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Moral Theme Comprehension in Children

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Although some claim that reading moral stories to children will improve their moral literacy (see, e.g., Bennett, 1993), little research has been done that bears on this question. The purposes of this study were to (a) test the idea that children can extract the theme from a moral story and (b) test for developmental differences in moral theme comprehension. Participants from 3rd and 5th grades and a university were tested on whether they understood the lessons (i.e., the moral themes) from several moral stories. They were asked to identify both the theme from a list of message choices and which of 4 alternative vignettes had the same theme. Participants also rated the set of message and vignette choices for closeness of match to the original story. Reading comprehension was used as a covariate. Developmental differences in moral theme understanding were significant even after accounting for reading comprehension.

Although some claim that reading moral stories to children will improve their moral literacy (see, e.g., Bennett, 1993), little research has been done that focuses on this question. Bennett and others (e.g., Kilpatrick, 1992; Lickona, 1991; Wynne & Ryan, 1993) have stated that children need to hear moral stories to develop moral literacy and moral character. Regardless of the paucity of research examining such assumptions or the educational effects of reading moral stories on the reader (Leming, 1997), these assertions raise questions: What do children extract from a moral text? What do they understand as the theme or message? The purposes of this study were to test character educators' implicit claim that children can extract the theme from a moral story and to test for developmental differences in moral theme comprehension. The questions we sought to answer include the following: Do readers understand a moral text in the manner intended by the author? Can any listener extract the theme or message from a moral text? Is reading ability the sole determinant of moral theme comprehension? In this study, we integrated theory from both moral development and text comprehension to examine development in moral theme comprehension.

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Text Comprehension

Generally, when a reader reads a text, she or he tries to create a coherent mental representation of the text both by integrating text elements and by elaborating on the text with prior knowledge about the world (van den Broek, 1994). For example, consider this text: "Missy was looking for her car keys. She looked on the dining room table. Then she looked on the kitchen counter. She found them." When reading the last sentence, the reader must integrate current and prior text elements by recalling car keys from memory of earlier text events to understand the referent *them.* Without an integration of the earlier text, the reader cannot know what the referent means. The text continues, "Missy took her car keys and went out the door. She pulled out of the driveway." To understand this section of the text, the reader must infer from background knowledge that Missy got into a car, put the keys in the ignition, started the engine, and so forth. Otherwise, the reader might wonder what Missy was pulling out of the driveway. Through the process of integrating prior and current text elements and making inferences from prior knowledge to bridge text elements, the reader builds a mental model of what the text is about (McNamara, Miller, & Bransford, 1991; van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). However, even when reading an identical text, different readers do not build the same mental model.

Two factors are cited in explaining why all readers do not understand a text the same way: prior knowledge and individual differences in reading skill (see Gernsbacher, 1994, for examples). Prior knowledge can occur in the form of general knowledge structures such as schemas (see, e.g., Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Bartlett, 1932; Bobrow & Norman, 1975; Rumelhart, 1980; Rumelhart & Ortony, 1977). The reader's schemas affect how the text is understood. For example, a reader raised in the United States is likely very familiar with a birthday party schema. The birthday party schema is an activated set of birthday-related concepts such as a birthday cake, birthday presents, the person celebrating the birthday, and party guests. When the reader reads, "They celebrated Jesse's birthday. He ate a lot," the related set of concepts about birthday parties is

activated. If a reader later recalls "Jesse ate a lot of cake" (an inference that was not part of the original text), such added information would be evidence for a birthday party schema in operation. Schema effects have been documented where readers had different levels of familiarity with text material (see, e.g., Chiesi, Spilich, & Voss, 1979; Spilich, Vesonder, Chiesi, & Voss, 1979) and with culture-specific texts (Bartlett, 1932; Harris, Lee, Hensley, & Schoen, 1988; Pritchard, 1990; Reynolds, Taylor, Steffensen, Shirey, & Anderson, 1982). For example, Reynolds et al. (1982) had participants recall two stories about weddings. One wedding was traditional in the United States, the other was traditional in India. Participants recalled better the wedding that matched their cultural background, tending to distort recall of the unfamiliar wedding practices from the other text. However, although prior knowledge has a measurable effect on the comprehension of a text, differences in reading skill also play a part.

Reading skill differences help explain some of the developmental differences in understanding a text. Comprehension is affected by reading skill tasks such as decoding words and sentences, word recognition, vocabulary, and the ability to integrate the individual meanings of words and sentences into a general understanding of the text or theme (Oakhill, 1994). For example, research in narrative comprehension has demonstrated that children do not understand narratives in the same way adults do: Children remember less of the story overall and have difficulty making inferences to connect goal–action–outcome chains of events (see, e.g., Collins, 1983; Perfetti, 1985; van den Broek, Lorch, & Thurlow, 1997). When Wilder (1980) asked children to recall a moral story by recreating it with puppets, he found differences between older and younger children in terms of type and amount of story elements recalled.

Stein and Trabasso (1982) used moral texts to test the mental models children built of texts. By varying information about motives, goal-relatedness of motives, and severity of consequences within stories, the authors manipulated aspects of a character's intentions. A key component in interpretive ability is the ability to generate causal inferences (by which events in the text are mentally connected to other events in the text, as shown in the car key example), an ability that increases with age and cognitive development. Accordingly, with our example, children would have a more difficult time making the string of inferences about Missy and her car keys.

