The Lion, the Witch, or the Schoolkid? The Effects of Different Fantasy Elements on Children's Comprehension of Moral Lessons in Picture Books

Katherine A. Bos and Jacqueline Woolley, PhD
Department of Psychology, University of Texas at Austin

Introduction

- Starting at ages 5-6, children can identify the moral content of fictional stories with minimal prompting.

- Previous research indicates children are less likely to understand moral lessons in stories with anthropomorphic animal characters than human characters, 4, 5.

- Some research on children’s reading preferences indicates children prefer books about animals, but this is confounded by research suggesting children prefer realistic stories. 6

- No research has compared different fantasy for differences in adolescent moral understanding, such as human characters and impossible setting (e.g. superpowers, magic).

Hypotheses

1. Children in condition C (impossible fantasy) will have higher moral comprehension scores on average than children in condition B (animal fantasy).

2. Children in condition A (realistic) will score the highest moral comprehension scores on average than either fantasy book.

3. Children prefer to read realistic stories over fantastical stories.

Materials and Method

### Condition A
- *Peyton Mouse* wants to be *Super Teacher*. Every morning, *Daddy Mouse* takes *Peyton* to *Animal Elementary School*. *Peyton* goes to class with all the other animals in Ms. *Sheep’s* class, where *Peyton* learns all kinds of things. In class, *Peyton* learns about how to be tall and how to fly.

### Condition B
- *Peyton* goes to *Superhero Academy*. *Mighty Dad* takes *Peyton* to school every morning, and every afternoon *Mommy McGee* takes *Peyton* home.

### Condition C
- *Peyton* goes to a *Magical School* every morning, where *Peyton* learns about how to be tall and how to fly.

Results

#### I. Magical Thinking Assessment

- Participants were asked to categorize objects as "real" or "pretend".

#### II. Reading Comprehension Score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>a. Reading Comprehension Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### III. Moral Comprehension Score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>a. Moral Comprehension Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

- While there are no significant differences in reading comprehension based on condition, there were also no significant difference between moral comprehension scores and conditions A, B, or C.

- Participants met with a researcher for a 30-minute Zoom session, where the researcher and participant went through a Qualtrics survey together. Each Qualtrics survey contained the following:

I. Magical Thinking Assessment

II. One of three picture books (A, B, or C) and its moral comprehension questions

III. Fiction Preferences Survey

Future Directions

- Including more moral comprehension questions could create a greater range of moral comprehension scores. This may find statistically significant differences not apparent in this study.

- Polls on children’s interest in literature could differentiate between stories and nonfiction, such as an animal fact book instead of an animal story. This could show if children’s interest in animal stories is due to the fantasy of taking animals or an interest in animals as a subject.

Acknowledgements

I extend my thanks to Dr. Jacqueline Woolley, Jenny Nolan, and all research assistants in the Imagination and Cognition Lab for their feedback and help in recruiting and collecting data. This thesis was funded by scholarships from the Office of Undergraduate Research (O UR) and the College of Liberal Arts (COLA).

References