7%)
Disruption of Social Order Bullying, mockery, exclusion		
	"Mehmet pushed a child. Because he wanted his money... he knew the child would go hungry, but he still had to give it." (S3/G)	
	"Abdullah kept making fun of him... because Muiddin was a withdrawn child..." (S27/B)	6 (27.3%)
	"A girl named Asi kept bullying them and tripped them. Maviş became uncomfortable with this and began to withdraw." (S32/G)	4 (26.7%)
	"Melis and Cemile... started mocking [him], calling him a 'coward chicken.'" (S33/B)	
	"Merika brought fire out of her hand and then they started to fight." (S2/G)	
Physical conflict/war	"First the enemy and the main character came face to face. They fought each other. Missiles and weapons were brought out. Buildings began to collapse, and people died." (S12/B)	
	"The three-headed dragon fought the rhinoceros for many years." (S13/B)	7 (31.8%)
	"Yabani tripped him, but Bonojar managed to escape. Bonojar shot fire out of his arms. The two of them kept fighting each other." (S19/G)	7 (46.7%)

Table 1 continued

<i>Subtheme and code</i>	<i>Girls, n (%)</i>	<i>Boys, n (%)</i>
Social Harmony/Reconciliation		
Forming and maintaining friendship		
"Then Merika, Suksuk, and Bücürük played games. They ate together... a happy ending." (S2/G)		
"The gingerbread man... met an eagle and they became very good friends... they lived happily ever after." (S11/B) "While playing outside, Maviş met Miniş. They became very good friends." (S32/G)	14 (63.6%)	10 (66.7%)
Cooperation and joint problem-solving		
"It called the mouse and the rabbit... they started thinking together about how to get the food back from the crow." (S4/G)		
"The two siblings fought together and managed to defeat the giant." (S16/B)		
"The cats decided to fight the giant... they made a potion and gave it to the giant to drink." (S22/G)	10 (45.5%)	9 (60.0%)
Apology, reparation, correcting mistakes		
"Cookie and Ali immediately pulled the cables and were able to escape together." (S23/B)		
"Mehmet brought money from home and gave it back to his friend... they paid for and had the teacher's cabinet glass repaired." (S3/G)		
"The lion realized his mistake, apologized to the fox and the crow, and gave them a meal." (S8/G)	9 (40.9%)	4 (26.7%)
Mediation/reconciliation		
"Mahmut then realized that mocking someone was a bad thing. He apologized to Kazım, and they played football together." (S35/B)		
"Come on, what are you doing, you've been fighting for years! Come on, make peace, come on." (S2/G)		
"The crow Gaki came to them and wanted to stop their fight... 'then we will make the meal both of you want,' he said." (S10/G)		
"Boztaş steps in and tells them why he did what he did and that he upset Tentaş." (S21/G)	8 (36.4%)	3 (20.0%)
"Harry and Şura had a fight... afterward, Harry and Şura made up." (S29/B)		

by gender than in the other subthemes in Table 1. Apology and reparation (girls: 40.9%, boys: 26.7%) and mediation (girls: 36.4%, boys: 20.0%) were more common in girls' fairy tales. This suggests that girls' stories place greater emphasis on actively repairing relationships after conflict. Forming friendships was reported for more girls than boys in plain numbers (14 girls versus 10 boys). But there were more girls than boys in the study overall (22 versus 15), so plain numbers alone can be misleading. When we compare the two groups fairly by percentage, forming friendships was nearly the same for both groups (girls: 63.6%, boys: 66.7%), with boys slightly higher. Cooperation and joint problem-solving showed the same pattern. More girls than boys showed this code in plain numbers (10 girls versus 9 boys). But by percentage, cooperation was clearly more common in boys' fairy tales (60.0%) than in girls' (45.5%). Together, these results show that girls' fairy tales are not simply more "peaceful" overall, once we compare the two groups fairly. Girls stand out mainly in actively repairing relationships—apologizing and mediating. Friendship and cooperation themselves are shared choices for both groups. Overall, social norms were shared by both groups within a common framework. But the way norm violations happened and were repaired differed somewhat by gender.

The findings on the moral values in the students' fairy tales are presented in Table 2. The Helping and Kindness subtheme has two related codes that illustrate different ways characters act on behalf of others. The helping code shows small, everyday acts of assistance—helping a friend out of trouble, or helping a bird or cat get home. These acts ask little of the helper beyond a willingness to step in. The rescuing/protecting code shows a bigger form of kindness. Here, a character steps into a dangerous situation to save someone, stop a threat, or protect someone over time—such as freeing captive animals or shielding another character from harm. This matters because it separates everyday kindness from a braver kind of care that takes risk and initiative. Helping appeared in a similar number of students in girls' and boys' fairy tales (8 and 7 students, respectively). But once we compare the groups fairly, it was more common among boys (46.7%) than girls (36.4%). The gender difference was much clearer for rescuing and protecting. This was far more common in boys' fairy tales (60.0%) than in girls' (27.3%). This suggests that when boys' characters show kindness, they more often do it through bold, protective action rather than small, everyday help.

The Sensitivity subtheme shows how well characters notice and respond to other people's feelings. It has two codes that ask different things of the character. The empathy/sensitivity code shows a character noticing or being moved by someone else's feelings—hiding one's own sadness so as not to burden others, or being moved by a friend's distress. This is a quiet, thoughtful kind of moral awareness. The compassion/avoiding harm code goes further. Here, characters hold back from harming someone even when they could—not wanting to hurt an enemy as much as he hurt them, or a reformed giant undoing the damage he once caused. This code shows that students value a fair, restrained response to wrongdoing rather than revenge. Empathy occurred at similar rates among girls and boys (27.3% and 33.3%, respectively). This shows no clear gender difference for this code. Both groups seem equally able to notice others' feelings. Compassion and avoiding harm, however, were somewhat more common in girls' fairy tales (18.2%) than in boys' (13.3%). This small difference points to a broader gender pattern, more clearly seen in moral awareness below.