Children's interpretive (inferential) abilities, skills relevant to theme comprehension, have been tested by various means. An example from moral text comprehension can be found in the work of D. F. Johnson and Goldman (1987) in which children were presented with Bible stories that illustrated "rules of conduct" (e.g., helping, obeying, or not being afraid). Children were tested on their ability both to recognize the rules in the stories and to group stories according to the rules. Young children tended to group stories according to actions and concrete items rather than by rule similarity.

Several researchers have suggested that young children have difficulty extracting themes from stories. Taylor (1986) reported that summarizing the point of a narrative was difficult for fourth and fifth graders. N. S. Johnson (1984) found that summarization was more difficult than recall for elementary school children. When Goldman, Reyes, and Varnhagen (1984) asked kindergarten through sixth-grade children to extract lessons from fables, children were generally unable to extract a lesson until fourth grade (age 10); younger children were able to extract only concrete, story-specific lessons. Lehr (1988) tested theme comprehension in kindergartners and second and fourth graders with realistic stories and folktales. Both age and previous experience with literature were related to theme identification. Overall, children were better at extracting themes from realistic fiction than from fantasy fiction.

Adults also have difficulties extracting themes from texts (Afflerbach, 1990; Reder & Anderson, 1980; Williams, 1993). Afflerbach found that experts automatically constructed the main idea of topic-familiar texts significantly more than they did for texts about unfamiliar topics. Afflerbach concluded that main idea construction generally is neither automatic nor fundamental unless the topic is familiar. Not only does prior knowledge influence the comprehension structures built from reading texts, it can also affect the mental representations important in moral development.

Moral Development

Research in moral development has often focused on moral judgment (i.e., reasoning used to advocate a certain action choice in a moral dilemma; Colby & Kohlberg, 1987; Rest, 1986). In this tradition, researchers have recognized that people conceptualize moral problems differently on the basis of age and education (see, e.g., Kohlberg, 1984).[1] As individuals develop in moral judgment, transformations occur in how they construe their obligations to others. These transformations can be viewed as moral schemas about how it is possible to organize cooperation (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999). As moral judgment matures, an individual's concerns expand, and he or she is able to consider the welfare of more and more others when conceptualizing ideal forms of cooperation (e.g., at the lowest schema, one is primarily concerned for self, whereas in the most developed schema, one includes concern for strangers).

Several methods have been used to measure changes in moral judgment, including moral comprehension. Moral comprehension studies present participants with someone else's reasons for a moral action. Participants are asked to respond by paraphrasing, recalling, or selecting the identical reasoning from a list of paraphrased reasons. For example,

[1] Kohlberg's (1984) moral stage theory has engendered a great deal of research and supportive findings. The Defining Issues Test (DIT; Rest, 1979) is an offspring of his theoretical approach. The DIT, systematically validated through a series of studies (see Rest, Thoma, & Edwards, 1997, for a review), indicates that moral judgment based on justice changes with age and education from a preference for preconventional thinking to a preference for conventional thinking to one for postconventional thinking.

Rest (1973; Rest, Turiel, & Kohlberg, 1969) presented moral arguments based on different Kohlbergian stages in separate paragraphs to participants who were asked to restate them. The schemas that a participant could paraphrase were credited as being understood. The comprehension of moral stage arguments is cumulative. That is, as understanding expands to include higher, more complex stages, the individual retains comprehension of the simpler stages. By providing an inventory of a participant's moral schema capacity across stages, moral comprehension studies support the developmental nature of moral schemas.

Another type of moral comprehension is moral text comprehension. Narvaez (1998) studied the effects of moral judgment development on the comprehension of narratives. After reading narratives about moral dilemmas in which various stages of Kohlbergian moral reasoning were embedded, participants were asked to recall the narratives. Differences in recall corresponded to differences in moral judgment development as measured by the Defining Issues Test (DIT). Persons with higher scores in moral judgment on the DIT not only had better recall of the texts and the high-stage moral arguments within them but also distorted their recall differently. Although all readers tended to distort the text in their recall, high-stage moral reasoners were significantly more likely to add new high-stage reasons to their recall of the narratives in comparison with lower stage reasoners. This research also supports the view that developmental differences in moral judgment influence the comprehension of moral texts.

The current study brings together moral comprehension with text and theme comprehension by focusing on whether children are able to extract the theme from a moral story. This research differs from previous studies in the following ways:

1. Unlike previous moral comprehension researchers who asked participants to restate moral reasoning advocating a particular course of action, we asked participants to extrapolate and identify the moral message from a story. We examined whether children understood the themes of moral stories as the author intended or whether they distorted the themes.

2. Unlike those who have discussed moral stories elsewhere (e.g., Bennett, 1993), our definition of *moral* involves cooperating or getting along with others (Piaget, 1932/1965; Rest et al., 1999). For us, a *moral story* has a theme about a specific aspect of getting along with others. Therefore, in the selection of texts for this study, we did not choose texts such as Aesop's fables, because they focus mostly on types of prudence (e.g., don't be vain, plan wisely, don't be fooled, etc.).

3. We focused on correct versus incorrect choice of the moral theme from among distractors. Thus, the focus of responses is on veridical choice rather than on theme generation or personal interpretation of a story theme.

4. To control the clarity and complexity of the moral stories and moral themes, we developed our own stories. We had conducted an earlier study using texts from children's books (Narvaez, Bentley, Gleason, & Samuels, 1998) but were unable to find complex moral stories with a variety of moral themes (within our strict definition) that were suitable for this research. For this study, we created well-constructed (i.e., with a beginning, middle, and end), nonreligious, literary stories.

