

Digital environments exposure, empathy, moral judgement, and literature class

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Abstract

*The article represents a part of an experiment conducted at the University of Maribor, where we observed how children perceive the ethical component in the first book of the Harry Potter series, the *Philosopher's Stone*. In a group of children aged 9, 11, and 13, we observed their perception, understanding, and evaluation of ethical judgments in relation to the literary events in the *Philosopher's Stone*. Like Kohlberg, we were interested not only in whether the children perceived and understood the actions of the characters acting, but also whether they were able to explain and evaluate the motivation behind the characters' actions. We were also interested in whether mimetic association with the literary world or the ability to take the perspective of one of the literary characters, affects the child's empathy with the literary character and thus his or her ethical judgments about the characters' actions.*

Keywords: digital environments exposure, empathy, moral judgement, literature class

1 Introduction

Empathy, moral judgment, and human behavior are closely linked, as research in recent decades has shown (Batson, 2011; Dickert, 2016; Khalid, 2022). It is therefore of great concern that students' empathy skills decline after prolonged exposure to digital environments, as demonstrated in recent studies. This process of decline in empathy skills has been demonstrated in several studies over the last decade. Errasti, Amigo & Villadangos (2017) observed the impact of intensive use of social media (Facebook, Twitter) on 503 Spanish adolescents aged 14 to 16 using the Basic Empathy Scale. The obtained results proved the negative influence of the tendency to use social media on empathy competence. The results of Vossen and Valkenburg's (2016) study were similar. They observed the effects of social media use on cognitive and emotional empathy competence and on 'sympathy' (defined as empathy with another person who has experienced something unfortunate) in a large sample of 942 children in the Netherlands. The results show that the impact on empathy is immense and increases with time spent on social media. Even deeper insights into the interdependence between people's online behavior, their moral judgment, and their empathy skills are provided by research conducted by Flores & James (2012). Their findings show that respondents are unaware that their online behavior hurts the recipient of their 'message' – particularly in cases where the target of online bullying, lies, and negative insinuations is someone not close to them. The negative

influence of media exposure on empathy skills increases the amount of time spent playing violent video games, as demonstrated in research by the lack of awareness that their behavior on the Internet hurts the recipient of their 'message' – especially in cases where the target of bullying, lying, and negative insinuations on the Internet is a person not close to them. The negative impact of media exposure on empathy skills (Twenge & Campbell, 2018) increases with time spent on the Internet and time spent playing violent video games (Prot et al., 2014).

All of this is summarized in the NESET report on the impact of technology use on children's empathy and attention skills, published after the closure of schools in the epidemic year of 2020 (Flecha et. al., 2020), when exposure to digital environments expanded from mainly free time activities to almost all educational activities. Knowing that time spent in digital learning environments will never return to previous levels and that AI is being used for knowledge acquisition in the educational process of young children, we need to pay urgent attention to the skills and competencies that will decline or be lost. Empathy skills are undoubtedly one of them.

Now it is time to consider what measures, what didactic approaches, what activities the educational system can take to compensate for the negative influence of digital environments on the development of empathy competence. One of the didactic approaches to this is to promote the reading of children's literature in school, as engagement with literature promotes empathy and is related to the moral judgement of readers. The purpose of this article is to try to answer the following question: Does the reading of children's literature in primary class influence the child's emphatic engagement and thus his moral judgment. We will examine this question using *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. Why did we choose *Harry Potter*? The reason is that the *Harry Potter* book series by J. K. Rowling has received a lot of attention in recent years. Debate about the moral message of the stories has been fraught with ambivalence. No other literary work for children has been studied so much for its ethical component, which in turn makes it an ideal starting point for our experiment.

Before we begin, we must try to find answers to the following questions: Are the *Harry Potter* stories moral stories? And: Do the characters in the stories represent certain stages in Kohlberg's model of moral reasoning?

