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## THE INNER LANDSCAPE OF CHARACTERS IN STORIES TOLD BY CHILDREN

The ability to speak about one's own mental states as well as those of others appears toward the end of the second year of life, and the repertoire of psychological expressions used by children increases considerably by the end of the third year (Bretherton & Beehly, 1981). However, not until about age 6 do children begin to describe the inner state of characters they create in their stories (Camaioni, 1997; Kielar, 1987; Stein, 1988; Stein & Glenn, 1979). This age span is marked by a significant progression in the critical period for the development of narrative competence, that is, between ages 6 to 10. At the same time, it has been shown that there is an influence on the use of psychological vocabulary of such variables as gender (Fox, 1991, girls' showing greater ability to define the mental states of their characters) and age (Camaioni, 1997). Our research aimed at revealing the influence of such variables as age and story context as well as the interaction of these variables on creating the inner landscape the story. Pupils ages 9 (36 persons) and 12 (32 persons) were presented two beginnings to a story which differed with regard to how well-known were the surroundings described in the story as well as the commonness of the requisites: stories presented well-known, ordinary surroundings (A walk) and a fantasy (Lagnikku, The Wanderer). An analysis showed that the inner landscape of the main character is created using expressions describing the intellectual sphere and emotional processes; expressions using words describing perceptual processes and the moral sphere occur less often. It turned out that the variable "the context of story" had a stronger influence than did age. Stories about an ordinary context elicited more expressions about the emotional sphere while abstract scenes inclined the listener to a greater use of intellectual expressions. The results obtained have both a cognitive significance and a practical one. Abstract stories have greater value for stimulation of cognitive development since they inspire intellectual transformations, while texts connected with a concrete and known environment better serve purposes of socialization.

### **Introduction**

The ability to speak about one's own as well as others' mental states appears by age two, and the repertoire of psychological expressions used by children increases at age three. These facts were confirmed in Polish research conducted during the 1960s (Szuman, 1968) as well as by English language research in the 1980s (Bretherton & Beehly, 1981). These expressions refer to perception, physiological states (hunger), emotions, desires,

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talents, cognition as well as moral spheres. The majority of expressions concern perception, particularly sight (see, look, watch), while only a small number refer to unreal states (pretend, dream). This result is in accordance with Wellman's hypothesis (1990), the "imitating theory of representation": a child focuses on perception data and is unable to think about creations of the mind such as dreams or make-believe. A distinct increase in such expressions is observable in children by the age of four. As Szuman's analysis of speech journals shows, children by this time express states and feelings (to be bored, to be offended, to be surprised), activities of the mind (to believe, to consider, to be convinced), volitional activities (to allow, to prefer), social behavior (to apologize, to disturb, to joke).

Children include descriptions of inner states of the characters they create for their stories around the age of six (Camaioni, 1997; Kielar, 1987; Stein, 1988; Stein & Glenn, 1979). Six-year-old children describe the experiences and thoughts of their characters while the frequency of such expressions increases under the influence of stories told by adults. The impact that storytelling has on a child's use of expressions for characters' desires, thoughts, and goals can be observed also in ten-year-old children (Stein, 1988; Stein & Glenn, 1979). Significant progress in sketching the inner landscape of characters can be seen among children between the ages of six and ten, which is considered the critical period for development of competence in communication.

Research to date has confirmed that age and gender influence children's ability to define the psychological states of characters, to describe their inner world. Older children and girls showed a greater ability in this area (Fox, 1991; Camaioni, 1997). In addition, it has been shown that the number of expressions describing perceptual states significantly decreases during the period of late childhood, while the number of expressions for cognitive or positive emotional states increases. However, the number of expressions for negative emotional states, acts of volition and moral judgements does not change.

## Research problem and method

Our research aimed at identifying a variable other than age and gender which would influence the sketching of an inner landscape of characters in stories told by children – namely, story context.

The research problem: The influence of age and story context as well as a combination of these two variables on children's creation of an inner landscape of characters in stories.

Sixty-eight pupils ages 9 (36 persons) and 12 (32 persons) from elementary schools in Kraków were included in the research. The pupils were presented with the beginnings of

Table 1. The characterization of the stories used in the research

Story	Characterization
A walk (common story)	common characters, ordinary names; very familiar setting; familiar props; conventional behavior of the characters; ordinary and familiar inner landscape of the main character (surprise).
Lagnikku, the wanderer (strange story)	unusual characters, strange names; unfamiliar setting; unconventional behavior of the characters; unusual inner landscape of the main character (desire to eat roses).

stories that differed in two ways: closeness and familiarity of the main character, setting and events as well as the uncommonness of these three elements of the story (see Table 1).

The task of each tested pupil was to think up and write the next part of the story. The research was carried out on the school premises during two sessions in 4-5 person groups. One story was presented during a single session. There was a 2 – 4 week-long break between the sessions.