5. In each story, we adopted the complex notion of moral behavior as theorized by Rest's four component model (Rest, 1983). In this model, moral action requires moral sensitivity (being aware of cause–consequence chains of actions and reactions), moral judgment (selecting the most moral action), moral motivation (applying one's values and prioritizing a moral action), and moral character (implementing and following through on the moral action). All four components were included in each story.

6. We selected themes that were understandable to younger children (e.g., persevere for the good of others, be honest with strangers, do not lie for friends, be responsible and trustworthy by completing your duties to others), not more adult themes on topics such as the complexities of constitutional democracies.

Method

Participants

There were 132 participants: 50 third graders (average age, 8 years, 6 months; 28 girls, 22 boys) and 54 fifth graders (average age, 10 years, 9 months; 34 girls, 20 boys) from a city elementary school. We pilot tested tasks and stories with children from 6 to 12 years old. Our pilot testing confirmed earlier findings that children younger than those in fourth grade have difficulty extracting the themes (Goldman et al., 1984). Thus, we selected third- and fifth-grade students for three reasons: (a) On the basis of the results of an earlier study (Narvaez et al., 1998), fifth graders were found to be quite competent at identifying moral themes in relatively simple stories in which distractors were clearly wrong (e.g., "Never trust a monkey or a rabbit"); (b) third graders performed the tasks competently in the aforementioned study (although they were more likely to be incorrect in their answers); and (c) most students had the skills to be able to move beyond the concrete and to generalize a theme by fourth grade (Goldman et al., 1984). To confirm the authors' criterion of veridical themes, 28 adults were recruited (average age, 27 years, 9 months; 15 women, 7 men, 6 who did not indicate gender) from educational psychology classes at a public university. Each adult received course credit for participating.

Materials

Stories. Four stories about moral dilemmas were written. Each story has a complex moral message and contains a dilemma that the protagonist must resolve. In each story, the protagonist resolves the dilemma by affirming the values of the theme. Of the four stories, two are about helping strangers ("Kim" and "California"). "Kim" concerns a girl whose family is moving across the country and stops at a gas station where Kim receives too much change from the cashier. The moral messages concern being honest with everyone, even strangers, and using self-control to be honest. (See Appendix A for the full text of "Kim.") "California" is a version of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Boy and the Dike." Set in the Western United States at the turn of the century, the story is about a girl who saves cattle in which the community has invested by holding the gate of a corral closed during a storm throughout the night. The moral messages are self-sacrifice and perseverance to help others.

The other two stories are about helping friends or family ("Jed" and "Malcolm"). "Jed" is about a boy who is tempted away from his home responsibilities. The moral messages concern doing one's duty and being trustworthy. "Malcolm" is about a boy whose friend is an arson suspect and expects Malcolm to lie to keep the friend out of trouble while getting an innocent stranger into trouble. The moral messages are about telling the truth about strangers even at great cost.

To measure moral theme comprehension, we used two types of stimuli after a story was read: vignettes (paragraph-long stories with same or different themes) and messages (brief sentence-long themes). Participants responded to each type of stimulus with two types of tasks: (a) rating the closeness of the original story theme to the theme in each vignette or message and (b) selecting the vignette or message with the same theme. Two of these tasks (the selection tasks) had been used successfully in a previous study (Narvaez et al., 1998), and two (the rating tasks) were pilot tested successfully with children for this study.

Themes and distractors. The list of themes and distractors for the multiple-choice message and theme selection task was generated from two pilot groups: a group of adults (enrolled in an education class) who were asked to generate as many themes as possible for each story and a group of children (faculty and staff offspring) who were interviewed individually about what they thought the themes of the stories were. The themes were further corroborated with another group of adults (graduate students).

Keeping in mind the distortions that had occurred in previous research on moral comprehension and moral narrative recall, we attended to the distortions of moral themes that emerged in our pilot studies. These types of distortions were used as the basis for constructing distractor items for the multiple-choice message task. Distortions in the pilot studies often were based on three low-stage Kohlbergian moral reasoning stages, so we included distractor variables based on these stages (Stages 1–3), categorized according to Rest's version of Kohlberg's moral judgment stage typology (see Rest, 1979). We had five different categories of distractors (each scored as *incorrect*) and two theme choices (both scored as *correct*) for each story. The five distractor types were as follows: Stage 1 theme distortion (a focus on reprisal), Stage 2 theme distortion (a focus on prudence, i.e., personal gain or loss), Stage 3 theme distortion (a focus on losing or gaining the approval of others), an item using multisyllabic, "grown-up" words (an item that made sense but was not the theme), and an item focusing on the priority of the "in-group" (an item emphasizing collectivism). See Table 1 for the list of messages for "Kim." The in-group item was included because we thought it might provide information about cultural differences by attracting some cultural groups more than others. Although our hunch was correct, that analysis is not provided in this article.

Table 1
Message Choices and Categories From "Kim"

Item	Category
Good children don't embarrass their parents.	Stage 3
If you give up what isn't yours now, your parents will reward you later.	Stage 2
If you think of others first instead of your family, your family may suffer.	In-group
Monetary interchanges need to be monitored scrupulously.	Complex
Treat all people with honesty no matter what tempts you.	Theme
You might get caught if you keep money that isn't yours.	Stage 1
You shouldn't keep what isn't yours even from strangers.	Theme

There were three distractors for the multiple-choice vignette selection task. All used the same gender of protagonist as the target story did. The distractors varied systematically on superficial characteristics: One vignette type used the same actions (i.e., the same plot characteristics) but had different actors and a different theme, a second vignette type used the same actors but involved different actions and themes, and the third type of vignette had only the same setting. The target (correct) vignette had different actions and actors but the same theme. See Appendix B for examples.