The Moral Awareness subtheme shows two ways characters deal with wrongdoing: holding others responsible and holding themselves responsible. Defending the truth/reporting wrongdoing shows characters who speak up when something is wrong—telling a teacher, confronting a wrongdoer, or threatening to tell on someone. Here, the character actively protects fairness in the story. Recognizing wrongdoing/feeling remorse shows the opposite: a character who did something wrong comes to realize it and feels regret, often in their own words ("I think I shouldn't do this either"), even before anyone punishes them. Together, these two codes show that morality in the stories operates in two ways: enforced from the outside by characters who call out wrongdoing, and built from the inside by characters who feel their own guilt. Defending the truth occurred at nearly the same rate for girls and boys (27.3% and 26.7%, respectively). This shows that

Table 2
Moral values identified in the fairy tales

Subtheme and code	Girls, n (%)	Boys, n (%)
Helping and Kindness Helping		
	"He took a joyful rope and saved the king. The king said, 'Thank you so much, without you I would have stayed there.'" (S26/G)	8 (36.4%)
	"Distor said he could help him... the cat does as the bird says, though with difficulty, and manages to get back onto the balcony." (S15/B)	7 (46.7%)
Rescuing/protecting		
	"Cikcok immediately turned into a human to help Mia." (S34/G)	
	"The Five-Legged Cat and the Magic Rabbit saved the child... they neutralized Witch Karga and saved the world." (S5/B)	6 (27.3%)
	"Jake and Maya... rescue the captive animals... they plant trees and vegetation to keep the forest alive." (S18/B)	9 (60.0%)
	"The character named Ozan protected her and took her home... Ozan took Liza and they jumped out of the trap." (S37/G)	
Sensitivity Empathy/sensitivity		
	"Strawberry was very sad, but because she wanted to seem happy, she did not show her sadness." (S20/G) "Maya and her friends... saw that their city had been destroyed. They were very saddened by this." (S24/B) "Nazlı was trying hard to help Muiddin." (S27/B)	6 (27.3%)
Compassion/avoiding harm		
	"The fox and the crow wanted to set a trap for the lion, but they did not want to harm him as much as he had harmed them." (S8/G)	4 (18.2%)
	"The giant became good, and so all the animals and people returned. The giant also fixed everything he had burned." (S22/G)	2 (13.3%)
	"Instead of killing it right away, it was taken in to be studied by scientists." (S25/B)	
Moral Awareness Defending the truth/ reporting wrongdoing		
	"Ömer and his friends were very upset about this and reported it to the teacher." (S3/G)	6 (27.3%)
	"Cikcok said that what he had done was wrong, but Kötüburun did not take it to heart at all." (S34/G)	4 (26.7%)
	"Nazlı threatened to tell the teacher about Abdullah." (S27/B)	

Table 2 continued

<i>Subtheme and code</i>	<i>Girls, n (%)</i>	<i>Boys, n (%)</i>
Recognizing wrongdoing/feeling remorse	"The lion realized his mistake, apologized to the fox and the crow, and gave them a meal." (S8/G) "The bad child... said 'I think I shouldn't do this either'... he realized how bad what he had done was." (S17/G)	8 (36.4%) 4 (26.7%)
Effort and Perseverance	"Mahmut then realized that mocking someone was a bad thing." (S35/B)	
Determination/not giving up	"He studied and studied, succeeded, and lost, but he never gave up. He graduated from Hugolo University. He became an engineer." (S7/G) "Because defeating the giant was very difficult, they got very tired, but they did not give up." (S16/B) "Kazım... started studying. On exam day, Kazım got 100." (S35/B)	4 (18.2%) 6 (40.0%)
Sharing and Generosity	"Then we will make the meal both of you want,' he said... they happily ate their meal with their friends in the forest." (S10/G) "Ali shared his food with Kazım." (S35/B) "He opened his farm to the whole Hugolo tribe." (S7/G)	4 (18.2%) 2 (13.3%)

both groups equally want to hold others accountable. Recognizing wrongdoing and feeling remorse, however, was more common in girls' fairy tales (36.4%) than in boys' (26.7%). This suggests girls' characters more often show this inner process of reflecting on and regretting their own mistakes.

The Effort and Perseverance subtheme rests on one code: determination/not giving up. This shows characters who keep working toward a goal despite difficulty, tiredness, or an earlier failure—studying again and again after a setback until they finally succeed, or fighting on against a tiring opponent instead of quitting. This code adds something important to the picture of moral values in the stories: success comes from steady effort, not just natural talent or a single lucky act. Characters earn their success over time. This subtheme showed one of the clearest gender differences in Table 2. Determination and not giving up were much more common in boys' fairy tales (40.0%) than in girls' (18.2%). This fits the wider pattern of struggle and achievement in boys' stories, discussed further below. It suggests that boys' characters are more often shown pushing through difficulty.

Finally, the Sharing and Generosity subtheme rests on one code: sharing. This shows characters giving what they have to others rather than keeping it—splitting a meal with friends, giving away food, or opening their farm or home to a whole community. Unlike helping or rescuing, sharing does not respond to an emergency. It is a small, everyday act of generosity that still shows a character is caring and community-minded. Sharing was somewhat more common in girls' fairy tales (18.2%) than in boys' (13.3%). Overall, these results show something important. At first glance, it looks like girls are generally stronger in sensitivity and moral awareness. But once we compare student numbers fairly across both groups, this is only partly true. Values linked to rescuing, protecting, and determination form a clearly stronger pattern in boys' fairy tales. Taken as a whole, Table 2 suggests that both girls and boys care equally about being kind, empathetic, and fair. But the way this care is shown differs by gender: quiet reflection and small acts of generosity for girls, bold action and sustained struggle for boys.