## Results

The stories created by the children were analyzed from several points of view:

- 1 – the number of units of information, that is, the smallest portions of content expressed by nouns, verbs, adjectives or fixed combinations of two or more words,
- 2 – the quality of the units of information: a – repetition of what appeared earlier to stimulate further storytelling; b – novelty, that is, units of vocabulary introduced by the child,
- 3 – the number of characters introduced into the story, their originality;
- 4 – the number of settings and their originality,
- 5 – the main character's inner landscape: number and type of expressions.

The results presented below include 136 stories created by nine-year-olds (72 stories) and twelve-year-olds (64 stories).

It turned out that the stories told by the older pupils contained 20% more units of information than did those told by the 9-year-olds. In addition, their stories were marked by a higher coefficient of novelty and a greater number of settings. However, repetition accounted for about 40% of the text in both of the groups. The age of the child without regard to context affects the creation of stories: a greater number of information units was activated in the cognitive representation of the older group.

The influence of story context without regard to age turned out to be significant as to the greater amount of information, repetition (common stories) and novelty, originality of characters and settings (strange stories). The influence of context thus appears in the quality of the added information.

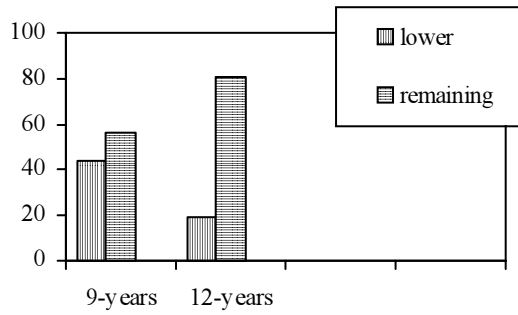
An analysis of variance revealed only one effect (see Table 2) resulting from the interaction of age and story context, namely, novelty of vocabulary ( $F= 3,75$ ,  $df= 66$ ,  $p= 0.05$ ).

It turned out that younger children are better at using a common story describing a familiar situation; they are able to effectively transform the data contained in such a story to form a new one. However, a strange story inclines them to think up new characters and settings. Older pupils are more independent of story context although strange stories also stimulate them to think up original settings and use a greater number of new words.

The ability to assimilate new, unknown and fantastic content was also studied ( $\chi^2 = 0.75$ ,  $pf = 0.0218$ ). A significant difference was found to exist in the number of children with lower coefficients of novelty in narration in the case of the story of Lagnikku in the younger group. This result shows that in the group of 9-year-olds there are more who have difficulty understanding fiction and abstraction in stories (see Fig. 1).

It turned out that age does not significantly influence the type of characters and action settings brought into the story by children. In both of the groups, familiar characters from the child's closest environment appeared most often (mother, salesperson, police officer), unfamiliar persons, usually known to the child from the mass media, more seldom, and original persons being a product of the storyteller's imagination significantly less often (see Fig. 2).

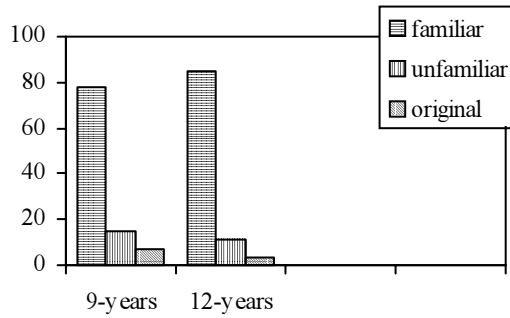
Figure 1. The number of children with different frequencies of novelty in storytelling



lower = lower than average  
 remaining = remaining frequencies

Figure 2. Proportions of different types of characters and settings in the story in relation to age

Characters



Settings

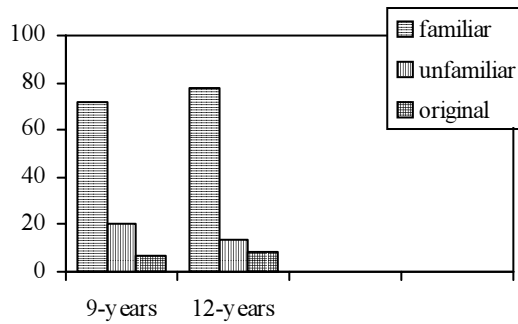


Table 2. The influence of age and story context (ANOVA,  $p < 0.05$ )

variable	9 – 12 year-olds	C (common) – S (strange)	C–S 9-year-olds	C–S 12-year-olds
number of units	9 < 12 p=0.002	C > S p=0.01	C > S	ns
repetition	ns	C > S p=0.02	C > S	ns
novelty of vocabulary	ns	C < S p=0.006	ns	C < S p=0.005
number of characters	ns	ns	ns	ns
originality of characters	ns p=0.0002	C < S p=0.0003	C < S	ns
number of settings	ns	ns	ns	ns
originality of settings	ns	C < S p=0.00001	C < S	C < S

The impact of context on the type of characters and settings introduced into the story turned out to be significant. Familiar characters and settings appeared more often in a common context. A strange context favored the introduction of remote characters and settings as well as original characters. Children recalled a reality which was familiar to them in the common context; they often produced situations in which they themselves participated. The strange context stimulated the creation of a new reality and the departure from previous experiences (see Fig. 3).