Tasks. After reading a story, the participants completed several tasks to measure comprehension. First, we measured reading comprehension by asking participants to answer 10 true–false questions about the story. Then came four tasks that measured moral theme comprehension:

1. Vignette rating: Participants rated four vignettes for how closely each one's theme matched the original story's theme. A 5-point Likert-type scale was used. Unlike the message choice task described below, the vignette rating task measured a more implicit understanding of the theme because the theme was not specified.
2. Vignette choice: Participants selected the vignette that best matched the theme of the original story. This task also measured a more implicit understanding of the story by not requiring a word-based understanding of the themes.
3. Message rating: Participants rated each of seven or eight messages for how well they matched the theme of the original story (using a 5-point Likert-type scale). This task measured a type of theme recognition.
4. Message choices: From the list of choices just rated, participants selected the two message choices that best matched the theme of the original story. This task measured their preference for presented themes.

Scoring. To minimize the effect of response sets (individuals consistently rating widely or narrowly), we standardized (adjusted) rating scores in the following manner: For each task and participant, the sum of the ratings for the theme items in a story was subtracted from the rating for each choice in a story. Analyses refer to the adjusted scores whereas unadjusted scores are reported in the tables as noted.

Each of the four tasks was examined separately for each story in the following manner: (a) For the vignette rating task, the difference between the average ratings for the distractor (incorrect) items was subtracted from the rating for the correct vignette choice; (b) for the vignette selection task, the correct vignette choice was credited as 1 point; (c) for the message rating task, the difference between the average ratings for the distractor (incorrect) items was subtracted from the average rating for the correct theme choices; and (d) for the message selection task, the total correct theme choices were summed. Each score type was combined across stories. The scores for each of these four combination variables were added together for a composite score indicating moral theme comprehension. The reliability of the composite score (across four stories and four tasks) using Cronbach's alpha was .89. The combination of rating and ranking tasks has been a powerful tool in other studies of moral thinking, such as the N2 score for the DIT (Rest, Thoma, Narvaez, & Bebeau, 1997).

Responses to the ratings of distractor items were also analyzed. Ratings for each category of distractor were added together across stories and then compared by age group.

Reading comprehension. Ten true–false questions about the story were used to measure reading comprehension (general, not specifically moral) and served as a covariate in the analyses. These questions measured factual recall and inferences about the story.

True (mentioned) facts are facts explicitly stated in the story. *False (unmentioned) facts* are factual statements that are not in the story. *True inferences* are inferences a good reader would make while reading the story. *False inferences* are inferences a good reader would not make while reading the story. In other words, true inferences are those that have causal supporting evidence in the story whereas false inferences do not. Over all four stories, there were 12 true facts, 11 false facts, 7 true inferences, and 10 false inferences. The questions for each story were randomly ordered. See Table 2 for the questions used for "Kim." The reading comprehension score was composed of the correct answers to the set of 10 true–false questions for each story added together ($n = 40$). Cronbach's alpha reliability for these 40 questions was .81. As a secondary control for general reading ability, the children's standardized test scores (Metropolitan Achievement Test 7, hereafter MAT7) for reading comprehension and vocabulary were also collected.

Procedure

The children were tested in three groups by grade in two 50-min sessions 1 week apart. To minimize reading comprehension differences that were not the focus of study, we put the stories and tasks on audio tape as well as on paper for the children. Adults received only the written version and completed the tasks at home.[2]

Participants were guided through a practice story first. In each of two sessions, the children read along as two stories and questions about them were played on tape. After hearing and reading a story, participants were asked to think about the message of the story ("What do you think the author would like you to learn about getting along with others? Think about what would be the *best lesson* from this story about getting along with others.") After thinking about the message, participants completed several tasks:

1. Reading comprehension: Participants answered 10 true–false questions about the story. ("Here are some True-False questions about the story [story name]. Circle 'True' if the statement is true about the story or circle 'False' if the statement is false about the story. Answer these questions without looking back at the story.")
2. Vignette rating: Participants read four vignettes (paragraph-length) and then rated each one according to how well its message matched what they thought was the target story message. A 5-point Likert-type scale was used. ("Please read the following four stories. As you read each one, decide how well its message matches the *best* message from [story name].")

Table 2
True–False Comprehension Questions for "Kim"

Questions	Type
Kim didn't want to pay for the gas.	False fact
Kim wanted to buy snacks.	True fact
Kim's father stopped the car at a grocery store.	False fact
The family planned to go out for lunch.	False inference
Kim's parents were from Minnesota.	False inference
Kim's father wanted the children to stay in the car.	False fact
Kim played the alphabet game with her father.	False fact
Kim's father was upset that she didn't keep the extra money.	False inference
Some boxes fell in the store.	True fact
The clerk was worried about her son.	True inference

3. Vignette selection: Participants were next asked to select the vignette with the message that best matched the message in the original story. ("Now mark which of the four stories above has a message that most closely matches the *best* message of [story name]. You may look back at the four stories and what you thought about their messages.")
4. Message rating: The participants read and rated seven or eight possible messages or themes according to what they thought was the message of the target story. A 5-point Likert-type scale was used. ("Below are several possible messages for [story name]. Mark how good a match each message is with what you think is the *best* message of [story name].")
5. Message selection: Participants then identified which two messages had themes closest to that of the original story. ("Below, we list the possible messages again. Please circle the numbers of the two messages that you think most closely match the *best* message from [story name]. Circle two.")