The findings on gender-based behavioral patterns in the students' fairy tales are presented in Table 3. The Emotional Behavioral Patterns subtheme shows moments when characters clearly feel and show an emotion. It has two closely related codes. Fear and anxiety show characters reacting to danger with fright—crying out, shaking, or being told by another character not to be afraid. Sadness and emotional expression show characters feeling loss, disappointment, or grief, sometimes openly and sometimes hidden, so they seem calm. This subtheme differs from Sensitivity in Table 2. Here, the focus is on the visible act of being afraid or sad, not on how a character responds to someone else's feelings. Both fear and anxiety (girls: 27.3%, boys: 13.3%) and sadness and emotional expression (girls: 22.7%, boys: 13.3%) were more common in girls' fairy tales. This shows that girls' characters more often show their feelings openly in the story. Girls' stories seem to give more space to a character's inner emotional experience as part of the plot.

The Social Behavioral Patterns subtheme shows characters' everyday sociability, not just one moment of making up after a fight. It has two codes: forming friendships and cooperation, and acting together. In Table 1, the Social Harmony subtheme examined friendship and cooperation as ways to resolve conflict. Here, the same behaviors are treated as a general pattern: characters who often seek out others' company and work alongside them toward a shared goal, whether or not a past conflict is being repaired. Forming friendships was somewhat more common among girls (45.5%) than among boys (40.0%). Cooperation and acting together were slightly more common among boys (40.0%) than girls (36.4%) once we compare student numbers fairly. This is the opposite of what plain numbers alone would suggest (8 girls versus 6 boys). This is exactly why we compare groups by student numbers, not plain counts, throughout this study. Together, these close results suggest that ordinary sociability, unlike the behaviors below, does not differ much by gender in this sample.

The Conflict Behaviors subtheme shows two kinds of trouble between characters. Physical struggle shows characters fighting directly with force, magic, or weapons. Bullying and aggression show smaller, repeated unkind acts, such as mockery, tripping, or hair-pulling. This difference

Table 3
Behavioral Patterns in Fairy Tales by Student Gender

Subtheme and code	Girls, n (%)	Boys, n (%)
Emotional Behavioral Patterns		
Fear and anxiety		
"They suddenly got scared and cried, wondering how they would escape." (S6/G)	6 (27.3%)	2 (13.3%)
"Cikcok... got very scared. But Mia said, 'Don't be afraid, I won't hurt you.'" (S34/G)		
"The cat fell from the balcony. It was very scared." (S15/B)		
"Strawberry was very sad, but because she wanted to seem happy, she did not show her sadness." (S20/G)	5 (22.7%)	2 (13.3%)
"The crow was very sad." (S4/G)		
"They saw that their city had been destroyed. They were very saddened by this." (S24/B)		
Social Behavioral Patterns		
Forming friendships		
"They all became friends... they went out together." (S17/G) "Maviş and Miniş became very good friends." (S32/G) "The gingerbread man... became very good friends with an eagle." (S11/B)	10 (45.5%)	6 (40.0%)
Cooperation and acting together		
"The cats... made a plan together... made the potion." (S22/G)	8 (36.4%)	6 (40.0%)
"The two siblings fought together and defeated the giant." (S16/B)		
"It called the mouse and the rabbit... they started thinking together." (S4/G)		
Conflict Behaviors		
Physical struggle		
"Merika brought fire out of her hand and started to fight." (S2/G)	5 (22.7%)	9 (60.0%)
"Missiles, weapons were brought out... people died." (S12/B); "They fought the giant everywhere." (S16/B)		
Bullying and aggression		
"Asi... bullied them and tripped them." (S32/G); "Abdullah kept making fun of him." (S27/B); "She kept pulling their hair to make them cry." (S28/G)	5 (22.7%)	4 (26.7%)

Table 3 continued

<i>Subtheme and code</i>	<i>Girls, n (%)</i>	<i>Boys, n (%)</i>
Problem-Solving Behaviors Resolving through communication	"Come on, make peace'... 'is this what a friend does to a friend?'" (S2/G) "They told the bad child that what he had done was wrong... the child understood." (S17/G)	7 (31.8%) 3 (20.0%)
Planned/ strategic solutions	"Harry and Şura... later made up." (S29/B) "Sinsirella... decided to make a plan... called the mouse and the rabbit." (S4/G) "The cats... made a plan... Tirmik learned his lesson." (S31/G) "Cookie... pulled the cables and managed to escape." (S23/B)	6 (27.3%) 3 (20.0%)
Moral Behavioral Patterns Apology and reparation	"The lion realized his mistake... apologized." (S8/G) "He apologized to everyone." (S32/G) "Mahmut... apologized, and they played football together." (S35/B) "She was very sad but did not show it." (S20/G) "He noticed that his friends were sad." (S17/G) "They were very saddened when they saw their city had been destroyed." (S24/B)	7 (31.8%) 3 (20.0%) 6 (27.3%) 3 (20.0%)
Empathy and sensitivity		

matters: one is a single, decisive fight, and the other is a pattern of smaller, unkind acts over time. This subtheme shows the clearest gender difference in Table 3. Physical struggle was much more common in boys' fairy tales (60.0%) than in girls' (22.7%). Bullying and aggression appeared at similar rates in both groups (girls: 22.7%, boys: 26.7%). This shows that the gender difference is about the type of conflict—physical struggle versus everyday unkindness—not about whether conflict happens at all. Both girls and boys write about conflict at similar rates. But boys' characters are much more likely to fight it out, or make it worse, through direct physical action.