Research on *Harry Potter* and its moral message has already given us detailed answers to the first question: "Does Rowling's stories fill the reader's need for a story with moral certainty" (Binnedyk & Schonert-Reichl, 2002). "In these stories, the expression of morality is so simplistic that Harry Potter, a boy of 11 years of age, displays little difficulty judging right from wrong. He lives in a black and white moral universe where good and evil co-exist and are always in competition to reign over the school he attends" (ibid, p. 3). But do Rowling's characters fit Kohlberg's stages of moral reasoning? Binnedyk & Schonert-Reichl describe (2002) the main characters of the *Harry Potter* series in terms of their predominant stage of moral development using Kohlberg's stage typology:

- Kohlberg's first stage of moral reasoning – heteronomous morality or punishment and obedience orientation – is exemplified by Dobby, the little house elf.
- Draco Malfoy, Harry's archenemy, is a good example of stage two by displaying an individualistic, instrumental purpose orientation.
- Illustrative of stage three reasoning, the interpersonal cooperation orientation - is Ron, Harry's friend. Ron will do anything for Harry in order to preserve their close friendship.
- Kohlberg's stage four of moral reasoning – the law-and-order orientation – is portrayed by Hermione, because of her emphasis on maintaining the functioning and existence of the system as a whole.
- According to Binnedyk & Schonert-Reichl (2002), Harry Potter himself is a good example of the fifth stage orientation to the social contract/internal rights as he focuses on fair procedures and social and individual rights.

To sum up: Harry Potter is "a hero with whom readers of all ages can easily identify" (Tucker, 1999, p. 227). This leads us to the following assumption: if interactions with peers can provide opportunities for role-taking in which children take the perspective of other children whose viewpoints on moral issues differ

from their own (Bear et al., 1997), then interactions with literary characters can have the same or even a better effect.

To verify this logical premise, we observed perceptions, understandings, and evaluations of ethical judgments related to literary events in Rowling's novel *the Philosopher's Stone* in a group of children ages 9, 11, and 13. We were interested not only in whether the children sensed and understood how the characters involved in the plot acted but also whether they were able to explain and evaluate the motivation behind the characters' actions. Furthermore, we were interested in whether the mimetic participation in the literary world, the ability to take the perspective of one of the literary characters, influence the children's empathy and thus consequently their ethical judgments or, on the contrary, are perception, understanding and evaluation of ethical judgments completely independent of the emotional involvement in a literary milieu. Hypothesis: taking the perspective of a literary character has a positive influence on the degree of empathy with the victim (Harry Potter) and consequently on ethical judgments: Perception, understanding, and evaluation of Dudley and Piers hitting him just for fun.

2 Methodology

2.1 Sample

A random sample from a concrete population was used for the study. Sixteen 9-year-old students, sixteen 11-year-old students and sixteen 13-year-old students participated in the study from beginning to end. The decision to participate and continue in the study was made by the children. There were equal numbers of boys and girls in each age group, making it a balanced sample in terms of gender and age.

2.2 Instruments

We investigated the influence of identification with a literary character on the perception, understanding and evaluation of ethical judgments by considering a *virtually real situation* and comparing it with the perception, understanding, and evaluation of ethical judgments in a *literary fiction*. We used as an example a passage from the *Philosopher's Stone* describing a visit to the zoo on the day of Dudley's birthday: "*It was a very sunny Saturday, and the zoo was crowded with families. The Dursleys bought Dudley and Piers chocolate ice-cream at the entrance and then because the smiling lady in the van had asked Harry what he wanted before they could hurry him away, they bought him a cheap lemon ice-lolly. It wasn't bad either, Harry thought, licking it as they watched a gorilla scratching its head and looking remarkably like Dudley, except that it wasn't blond.*

Harry had the best morning he'd had in a long time. He was careful to walk a little way apart from the Dursleys so that Dudley and Piers, who were starting to get bored with the animals by lunchtime, wouldn't fall back on their favorite hobby of hitting him. They ate at the zoo restaurant and when Dudley had a tantrum because his knicker-blocker glory wasn't big enough, Uncle Vernon bought him another one and Harry was allowed to finish the first" (Rowling 1997: 33-34)

We have adjusted the same paragraph by changing the names of the characters. Harry became Hank, Dudley became Danny, and Piers became Peter. Consequently, we had two instruments and thus two topics for discussion in semi-structured interview about which of the two boys exhibited the worse negative behavior.