There were three story orders. Each order presented two stories in each session for two sessions. Each session included one story about a boy and one about a girl.

Results

Several hypotheses were tested using analyses of variance (ANOVAs). In our primary analyses, we formed variables on the basis of (a) two kinds of ranking tasks: vignette choice and message choice; (b) two kinds of rating tasks: vignette rating and message rating; and (c) the composite score, which added the rankings and ratings across the four types of variables across stories (i.e., 16 units). Each analysis was conducted with alpha set at .05 and all t tests were two-tailed. There were no gender differences so analyses were combined for gender. When a participant failed to complete every instance of a response type, we eliminated that participant from the analysis of that type of response. Hence, the number of participants across the analyses varied.

Moral Theme Comprehension: Selection Variables

Two of the four tasks used to measure moral theme comprehension involved selecting the theme-based items. We first describe the results for each story and then the summary variables across stories. On the story level, the percentage of each group selecting the correct vignette was the following: For "Kim," third graders selected correctly 14% of the time; fifth graders, 59% of the time; and adults, 100% of the time. For "Jed," third graders were correct 18% of the time; fifth graders, 40% of the time; and adults, 75% of the time. For "Malcolm," the percentages were 10, 48, and 93, respectively; for "California," the percentages were 2, 35, and 96, respectively. Therefore, although all participants heard the same moral stories, there were significant differences in comprehending the moral themes.

Summarizing across stories, the third graders selected the correct vignette (one out of four possible choices) about 11%

[2] In the several pilot studies on the university campus, adults found the tasks to be extremely easy, so we decided there would be no threat to internal validity by allowing the adult participants to take the protocols home.

of the time ($M = 0.44$, $SD = 0.64$), and fifth graders selected correctly 45% of the time ($M = 1.81$, $SD = 1.67$), whereas adults selected correctly 91% of the time ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.56$). We used ANOVAs to compare the difference among the age groups and found it to be significant, $F(2, 129) = 118.74$, $p < .0001$. There was an increasing linear probability with age for selecting the correct vignette and, at the same time, a decreasing linear probability for selecting the third graders' favorite type of vignette, the distractor with the same actions as the target story. The third graders were consistent in selecting this distractor more than the others, suggesting that they were competent in the task, although incorrect. If the third graders had been overwhelmed by the task, their responses would have been distributed equally across choices. Instead, their responses indicate a systematic pattern of response (an attraction to the vignette with the same actions) that the fifth graders reflected less and the adults still less.

For the list of messages, we used ANOVAs to compare group scores for selecting the two correct theme choices for each story (message choice). Table 3 has the percentages of each grade that selected the theme items from the message choices. Although among the stories there were different findings, there was a consistent linear age trend for each story (third grade: $M = 2.72$, $SD = 1.51$; fifth grade: $M = 4.67$, $SD = 1.26$; adult: $M = 6.00$, $SD = 0.86$): $F(2, 129) = 63.28$, $p < .0001$.

Moral Theme Comprehension: Rating Variables

Participants rated each choice they were given. Table 4 lists the average unadjusted ratings by grade for correct vignettes (vignette rating). Summarizing across stories, the results of ANOVA testing for differences in the ratings of the vignettes (using adjusted scores) were significant (third grade: $M = -2.57$, $SD = 3.17$; fifth grade: $M = 3.76$, $SD = 3.75$; adult: $M = 9.22$, $SD = 2.86$): $F(2, 129) = 116.52$, $p < .0001$.

Table 3
Percentage of Third Graders, Fifth Graders, and Adults Who Selected the Theme From the List of Message Choices

Story and selection	Third grade	Fifth grade	Adults
"Kim"			
Selected both themes	22	59	93
Selected only one theme	52	39	7
Selected neither theme	26	2	0
"Jed"			
Selected both themes	14	47	93
Selected only one theme	52	41	7
Selected neither theme	34	13	0
"Malcolm"			
Selected both themes	10	28	64
Selected only one theme	44	52	32
Selected neither theme	46	21	4
"California"			
Selected both themes	26	61	54
Selected only one theme	48	35	43
Selected neither theme	26	4	4

Table 4
Average Unadjusted Ratings (1–5) for Theme Vignettes for Each Story by Grade

Target vignette	Third grade		Fifth grade		Adults		
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*F*(2, 129)
"Kim"	2.34	1.36	3.93	1.18	4.50	0.58	38.83**
"Jed"	2.46	1.36	3.74	1.08	4.54	0.74	33.25**
"Malcolm"	1.58	0.84	2.80	1.14	3.46	1.04	35.71**
"California"	2.22	1.15	2.87	1.29	4.29	0.76	29.44**

**$p < .001$.

Table 5 lists the average unadjusted ratings by grade for theme messages (message rating). Using ANOVAs on adjusted scores, we found a significant developmental trend for some theme rating variables. Overall, there were strong developmental differences for theme messages combined across stories (third grade: $M = 2.74$, $SD = 2.95$; fifth grade: $M = 5.74$, $SD = 2.40$; adult: $M = 8.32$, $SD = 2.01$): $F(2, 129) = 45.73$, $p < .0001$. In other words, the higher the age, the higher the rating of correct theme choices and the greater the differentiation between correct and incorrect choices.