The Problem-Solving Behaviors subtheme illustrates how characters work through difficulties without resorting to force. It has two codes. Resolving through communication shows characters who talk a conflict out—appealing to a wrongdoer's conscience (“Is this what a friend does to a friend?”) or explaining why something was wrong until the other side understands. Here, talking itself solves the problem. Planned/strategic solutions show a different kind of thinking ahead: characters who stop to make a plan before acting, whether calling for help, making a potion, or working out how to escape a trap. Success here comes from planning, not from improvising. Girls' fairy tales more often used communication-based solutions (31.8% versus 20.0% for boys) and planned solutions (27.3% versus 20.0% for boys). This suggests girls' characters more often solve conflict through talking and planning ahead, rather than through the direct physical action seen more often in boys' stories, as shown above.

The Moral Behavioral Patterns subtheme closes Table 3. It returns to the two moral qualities already discussed in Table 2, but now expressed as actions rather than values. Apology and reparation show characters who actually apologize or make up for wrongdoing once they realize it. Empathy and sensitivity show characters actively noticing that someone else is upset, not just feeling upset themselves. Placing these behaviors next to the emotional and conflict codes above lets us compare how often characters act on their moral awareness, not just feel it. Apology and reparation (girls: 31.8%, boys: 20.0%) and empathy and sensitivity (girls: 27.3%, boys: 20.0%) were both more common in girls' fairy tales. Together, these results show that emotional expression, talking through problems, and making up for wrongs were all more common in girls' fairy tales. Physical struggle was more common in boys' fairy tales. Forming friendships and, to a smaller extent, cooperating were shared choices for both groups, with no clear gender difference. Overall, Table 3 suggests that the behavioral differences between girls' and boys' fairy tales are less about whether characters are kind, emotional, or good at solving conflicts. The real difference is in how these qualities are shown: through talking and relationships for girls, through direct, physical action for boys.

The findings on the social messages in the students' fairy tales are presented in Table 4. The Moral Messages subtheme is different from the subthemes above. Instead of showing what a character does or feels, it shows the lesson the story seems to teach the reader through its ending. The good prevails code shows endings in which good is rewarded, and wrongdoing is defeated or corrected. This gives the reader a simple message: good wins in the end. One must defend the truth, and one can make mistakes, but they must be corrected. Take the reporting and remorse behaviors from Table 2 and turn them into clear lessons about honesty and taking responsibility. Bullying is wrong, and greed and selfishness are harmful; the story's disapproval of these behaviors is clear and direct rather than merely implied through the plot. Together, these five codes show that students' fairy tales do more than show values in action. Many students also end their stories by telling the reader, in effect, what they should learn from it. The message that good ultimately prevails appeared more clearly for more girls in the numbers (12 versus 10 students). But once we compare the two groups fairly, it was more common in boys' fairy tales (66.7%) than in girls' (54.5%). By contrast, the messages that one must defend the truth (girls: 27.3%, boys: 20.0%), that mistakes are natural but must be corrected (girls: 31.8%, boys: 26.7%), and that greed and selfishness are harmful (girls: 13.6%, boys: 6.7%) were all more common in girls' fairy tales. The message that bullying is wrong appeared at similar rates in both groups (girls: 22.7%, boys: 26.7%).

Table 4
Social messages in students' fairy tales

Subtheme and code		Girls, n (%)	Boys, n (%)
Moral Messages Good prevails	"The Five-Legged Cat and the Magic Rabbit... saved the child... saved the world." (S5/B)	12 (54.5%)	10 (66.7%)
	"The giant became good... fixed everything." (S22/G)		
	"Tirmik learned his lesson and never behaved badly again." (S31/G)		
One must defend the truth	"Mahmut... realized that mocking was bad." (S35/B)	6 (27.3%)	3 (20.0%)
	"Ömer and his friends... reported it to the teacher." (S3/G)		
	"They said that what they had done was wrong." (S17/G)		
One can make mistakes, but they must be corrected	"The lion realized his mistake... apologized." (S8/G)	7 (31.8%)	4 (26.7%)
	"Asi... realized her mistake and apologized." (S32/G) "He apologized to everyone." (S32/G)		
	"apologized, and they played football together." (S35/B)		
Bullying is wrong	"Mehmet pushed a child because he wanted his money." (S3/G)	5 (22.7%)	4 (26.7%)
	"kept pulling their hair to make them cry." (S28/G)		
	"The crow... became proud... was deceived." (S4/G)	3 (13.6%)	1 (6.7%)
Greed and selfishness are harmful	"Tirmik... ate all the food by himself." (S31/G)		
Social Messages Friendship matters	"They all became friends... they went out together." (S17/G)	12 (54.5%)	10 (66.7%)
	"they became very good friends." (S11/B)		
	"The two siblings fought together and defeated the giant." (S16/B)	8 (36.4%)	6 (40.0%)
Acting together brings success	"made a plan together... solved it." (S31/G)		
	"Joyful... saved the king... thanked him." (S26/G)		
	"Distor... said he could help." (S15/B)	6 (27.3%)	7 (46.7%)

Table 4 continued

<i>Subtheme and code</i>	<i>Girls, n (%)</i>	<i>Boys, n (%)</i>
Problem-Solving Messages		
Problems are solved by talking	7 (31.8%)	3 (20.0%)
Making a plan brings a solution	6 (27.3%)	3 (20.0%)
Emotional Messages		
Fears can be overcome	4 (18.2%)	3 (20.0%)
Emotions matter	7 (31.8%)	3 (20.0%)
Achievement and Growth Messages		
Those who work will succeed	4 (18.2%)	5 (33.3%)