2.3 Data collection

First, we read aloud the adapted passage with the changed names of Hank, Danny, and Peter. We also gave the children individual copies so they could read them on their own. After they finished reading, we discussed the '*real*' boy's behavior by asking: *We underlined two sentences that show Danny is a bad person! Which is worse: hitting the weaker ones for fun or throwing tantrums in public? Explain.* Then we asked the children to read the first two chapters of *the Philosopher's Stone* at home.

On the appointed date, we read the passage aloud again and also gave the children individual copies of the original. After the final reading, we asked the children to answer the following questions by asking follow-up questions: *We underlined two sentences that show Dudley is a bad person! Which is worse: hitting the weaker ones for fun or throwing tantrums in public? Explain.*

2.4 Analytical methods

All discussions with the children were recorded and transcribed. Data sources were analyzed in the following manner. First, responses related to the proposed topics were coded. Then, when groups of related codes or categories emerged, each was given a label. At this point, the teachers who had conducted the interview were consulted. Their task was to check the correctness of the label in the context of the particular communication situation while examining a child's moral judgement. If all agreed, the frequency of each theme in each situation (reception: quasi-real) was counted and presented in the form of tables.

3 Results

3.1 How do children perceive and evaluate fighting for fun compared to bad behavior in public

Table 1

The connection between gender, age, and the score related to which behavior is worse – discussion about Hank, a boy in a 'real world' setting

Age	9 years old			11 years old			13 years old		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Fighting	7	7	14	3	4	7	6	4	10
Tantrums	1	1	2	5	4	9	2	4	6
Total	8	8	16	8	8	16	8	8	16

Fourteen 9-year-old children felt that fighting just for fun was worse than throwing a tantrum in public. There was no difference between the responses of boys and girls. Opinions differed more among 11-year-olds. More students chose the second option. The boys chose throwing a tantrum more often than fighting for fun. Girls chose the first and second described behavior in equal numbers. The 13-year-old girls also chose the first and second options in equal numbers, while the boys chose fighting as a worse reason. There are gender differences for both 11-year-olds and 13-year-olds.

Table 2

The connection between gender, age, and the score in relation to which behavior is worse – discussion about Harry Potter

Age	9 years old			11 years old			13 years old		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Fighting	5	6	11	5	7	12	6	2	8
Tantrums	3	0	3	3	1	4	2	6	8
Both	0	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0

The 9-year-old children have mostly decided that fighting just for fun is worse than tantrums. There are differences between the genders, as three of the boys preferred tantrums to fighting, while none of the girls did. Two of the girls found it very difficult to decide between the two types of bad behavior. Similarly, the 11-year-old students decided that being beaten just for fun was worse. There were eight girls and five boys. The responses were evenly distributed among 13-year-olds. However, the gender differences were significant. Six of the boys thought it was worse to fight just for fun. Only two girls held the same opinion. The results were exactly the opposite for tantrums.

3.2 What reasons do the children give in the case of a 'real boy'? Why do they consider one type of behavior more unacceptable than the other?

Table 3

Categories of reasons, why particular behavior is worse and the number of students – discussion about Hank, a 'real boy'

Gender	Male			Female		
	9 years	11 years	13 years	9 years	11 years	13 years
Categories of reasons: fighting						
Unfairness	2	3	1	1	4	3

He could get hurt	5	0	5	6	0	1
Total	7	3	6	7	4	4
Categories of reasons: Tantrums						
Because Danny is spoiled	1	4	2	1	4	4
Because Danny is greedy	4	1	0	4	0	0
Total	5	5	2	5	4	4

The 9-year-olds were most likely to agree that fighting is worse because Hank can get hurt. Six girls and five boys expressed this opinion. The difference in responses between boys and girls is small. One boy and one girl justified their decision that throwing a tantrum in a public place was worse by saying that Danny was spoiled. Both apparently found this unacceptable.