ANOVAs were conducted for each set of rating variables. The findings for the incorrect vignettes were as follows for same-action vignettes (third grade $M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.56$; fifth grade $M = 3.53$, $SD = 0.73$; adult $M = 2.36$, $SD = 0.60$): $F(2, 129) = 43.82$, $p < .001$; for same-character vignettes, $F(2, 129) = 23.37$, $p < .001$; and for same-setting vignettes, $F(2, 129) = 13.30$, $p < .001$. For the ratings of the message distractors, all tests were significant: for Stage 1, $F(2, 29) = 22.58$, $p < .0001$; for Stage 2, $F(2, 29) = 4.00$, $p < .02$; for Stage 3, $F(2, 29) = 12.82$, $p <$

Table 5
Average Unadjusted Ratings (1–5) for Theme Messages for Each Story by Grade

Story and theme	Third grade		Fifth grade		Adults		
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*F*(2, 129)
"Kim"							
Theme 1	3.65	1.35	4.65	0.68	4.57	0.69	14.88**
Theme 2	3.02	1.61	4.17	1.16	4.46	0.74	15.12**
"Jed"							
Theme 1	3.00	1.41	4.33	0.86	4.75	0.44	31.68**
Theme 2	4.04	1.12	4.44	0.82	4.43	0.69	2.90
"Malcolm"							
Theme 1	3.88	1.32	4.02	0.98	3.93	0.86	0.21
Theme 2	3.98	1.29	4.00	1.15	4.68	0.55	4.24*
"California"							
Theme 1	3.90	1.16	4.13	0.89	4.25	0.93	0.29
Theme 2	3.72	1.21	4.00	1.15	4.14	1.04	0.25

*$p < .02$. **$p < .001$.

.0001; for complex word, $F(2, 29) = 14.77$, $p < .0001$; and for in-group, $F(2, 29) = 13.28$, $p < .0001$.

Moral Theme Comprehension: Composite Variables

As mentioned previously, combining rating and ranking tasks can be more powerful than either task alone (Rest, Thoma, Narvaez, & Bebeau, 1997). Analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) were conducted for each of the four dependent variables added across stories (i.e., target vignette choice, target vignette rating, target message choice, target message rating) and for all four added together. In the first set of analyses, scores on the reading comprehension items answered after each story were used as a covariate to control for general reading skill. See Table 6 for summary scores and significance. Analyses were significant for each dependent variable and their combination. There was a main effect for grade on the composite theme comprehension score, $F(2, 129) = 135.62$, $p < .0001$; even with reading comprehension as a covariate, $F(2, 129) = 74.65$, $p < .0001$.

A second set of ANCOVAs was performed for the children only; as a secondary control for general reading ability, two standardized subtest scores (MAT7 scores for reading comprehension and for vocabulary) along with the true–false reading comprehension measure were used. Again, the dependent variable was the composite theme comprehension score (all four dependent variables added together across stories). Covarying out both sources of reading comprehension scores (standardized test scores and study-specific true–false item scores) still produced a main effect for grade between the two groups, $F(1, 92) = 61.61$, $p < .0001$. When each source of reading comprehension (true–false items, MAT7 vocabulary, MAT7 reading comprehension) was tested independently for its prediction to composite scores, the effect was strongest for the true–false reading comprehension measure: for the true–false measure, $F(1, 91) = 5.67$, $p < .02$; for the MAT7 vocabulary, $F(1, 91) = 3.92$, $p < .051$; and for the MAT7 reading comprehension, $F(1, 91) = 1.37$, $p < .24$.

Order Effects

There were order effects. As it turned out, there were more third graders in one group, and so this group's overall means were significantly lower for the main variables. However, an ANOVA conducted for Order × Age showed no significant differences, $F(2, 129) = .561$, $p < .572$, indicating that the order differences were accounted for by the disproportionate number of third graders in the one group.

Discussion

The age groups performed differently on the tasks designed to measure moral theme comprehension. There were developmental differences on the message ratings and choices and on the vignette ratings and choices. These differences remained significant even after controlling for reading comprehension. With increasing age, correct performance improved. A separate analysis of the children's scores involved using as a covariate their standardized test scores (MAT7) along with the study-specific reading comprehension scores (true–false items). Differences between third and fifth graders were still large and significant. Reading comprehension could not explain all the variance in moral theme comprehension. We come to three specific conclusions as follows.

First, reading moral stories to children does not guarantee that they will understand the moral message or theme as intended by the author. Although we do not argue that children should not listen to moral stories that they understand differently from adults, we do advise that adults who educate for character should be aware of children's differential interpretations of stories that seem perfectly clear to adults. Even among grade school children, the stories were understood differently—children only 2 years apart (third and fifth grade) varied significantly in their performance. This finding has serious implications for curriculum development and implementation. For example, character education curricula should be thoroughly pilot tested to gauge what is understood by the target audience. A curriculum that works with one age may not work for another.

Table 6
Means, Standard Deviations, and Fs With Covariate for Combination Variables (Adjusted Scores)

Variable	Third grade (n = 50)		Fifth grade (n = 54)		Adults (n = 28)		$F(2, 129)$	$F(2, 129)$ with covariate
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*		
Vignette choice	0.44	0.64	1.81	1.67	3.64	0.56	118.74***	57.18***
Vignette rating	−2.57	3.17	3.76	3.75	9.22	2.86	116.52***	65.99***
Message choice	2.72	1.51	4.67	1.26	6.00	0.86	63.28***	25.43***
Message rating	2.74	2.95	5.74	2.40	8.32	2.01	45.73***	86.82***
Composite of four	3.31	6.04	15.99	7.00	27.19	4.98	135.62***	74.65***

Note. Vignette rating: possible range = −15–15; vignette choice: range = 0–4; message rating: possible range = −35–35; message choice: range = 0–8. Composite score combines the four other scores into one score.
***$p < .0001$.