The Social Messages subtheme does the same thing as Moral Messages, but for the relationship values shown in Table 3. It turns friendship, helping, and cooperation from things characters do into clear lessons for the reader. Friendship matters, and helping is necessary to show, often in a character's own words of thanks or resolve, that connecting with and helping others is something the story wants the reader to value. Acting together brings success ties this to a clear result: working together is shown as the reason a hard goal was reached. The message that friendship matters appeared more often for girls in plain numbers, like the "good prevails" message. But once we compare the groups fairly, it was more common in boys' fairy tales (66.7%) than in girls' (54.5%). The message that helping is necessary showed an even bigger gender gap in the same direction. It appeared much more often in boys' fairy tales (46.7%) than in girls' (27.3%)—a bigger gap than plain numbers alone would suggest. The message that acting together brings success appeared at similar rates in both groups (girls: 36.4%, boys: 40.0%).

The Problem-Solving Messages subtheme matches the Problem-Solving Behaviors subtheme in Table 3, but again, as a lesson, not just an action. Problems are solved by talking and making a plan, which brings a solution, showing that dialogue and planning are not just things characters happen to do, but strategies the story recommends to the reader. Girls' fairy tales more often used both talking through problems (31.8% versus 20.0% for boys) and making a plan (27.3% versus 20.0% for boys). This matches what we already saw in Table 3 for problem-solving behaviors: girls' characters more often solved conflicts through talking and planning. Table 4 adds one more layer to this. It is not just that girls' characters do this more often. Their stories are also more likely to say it out loud, telling the reader directly that talking and planning are the right way to solve a problem.

The Emotional Messages subtheme makes the same shift from behavior to clear lesson, this time for the feelings shown in Table 3's Emotional Behavioral Patterns subtheme. Emotions matter tells the reader that a character's feelings are worth noticing—sometimes by showing that a character hid their sadness rather than being allowed to show it. Fears can be overcome; instead, it presents fear as temporary, fading once the danger passes, giving the reader a message of hope. The message that emotions matter was more common in girls' fairy tales (31.8%) than in boys' (20.0%). This aligns with the stronger focus on showing feelings already evident in girls' behavioral patterns. The message that fears can be overcome appeared at similar rates in both groups (girls: 18.2%, boys: 20.0%). This suggests both groups equally use the idea that fear passes, even though girls' stories spend more time on the feeling itself.

Finally, the Achievement and Growth Messages subtheme rests on one code: those who work will succeed. This turns the Effort and Perseverance value from Table 2 into a clear lesson: hard work leads to success. A character's success—graduating, passing an exam—is shown as the direct, fair result of their earlier hard work. This code appeared for a similar number of students in both groups (4 girls versus 5 boys). But once we compare the groups fairly, it was clearly more common in boys' fairy tales (33.3%) than in girls' (18.2%). This aligns with the stronger focus on determination already evident in boys' moral values. Overall, the pattern in Table 4 matches what we saw in Tables 1 through 3. Messages about moral awareness, feelings, and communication were more common in girls' fairy tales. Messages about goodness, helping, friendship, and achievement were more common in boys' fairy tales. This shows that the gender differences observed in characters' values and behaviors also appear in the clear lessons that the students' stories convey to the reader.

4. Discussion

This study shows that the fairy tales of fourth-grade primary school students are not merely products of creative writing but also important narratives reflecting how children make sense of social norms, moral values, and social relationships. The findings revealed that social norms, moral values, behavioral patterns, and social messages were strongly present in the students' fairy tales.

The research findings show that social norms, moral values, and social messages in the students' fairy tales are interrelated. The frequent presence of themes such as the violation and

subsequent restoration of rules, the triumph of good, the correction of mistakes, friendship, helping, and cooperation suggests that students make sense of social life within the framework of certain values and norms. In particular, the fact that situations such as conflict and bullying lie at the center of the narratives shows that children process the problems they encounter in social life through their fairy tales. Conversely, the prominence of apology, reconciliation, and cooperation in resolution processes indicates that students regard social harmony as an important value.

These findings are consistent with studies showing that children's written narratives reflect social expectations, cultural values, and social experiences (Gürkan, 2021; Ryan & Khosronejad, 2025). They also support research emphasizing that fairy tales play an important role in children's moral and social development (Işık & Argun, 2022). The prevalence of values such as helping, empathy, sharing, honesty, and justice in students' fairy tales suggests a shared moral framework. The prominence of themes such as the triumph of good, the correction of mistakes, and the defense of truth in moral messages suggests that children do not merely learn these values but also reconstruct them in their own narratives (Gasser et al., 2022; Ryan & Khosronejad, 2025). Similarly, the frequent use of social messages such as friendship, helping, and cooperation shows that students value social relationships and acting together. The literature notes that fairy tales contribute to children's development of empathy, understanding others' perspectives, and social relationships (Işık & Argun, 2022).

In interpreting the findings, all comparisons were evaluated using percentages normalized to the total number of students in the relevant gender group, given the imbalance between the number of girls ($n = 22$) and boys ($n = 15$). This evaluation showed that some patterns based on raw student counts were confirmed, whereas others weakened or changed when proportional distributions were considered. Conciliatory, relationship-preserving, and reparative behaviors, particularly apologizing and mediating, were proportionally more frequent in girls' fairy tales, whereas conflict, struggle, and rule violation were proportionally more prominent in boys' fairy tales. In contrast, the raw-frequency pattern suggesting that girls were more prominent in some social behaviors, such as friendship formation and cooperation, was not consistently confirmed in the normalized percentages and, in some cases, was reversed. Similarly, while girls placed greater emphasis on moral-awareness dimensions such as compassion, recognizing wrongdoing, and remorse, with both groups showing a similar pattern for empathy, boys more often emphasized values related to rescuing, protecting, struggle, and achievement. A similar differentiation was observed in social messages: girls proportionally emphasized communication-, planning-, and emotion-expression-oriented messages, whereas boys proportionally emphasized goodness/friendship-, helping-, and achievement-oriented messages.