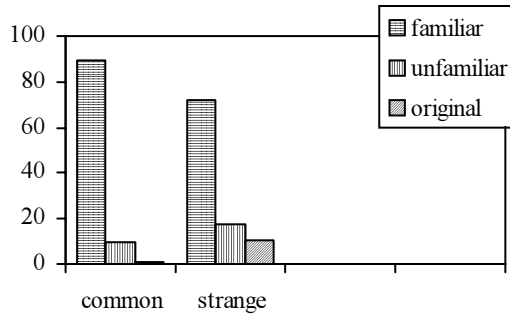
Expressions for the psychological qualities of the main character were classified in accordance with Bretherton's proposal. Five groups of psychological expressions for the main character were distinguished: perception, emotion, volition, cognition, morality (see Fig. 4).

It turned out that the number of expressions for psychological qualities attributed to the main character increased with the age of the pupils. The average number of expressions was twice as large in the older children. Cognitive expressions (*to know, to think, to be surprised, to reflect upon*) dominated in both groups, comprising 1/3 of all psychological expressions in a given age group. Volitional expressions (*to want, to resolve*) constituted 1/4 of all the psychological expressions attributed to characters. Expressions of morality (*not allowed, should*) occupied third place as to frequency of appearance, i.e. 1/5 of all psychological expressions. The influence of age was evident in two areas: the number of qualities which described perception decreased with age while the number of cognitive expressions significantly increased with age ( $p=0.0002$ ).

Context had a marked influence in the cognitive sphere: more extensive descriptions of the cognitive qualities of characters were provided in the strange context ( $p=0.007$ ). Context was also observed to affect the emotional sphere: a greater number of emotional states were attributed to characters of common stories ( $p=0.0001$ ), with an equal number

Figure 3. Proportions of different types of characters and settings appearing in the story in relation to context

Characters



Settings

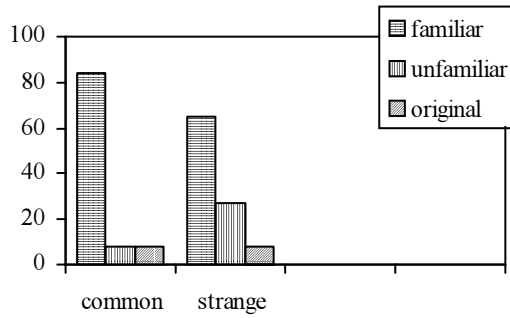
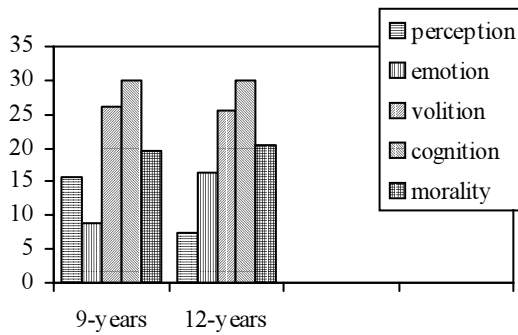


Figure 4. Proportions of groups of psychological expressions attributed to the main character in relation to age



of positive (*to be happy, to like*) and negative emotional states. However, descriptions of characters in the strange context contained more negative experiences (*to be horrified, to be bored, to grow restless, to be nervous*) ( $p=0.05$ ).

## Conclusions

To sum up, the type of context is a more differentiating factor than is age in children's stories with regard to originality and creation of a character's inner landscape. The impact of age appears clearly in making use of information and producing novelties. It turned out that manipulating abstract data may still be too difficult for 9-year-old pupils. A strange context stimulates originality of thought and to a greater degree brings into the forefront those experiences of a child which he/she has gained indirectly (from reading, watching television and films).

Results concerning a child's creation of a character's inner landscape turned out to be similar to earlier established trends. The extent of psychological descriptions of the characters clearly increases toward the end of childhood, signalling an interest in a person's inner world which is characteristic for the period of adolescence. Cognitive expressions, increasing in number with age, dominate in the psychological descriptions. At the same time, the number of expressions for perception decreases.

The strange context averts the author's thoughts from the main character's experiences, directing them toward constructing a complex plot involving unusual situations in which the character is involved. The character endeavors to understand and clarify these situations; herein is the source of so many expressions concerning the cognitive sphere. Expressions of emotional states appeared more frequently with reference to characters from common stories, as if it were only possible to attribute feelings – positive as well as negative – to close and familiar persons. Only in the case of unusual characters was it possible to ascribe more negative than positive experiences.

Common narratives directly reflect the experiences of children along with their family, school and social situations, while fantastic stories, prompting the transformation of the familiar, reveal the intellectual strengths of their authors.

Consequently, fantastic, unusual stories, disposing to intellectual transformations, have a greater value for stimulating a child's cognitive development. Texts connected with concrete surroundings which are familiar to the child better serve the purpose of socialization.

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