Second, there are developmental differences in moral theme comprehension, as has been found in other moral comprehension research (e.g., Narvaez, 1998; Rest, 1973; Rest et al., 1969). Despite the fact that the correct themes were provided as choices to the respondents, the younger child was less likely to choose the correct message or vignette or to rate them highly. For all ages, the most attractive distractor type for the vignettes was the one with the same actions as the target story (a surface similarity). This attraction decreased with age as the attraction to the target vignette increased. Perhaps part of children's difficulty in grasping moral themes is that they tend to be distracted by superficial details.

Third, moral theme comprehension requires something beyond general reading comprehension. The age trends were not due simply to reading comprehension, as measured by standardized test scores and our reading test scores. Even when standardized reading comprehension and vocabulary scores were used as covariates along with our reading comprehension items, there were still significant differences between the third- and fifth-grade students on moral theme comprehension tasks. Because of the greater attraction to lower moral judgment stage distortions for themes in younger participants, we believe that moral judgment development is a factor in moral theme comprehension. The reader seems to impose a level of moral sophistication on the initial interpretation of the moral story.

We speculate that there are several tasks that must be completed to successfully complete the theme comprehension tasks generally: one must "pick up" the message by integrating intention–action–outcome chains of events, remember the message, put it into words, make a generalization, and apply it. It is not clear where the younger students go wrong. Do they choose the superficially similar distractor because they did not pick up the message to begin with, or because they did not remember it, or because they could not put it into words, or because they could not generalize, or because they could not apply the generalization they had formulated? Further research must determine where children have difficulty.

Researchers should also explore questions like the following:

1. What are the elements of moral theme comprehension? What is the difference between moral and nonmoral theme comprehension? Researchers have found that extracting embedded information from a narrative is difficult, and readers rely on factors such as their concerns at the time and their perspective on the topic (Britton, 1984; Rosenblatt, 1991). General theme extraction is especially difficult for children, although it becomes better established by fifth grade (Goldman et al., 1984). It has been established that stories contain story grammar categories such as initiating events, actions, goals, and outcomes that are differentially recalled by children in contrast with adults (see, e.g., Collins, 1983; van den Broek et al., 1997). Does moral theme comprehension require something over and above these simpler elements, such as more sophisticated social knowledge?

2. What kinds of story structure and affective focus (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982) facilitate moral theme comprehension? How does the causal connection strength (Trabasso & van den Broek, 1985) of a moral theme relate to its comprehension (i.e., is a theme with more causal connections to events in the story better comprehended?

3. What determines whether a reader conjures a moral or a nonmoral theme for a story? For example, *The Little Engine That Could* (Piper, 1930) has both a nonmoral theme (keep trying and you will be successful) and a moral theme (persevere to help others). Does the generation of a moral theme (instead of a nonmoral theme) become a more automatic rather than a consciously controlled process with age?

4. What is the relation between moral theme comprehension and scores on moral judgment measures? Does moral theme comprehension require sophisticated moral judgment? In other studies, moral reasoning comprehension was strongly related to moral judgment, for example, $r = .67$ (Rest, Thoma, & Edwards, 1997). Does a reader have to share a particular set of moral schemas to extract a theme based on such schemas?

5. Are some moral themes understood sooner developmentally than other moral themes, or are some themes just easier to comprehend than others?

6. What kinds of instruction facilitate moral theme comprehension? Williams, Brown, Silverstein, and de Cani (1994) have demonstrated that middle-level students can understand the theme of a narrative only with deliberate, structured guidance. Answers to some of these questions will facilitate work on interventions for moral theme comprehension and ultimately allow the improvement of character education curricula.

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Appendix A

Kim

Kim pushed against the heavy boxes as they leaned towards her on the sharp curve. Her dad noticed that the boxes were sliding so he slowed down on the freeway ramp. Her dad had lost his job. They were moving to another city where jobs grew on trees. So people said. They were headed for Minneapolis.

The car was packed with everything they owned. The dinner table and chairs were on top of the car and on top of two mattresses. They gave away the old sofa and stuffed chair before they left Detroit. But they still had the room-sized rug. It drooped off the roof over the back window. Every couple of hours they stopped to tighten the ropes and push the rug and mattresses back from crawling off the car.

Kim had her own box. It had her clothes, her favorite (and only) doll, the dancing ballerina jewelry box she got for her birthday, and the fancy gold vanity set she inherited from her rich godmother when she died. The comb had lost some of its teeth, but the brush and mirror still looked new.

She felt a punch on her arm.

"Stop it, Martin!"

Her little brother squirmed next to her, having gotten bored with rereading the one comic book he owned. He looked like his father, a Puerto Rican mix of many races—curly hair, blue eyes, olive skin. Kim looked like her mother, a Filipino-Chinese. She had almond eyes, straight dark hair and olive skin. Their parents had given them "good American names" so that they would not be teased in school.

"That looks like a good place," Mrs. Perez said softly as they found a small gas station with a grassy lot behind.

Mr. Perez pulled into the gas station. "Everybody out for a stretch!" He didn't have to convince anyone. They all jumped right out.