These findings are broadly consistent with research showing that children's narratives reflect gendered patterns in emotional expression, agency, social relations, and moral meaning-making. Anggraeni et al. (2026) found that girls' narratives tend to emphasize emotional expression, interpersonal connection, and coherent relational structure, whereas boys' narratives are more often action-oriented and less emotionally elaborated. Similarly, research on young children's conflict narratives suggests that girls' stories may include mediation, compromise, solidarity, and apology, while boys' stories more often involve resistance or conflictual agency (Lahtinen et al., 2025). The present findings also align with broader developmental accounts indicating that girls are often socialized toward relationality, compliance, and emotional expressiveness, whereas boys are more often socialized toward strength, independence, and emotional restraint (Saygan & Pekel Uludağlı, 2021). From the perspective of our journals, these results can also be interpreted in relation to evidence that storytelling is closely connected with children's moral reasoning, social skills, sensitivity, and understanding of social dynamics, and that primary school children's social-emotional skills are shaped through communication, emotional awareness, empathy, and interpersonal regulation (Isik & Sahin Taskin, 2024; Jacob et al., 2024). Thus, the proportional analysis suggests that gendered differences in the fairy tales should not be interpreted simply as differences in frequency, but as differences in the narrative organization of social relations, moral awareness, emotional expression, and problem-solving orientations.

Beyond noting this consistency, it is worth asking why communication- and relationship-oriented resolutions might be proportionally favored in girls' narratives. One plausible explanation, consistent with socialization accounts of gender development, is that girls are more often encouraged – by parents, teachers, and media – to attend to others' emotional states and to use verbal strategies for managing conflict, which may in turn become available narrative resources when they construct fictional characters (Rogers, 2020; Saygan & Pekel Uludağlı, 2021). An alternative, non-competing explanation is that these patterns partly reflect differences in the everyday peer contexts in which girls and boys in this age group interact, rather than a stable trait; longitudinal or comparative designs would be needed to adjudicate between these accounts, and the present study's cross-sectional, single-country design does not allow this distinction to be tested directly.

By contrast, the proportional prominence of themes such as physical struggle, power, rescuing/protecting, and achievement in boys' fairy tales parallels research showing that boys more often use action- and achievement-oriented structures in their narratives (Anggraeni et al., 2026; Gürkan, 2021). This pattern becomes even more pronounced in the group-size-normalized percentages than in the raw-frequency comparisons, which strengthens the likelihood that this difference reflects a genuine pattern. The fact that characters mostly resolve problems through direct intervention or struggle can be interpreted as reflecting gender roles in the narratives (Gürkan, 2021; Lahtinen, 2025; Saygan & Pekel Uludağlı, 2021).

Similarly, the proportional prominence of struggle- and achievement-oriented content in boys' narratives should not be read simply as confirmation of a fixed 'boys like action' stereotype. Recent international evidence indicates that gender-typed patterns in young children's narrative and play preferences are responsive to structured, narrative-based interventions and are therefore more malleable than trait-based accounts would suggest (Segura-Nebot et al., 2025). Read together with the fact that the students in the present study were given no guidance regarding characters, themes, or plot, this suggests that the achievement- and struggle-oriented content in boys' fairy tales is better understood as a currently available and socially rehearsed narrative script than as an inevitable expression of gender.

However, one notable finding of the study is that students did not always adhere to traditional gender stereotypes. In some narratives, girls included struggle-oriented behaviors, while in others, boys included emotional and conciliatory behaviors. This suggests that students are able to treat gender roles not as rigid, fixed patterns but as structures that can be reinterpreted in different contexts. This finding is also consistent with studies indicating that instances departing from traditional gender stereotypes can be observed in children's narratives (Rogers, 2020; Ryan & Khosronejad, 2025). This is consistent with recent international research showing that when children themselves construct narratives – rather than simply consuming texts written for them – gender is not always reproduced uniformly, and individual children can depart markedly from group-level tendencies even while broader patterns remain visible at the aggregate level (Malisiova & Kompoti, 2026).

The research findings show that fairy tales written by children are important narrative domains in which social norms, moral values, and gender roles are reproduced. Although students emphasize shared social values, they express these values through different narrative forms. This suggests that children do not merely reflect social norms and values but also reinterpret them in light of their own experiences and perspectives. Consistent with Corsaro's (2018) interpretive reproduction approach, children's narratives can be regarded not as domains in which social values are passively transmitted, but as domains in which they are actively made sense of and reproduced. In this respect, fairy tales written by children offer an important data source for examining how they perceive and make sense of the social world.

5. Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the study group is limited to 37 fourth-grade primary school students in three central districts of Bursa province, Türkiye. This limits the transferability

of the findings to children in different regional, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts. Second, although the data were collected under standardized conditions—individually, in the classroom setting, without teacher intervention, and within two class hours in each classroom—the possible influence of factors such as the distinct classroom climate, peer dynamics, and the classroom atmosphere of that particular day across the six different classrooms could not be separately controlled for in this study. Third, because of the imbalance between the number of girls ($n = 22$) and boys ($n = 15$) in the study group, gender comparisons were made using percentages normalized to group size; nevertheless, the small sample size means that some percentage differences may stem from the narrative preferences of only a few students. For this reason, the findings should be interpreted as descriptive tendencies. Fourth, because the students wrote fictional narratives, the social norms, values, and behavioral patterns identified in their fairy tales should not be interpreted as direct or literal expressions of the students' own personal beliefs or behavior; rather, they reflect the cultural and narrative resources that students draw on when constructing a story, which may diverge from their actual convictions or conduct in daily life.