Half of the 11-year-old children justified their decision that throwing a tantrum in a public place was worse than a fight for fun by saying that Danny was spoiled. The children based their decision that hitting someone smaller than themselves just for fun was worse on the fact that Danny and Peter might hurt Hank. There were no major differences between the different genders.

The differences between the girls and the boys in justifying why hitting someone weaker than oneself just to have fun is less acceptable than throwing a tantrum in public were greater for the 13-year-olds than for the 9-year-olds. The boys who thought hitting for fun was worse gave more specific reasons for their decision: They most often pointed out that Hank might suffer physical injury. Girls often had more general reasons for their decision: they expressed that it was unfair to hit those who were weaker. Both boys and girls who expressed the opinion that throwing tantrums in public is worse than hitting the weaker ones based their decision on a single argument, that Danny is spoiled. This opinion was expressed by half of the girls and only by two boys.

3.3 What reasons are given in the case of Harry Potter? Why do they consider a certain behavior more unacceptable than another?

Table 4

Categories of reasons, why a certain behavior is worse and the number of students – discussion of Harry Potter

Gender	Male			Female		
	9 years	11 years	13 years	9 years	11 years	13 years
Categories of reasons: fighting						
Because it hurts.	1	3	6	1	4	2
You shouldn't fight.	1	2	0	1	3	0
He can get hurt.	3	0	0	4	0	0
Total	5	5	6	6	7	2
Categories of reasons: Tantrums						
Because he is in public.	2	3	0	0	0	0
It's not appropriate.	1	0	0	2	0	2
Because Danny is greedy.	0	0	2	0	1	4
Total	3	3	2	2	1	6

The 9-year-olds who thought it was worse to hit someone weaker than oneself mostly justified their decision by predicting the consequences: Dudley and Pierce might hurt Harry. Both boys and girls made this decision, with girls making the decision more often. Children gave two other reasons for their decision, namely that it hurts and, more generally, because it is not appropriate. These two responses were equally prevalent among boys and girls. Two of the boys decided that tantrums are worse than fights because they happen in public. None of the girls chose the same answer. Both girls pointed out that this type of behaviour is inappropriate.

The 11-year-olds who decided that fighting weaker people was worse than throwing tantrums based their decision on the fact that fighting might be too painful for Harry. Just under five children felt that fighting

should not be done at all. In both cases, more boys than girls chose the above reasons, but the difference is barely visible. Only one girl thought tantrums were worse, reasoning that Dudley was greedy. Three of the boys also thought tantrums were worse because they occurred in public.

Gender differences were most pronounced among 13-year-olds. It was boys who were most likely to agree that it is worse when older boys hit younger boys just for fun. The proportion of girls who made the same decision was three times lower. There were no differences in the reasons given to justify the decisions. All agreed that fighting hurts and is therefore completely unacceptable. For the reasons why public temper tantrums are worse, there were two responses, and both were chosen by girls who felt that the most valid reason for rejecting their respective ethical judgements was that Dudley is just greedy. Interestingly, the 13-year-olds were not bothered by the fact that the second event took place in public.

4 Discussion

Can we consider the idea that there is a difference in understanding and evaluation of (un)ethical judgements when readers adopt the perspective of a literary character or when it involves a person for whom the readers do not yet have empathy?

The results obtained from the children's responses support the above-mentioned question. The children's responses when the discussion shifted to a "real boy," Hank, or Harry Potter were noticeably different. When they talked about Hank, they were more concerned about the injuries and unfairness of the situation, whereas when they talked about Harry Potter, pain, injuries, and the general truth that one shouldn't fight became much more important.