As her dad filled the gas tank, Kim leaned against the car. Martin was off running and bouncing an old tennis ball in the grassy lot. She watched him for a moment, thinking about whether or not to join him. She decided not to. She was tired of his company after sitting next to him in the car all day long.

"You should get some exercise, girl! Here take this $20 and go pay for the gas. You should get back $1.15."

Her dad was very careful with money. They didn't have much of it. They barely had enough for gas to Minneapolis. The only thing they were eating was baloney sandwiches made from day-old bread and thin slices of baloney. Not even any ketchup! They would buy a carton of milk and a carton of juice and pass them around while they ate the sandwiches. Martin always spilled. Mom said it was because he had a small mouth.

Once inside the gas station store, she eyed the potato chips at the counter but then looked away as her mouth watered. She handed the clerk the $20 bill. As the clerk opened the cash drawer there was a loud crash in the corner of the store. They heard a loud cry.

The clerk became alarmed. "It's my 3-year-old son." She had the 15 cents in her hand. She quickly reached for a bill, pushed it into Kim's hand and went running to help her son. Kim watched. The boy was all right. He had pulled down a stack of cereal boxes but didn't look hurt.

Kim went outside. Her father was playing catch with Martin and her mother was still in line for the bathroom. She looked at the change in her hand. Then she looked again. Instead of $1.15 she had $5.15. The clerk had given her a five-dollar bill instead of a one-dollar bill.

She thought of the candy that she could buy with the extra money. She could go in the store and pretend she had forgotten to buy fruit rollups, potato chips, and pop. The whole family could have a treat, something they rarely had money for. Or she could go ask for change, give her dad the $1.15 and then save the $4 for herself. She wanted to buy a Teacher Barbie doll because she wanted to be a teacher when she grew up.

She couldn't decide, candy and treats now or save for the doll. Then she heard her mother's voice in her head, "You are a Kwong. Kwongs know that the path to success is self-control. Don't do what your feelings tell you to do without thinking about it first. Stop and think. Plan for the future. What you do today affects all your tomorrows." Kim decided not to buy the treats.

She thought about the money. Then she heard her father's voice inside her head from a time when his boss had given him too much money in his paycheck: "If you want to be a good person, you should always try to be honest. And you must always be honest because you are a Perez. We Perez are all honest, good people. Everybody knows that."

Was she being dishonest by keeping money put in her hand by someone she didn't even know? She would never see this clerk again. The clerk didn't know the Kwongs or the Perez family, and they didn't know her. Did it really matter to be honest with people that you didn't know and didn't know you? She entered the store and went to the counter and held out the money to the clerk.

Later, when everyone was back in the car, Kim handed the money to her father. "Here's the change, Papá. She gave me too much, but I gave it back."

"Good for you, sweetheart, good for you." Mr. Perez started up the car and they drove out of the lot.

Martin said, "Let's play alphabet—there's an 'A'!"

"Okay, amorcito—I see a 'B'!" Kim responded. She smiled and felt grown-up.

Appendix B

Example of Vignette Choices From "Kim": Same Setting, Same Characters, Same Actions, Same Theme

Vignette With Same Setting

For summer vacation, Dawn was going to visit her Aunt Sandy. It would take 3 days to get there. Dawn prepared for her trip very carefully, making sure she had enough money for gas. She planned ahead for each stop she would need to make. On the second day of driving Dawn noticed a gas station ahead. It wasn't where she expected it. She had planned to stop at the gas station 20 miles from there. Dawn looked at her gas gauge. She knew she had enough gas to make it the 20 miles but not much farther. She decided that she should get gas at this station just to be safe. She pulled over and filled the gas tank. While she was paying for the gas, the cashier told her that the gas station 20 miles away was closed. Dawn was glad she had stopped there.

Vignette With Same Characters

When Kim's family arrived in Minneapolis, they went to stay with Kim's uncle. Martin and Kim were happy to finally get out of the car. Kim took her box of things inside. Martin took his ball and comic book to show his cousins. The uncle and his family thought that Kim's family might be hungry, so they made them a big dinner. Kim and her family ate until they were full and forgot all about baloney sandwiches. After dinner, Kim and Martin played games with their cousins.

Vignette With Same Actions

The Nicholson family was driving to Detroit. Theresa was not looking forward to moving. She didn't want to have to meet new friends, but she thought meeting new people would be better than hanging out with Chet, her brother. Chet was starting to bother her big time—especially after being in the car with him for so long.

Mr. Nicholson finally pulled off the highway so that they could eat dinner in a small town. They had an enjoyable meal at the town cafe. After receiving the bill for their food, Mr. Nicholson gave Theresa some money. "Sweetheart, will you please go pay the bill for our food? You should receive $4.50 back. Be sure to count your change." Theresa loved having adult responsibilities. She happily took the money from her father and went to pay the bill.

Vignette With Same Theme

Rhonda helped her mother unload the bags of groceries from their car. They had spent the day picking up groceries for the poor. Now, at dinner time, they were delivering them to poor families. This family was the last one. After they took the groceries inside, her mother sent Rhonda back to the car while she finished inside. Rhonda reached to shut the trunk. Then she noticed a tiny bag in the corner that they had missed. She looked inside. It contained several chocolate bars. Her stomach growled. The candy would fit into the pockets of her big winter coat. The family wasn't expecting the candy, so they would never know if she kept it. But it had been given for the family and therefore belonged to them. She ran quickly inside to deliver the bag.

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