6. Recommendations and Implications

The findings carry some concrete implications for classroom teachers and curriculum developers. First, guiding creative writing activities in a gender-sensitive manner—for instance, by using open-ended prompts that encourage students to move beyond traditional stereotypes in character selection and role distribution—may broaden children's narrative repertoire. In practice, this could involve teachers briefly modeling a counter-stereotypical example before the writing task (e.g., a story in which a female character solves a problem through physical courage or a male character resolves a conflict through dialogue), explicitly inviting students to consider a range of possible traits for their main character regardless of gender, and, during feedback, asking reflective questions such as 'Could this character have responded differently?' rather than directly prescribing particular roles or behaviors. Second, teachers could use students' own fairy tales, particularly themes of conflict resolution and emotional expression, as tools in classroom discussions on peer bullying and emotional awareness education. Third, the findings of this study may inform the development of a module on 'reading children's narratives from the perspective of gender and social norms' within teacher training programs.

Author contributions: Both authors contributed equally to all stages of the study, including conceptualization, methodology, data collection, formal analysis, writing, review, and editing. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Data availability: The data that support the findings of this study (children's fairy tales) are not publicly available because they contain information that could compromise the privacy of the child participants, but de-identified excerpts are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Please confirm or revise before submission.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies: The authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) for translation assistance and Grammarly for language editing and proofreading to improve the clarity, coherence, readability, and linguistic accuracy of the manuscript. These tools were used solely for language-related purposes and were not used to generate the study's data, analyses, interpretations, results, or findings. All intellectual and scholarly contributions, as well as responsibility for the final content of the manuscript, remain entirely with the authors.

Declaration of interest: The authors declare no competing of interest.

Ethics declaration: Prior to data collection, ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Sakarya University Educational Research and Publication Ethics Committee (Decision No. 11, taken at meeting No. 38 dated 04.12.2024; approval letter no. E-61923333-050.99-426974, dated 06.12.2024). Written informed consent was obtained from the parents/legal guardians of the participating students, and the students themselves were informed of the voluntary nature of participation in the study in an age-appropriate manner.

Funding: No funding was received for this study.

References

- Ağgöl, C., & Yılmaz, F. (2023). Children with Stereotypes and Prejudices: A Study on Primary School Students. *Erzincan University Journal of the Faculty of Education*, 25(2), 279–296. <https://doi.org/10.17556/erziefd.1146808>
- Anggraeni, S. W., Sunendar, D., & Cahyani, I. (2026). Gender and narrative writing in elementary schools: A qualitative study supporting inclusive education. *F1000Research*, 14, 1317. <https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.171604.2>
- Armoni, Z. (2023). *Examination of secondary students' opinions on gender equality through Howell and Heap's approach to processive drama* (Publication no. 822334) [Master's thesis, Ankara University]. Council of Higher Education Thesis Center.
- Arslan, D., Tamul, Ö. F., Şahin, M. D., & Sak, U. (2023). Effects of gender norms on intelligence tests: Evidence from ASIS. *Journal of Pedagogical Research*, 7(5), 374–384. <https://doi.org/10.33902/JPR.202323599>
- Batmaz, Ö. (2021). A look at gender equality in illustrated children's books. *Gaziantep University Journal of Educational Sciences*, 5(1), 1–18. <https://izlik.org/JA77JE49RR>
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>
- Brito, J. J. da S., Moura, J. F. de, & Pantoja, V. (2025). Narrativas de crianças sobre as construções binárias e normativas de gêneros [Children's narratives on binary and normative gender constructions]. *Cadernos CRH*, 38, e025063. <http://dx.doi.org/10.9771/ccrh.v38i0.56726>
- Burris, S. E., & Brown, D. D. (2014). When all children comprehend: Increasing the external validity of narrative comprehension development research. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5, 168. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00168>
- Čigarská, V. (2025). Examining the effect of a picturebook reading intervention on younger school age children with different reading skills and vividness of visual imagery. *Journal of Pedagogical Research*, 9(5), 58–83. <https://doi.org/10.33902/JPR.202534114>
- Corsaro, W. A. (2018). *The sociology of childhood* (5th ed.). Sage.
- Demir, S., & Uzundal, M. (2025). Reflections of peer bullying in children's literature works. *RumeliDE Journal of Language and Literature Studies*, 47, 55–73. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16544458>
- Ellemers, N. (2018). Gender stereotypes. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 69, 275–298. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-122216-011719>
- Elo, S., & Kyngäs, H. (2008). The qualitative content analysis process. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 62(1), 107–115. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2007.04569.x>
- Ervansel Yüksel, T., & Koyuncu Şahin, M. (2023). Studies conducted in Turkey on examining the gender case in children's books. *The Journal of Academic Social Science Studies*, 16(98), 99–110. <https://doi.org/10.29228/JASSS.70163>
- Fang, F., & Low, H. M. (2026). Using wordless picture books to assess gender variations in social imagination among preschool children. *Acta Psychologica*, 263, 106339. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2026.106339>
- Gasser, L., Dammert, Y., & Murphy, P. K. (2022). How do children socially learn from narrative fiction: Getting the lesson, simulating social worlds, or dialogic inquiry? *Educational Psychology Review*, 34(4), 1445–1475. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-022-09667-4>
- Gürkan, S. (2021). Sociological inferences deduced from creative writing activities: Analyzing gender perceptions and stereotypes of children in terms of child development. *Bartın University Journal of Faculty of Education*, 10(1), 232–242. <https://doi.org/10.14686/buefad.822960>
- Gürşimşek, I., & Günay, D. (2005). Çocuk kitaplarında cinsiyet rollerinin işlenişinde kullanılan dilsel ve dildışı göstergelerin değerlendirilmesi [An evaluation of the linguistic and nonlinguistic indicators used in the treatment of gender roles in children's books]. *Dokuz Eylül University Buca Faculty of Education Journal*, 18, 53–63. <https://izlik.org/JA68EW37WE>
- Horne, C., & Mollborn, S. (2020). Norms: An integrated framework. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 46, 467–487. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-121919-054658>
- Isik, D., & Sahin Taskin, C. (2024). Beyond the classroom: Understanding primary school students' social-emotional skills through parental eyes. *Journal of Pedagogical Research*, 8(3), 48–62. <https://doi.org/10.33902/JPR.202426314>