What is particularly intriguing is the relationship between these observations, which can be grouped under the common denominator of »general rules«, and those which share the »category of empathy«. When an identification figure is considered, we can see that in the case of Dudley and Pierce beating up Harry just for fun, many more children decide that this type of behavior is not right due to Harry being in pain or even suffering injuries. More general observations are more than three times lower: you should not fight, and fighting is unfair. When these results are compared to the results of the discussion about 'real boy' Hank, we can see that sympathetic and general justifications of ethical judgements are equally represented: roughly an equal number of children justified their decision why it is bad if two (bigger) children beat up one (smaller) child with a general judgement, namely, that this type of behavior is unfair. As previously stated, nearly the same number of children believed Hank could be hurt in this type of fight.

The findings of the study can be explained by the Minimal Causation Hypothesis, which states that any moral judgment made by any person regarding a situation that causes emotion or affect in another person is caused, at least in part, by affective empathy (Kauppinen, 2017). Kauppinen (2017) points out that the argument for such an explanation can already be found in David Hume's and Adam Smith's considerations. Hume observed that something pleases or pains us without regard to our particular interest only when we empathize with the pleasure or pain of others - which implies that empathy is causally necessary for other-directed moral judgement, because it enables us to have the distinct kind of disinterested pleasure or pain on which moral approval or disapproval is based. Furthermore, Hume believes that our moral judgments are based on empathizing with the feelings of those who are affected by an action, regardless of their relationship to us. In addition to Hume, A. Smith emphasizes the role of cognitive empathy in a person's moral judgment, emphasizing the importance of imaginatively placing ourselves in the shoes of another person in order to respond in the same way the person does. This imaginatively placing oneself in the shoes of another person in real life (what Smith was referring to) can be compared to the process of identifying with literary characters while reading fiction, participating in a drama performance, or watching a movie. Other research points out how important dimension of identification with literary characters is the experience of feeling present at the events (Oatley, 1999). The reader becomes "an unobserved observer in scenes from the characters' lives in the world of the story" (Oatley, 1999, p. 445). Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) research also confirmed such *narrative presence*. Jacobs (2015) speaks of spatial immersion in this context Oatley (1999, p. 445) contrasts this kind of involvement with identification, which he defines as "the reader takes on the protagonist's goals and plans." Since the audience considers the character's goals themselves important, they will experience emotions "when these plans encounter vicissitudes" (Oatley,

1995, p. 66). The intensity of these emotions depends on the extent to which readers have identified with the character; the more they care about a character, the more they will enjoy the character's successes and regret its failures (Krieken, 2017).

The results of the presented research are consistent with the results obtained by neurocognitive methods. In an fMRI study of immersive experiences while reading emotionally charged versus neutral passages of Harry Potter, the emotionally charged passages resulted in stronger correlations between blood oxygen level-dependent signals in neural substrates associated with empathy, on the other hand, and post hoc immersion ratings, on the other (Hsu et al., 2014). There is ample evidence that identification with a narrative character can have diverse and important effects on the reading experience. Moreover, identification with a character can have important effects on the audience's real-life beliefs and attitudes (Krieken, 2017).

5 Conclusions

The narrative perspective used by J.K. Rowling in Harry Potter allows young readers to have a particularly intense mimetic participation in the literary world as well as a sympathetic participation in the literary events, which leads to a deep empathic awareness of the ethical judgments in the literary text and the reasons for the actions of the literary characters in the literary events, which informs the reader about these ethical judgments. The experiment we conducted proves that there are differences in perception, evaluation, and comprehension of ethical judgments when we measure perception, comprehension, and evaluation of ethical judgments under conditions in which children have taken the perspective of a literary character (Harry Potter) and when we measure them when children haven't had the opportunity to develop a sympathetic relationship with a person involved in an ethical conflict. The same experiment also provides us with the answer to the question: Can reading children's literature influence a child's empathy skills, ethical judgment, and thus moral development? Yes, it can. And because it can, children's literature in education can be seen as a didactic tool to prevent students' empathy competence from declining after prolonged exposure to digital environments.

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