- Işık, H., & Argun, E. (2022). An application to evaluate the imaginary place of hero figures in Turkish and Western cultures in secondary school students: The example of Dede Korkut Story. *Balikesir University Journal of the Institute of Social Sciences*, 25(47), 241–257. <https://doi.org/10.31795/baunsobed.1038396>
- Jacob, U. S., Busari, I. O., Pillay, J., & Oyefeso, E. O. (2024). Moral values and social skills of pupils with mild intellectual disability: Does indigenous language storytelling and gender play any role? *Journal of Pedagogical Sociology and Psychology*, 6(2), 17–29. <https://doi.org/10.33902/jpsp.202424850>
- Khimji, F., & Maunder, R. E. (2012). Mediation tools in story construction: An investigation of cultural influences on children's narratives. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 10(3), 294–308. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X12443022>
- Lahtinen, M. (2025). *Resisting boys and complying girls? Young children's narratives of the child's opportunities for agency in child-parent conflicts* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Jyväskylä.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.
- Malisiova, E., & Kompoti, D. (2026). Children's gender representations through digital storytelling in preschool settings. In A. Krouska, P. Mylonas, & J. Caro (Eds.), *Novel and Intelligent Digital Systems: Proceedings of the 5th International Conference (NiDS 2025)* (pp. 337–349). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-10827-2_27
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Mukagiahana, J., Sibomana, A., & Ndiritu, J. (2024). Teachers' understanding of gender responsive pedagogy and its application in teaching process: Case after teacher training program interventions in Rwanda. *Journal of Pedagogical Research*, 8(1), 280–293. <https://doi.org/10.33902/JPR.202423067>
- Özcan, U. (2022). A re-evaluation of social value and norm concepts in sociology. *Sosyologca*, 23, 19–31.
- Öztürk, H., & Erzen, E. (2023). Teaching death in Türkiye: The theme of death in illustrated children's books. *Journal of Pedagogical Sociology and Psychology*, 5(3), 28–46. <https://doi.org/10.33902/jpsp.202319688>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Poarch, R., & Monk-Turner, E. (2001). Gender roles in children's literature: A review of non-award-winning "easy-to-read" books. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 16(1), 70–76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02568540109594975>
- Rogers, L. O. (2020). "I'm kind of a feminist": Using master narratives to analyze gender identity in middle childhood. *Child Development*, 91(1), 179–196. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13142>
- Ryan, M., & Khosronejad, M. (2025). Examining authorial agency in elementary children's narratives. *Classroom Discourse*, 16(1), 52–67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19463014.2024.2360417>
- Saygan, B., & Pekel Uludağlı, N. (2021). Lifespan development of gender roles. *Current Approaches in Psychiatry*, 13(2), 354–382. <https://doi.org/10.18863/pgy.789615>
- Şahin, A., Gönen, A., & Özçelik, F. C. (2023). Evaluation of the 3rd and 4th grade story books in primary school in terms of violence and fear. *Eurasian Journal of Language Education and Research*, 7(2), 77–97. <https://izlik.org/JA44ZC77GC>
- Segura-Nebot, R., de Lemus, S., Baltar, A., & Montañés Muro, P. (2025). Boys and girls can play: Efficacy of a counter-stereotypical intervention based on narratives in young children. *Social Psychology of Education*, 28, 123. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-025-10077-x>
- Trepanier-Street, M. L., & Romatowski, J. A. (1986). Sex and age differences in children's creative writing. *The Journal of Humanistic Education and Development*, 25(1), 18–27. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2164-4683.1986.tb00295.x>
- UNICEF. (2021, November). *Defining social norms and related concepts*. <https://knowledge.unicef.org/social-and-behavior-change/resource/definining-social-norms-and-related-concepts>
- Uzkul, S. (2025). Gender stereotypes reflected in child figure drawings of five-year-old children. *Bitlis Eren University Journal of Social Sciences*, 14(1), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.47130/bitlissos.1554558>
- Westerveld, M. F., Lyons, R., Nelson, N. W., Chen, K. M., Claessen, M., Ferman, S., Fernandes, F. D. M., Gillon, G. T., Kavar, K., Kuvač Kraljević, J., Petinou, K., Theodorou, E., Tumanova, T., Vogindroukas, I., & Westby, C. (2022). Global TALEs feasibility study: Personal narratives in 10-year-old children around the world. *PLOS ONE*, 17(8), e0273114. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0273114>
- Yücel Çetin, D., & Mangır, M. (2021). Reflection of gender perception on language in children's books. *Journal of Mother Tongue Education*, 9(1), 166–187. <https://doi.org/10.16916/aded.799604>