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## A Study of Secondary School Students' Perceptions of Fictional Characters

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**Abstract:** Fictional characters give literary works a sense of reality. The actions of fictional characters play a crucial role in children's personality development. Young readers who lack critical reading skills are more likely to incorporate fictional characters into their lives because they have a hard time telling reality from fiction. Therefore, we should determine how children perceive fictional characters and teach them that they are imaginary figures. In this way, we can help them approach those characters' actions from an external and critical perspective. This study adopted a qualitative research design (case study) to investigate secondary school students' perceptions of fictional characters. The sample consisted of 45 secondary school students (28 female and 17 male). Data were collected through interviews and document review techniques. Data were analyzed using content analysis. Results showed that participants were more likely to be interested in and identify with characters with appealing personality traits. They had four types of approaches to fictional characters: (1) Wanting to change the storyline depending on what the fictional character goes through, (2) being influenced by them, (3) seeing them as role models, or (4) ignoring them. They wanted to change the storyline, especially when the villain got what he wanted or when the hero or the victim was unhappy, suggesting that they mostly took the protagonist's side (the good guy). While most participants attributed an ontological meaning to anthropomorphic characters, the symbolic meaning became of secondary importance. They were more interested in and identified more with characters with good living conditions and no death experiences.

**Keywords:** Children's books, children's literature, fictional character, identification, students' perceptions.

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### Introduction

Fiction books introduce readers to different realities and help them approach the real world from different perspectives. Fiction books are appealing to readers because they provide them with the opportunity to meet people they either have never met or will never meet in real life. In other words, the discourse concerning fiction is based on characters assumed to live in imaginary worlds.

Characters are essential parts of fiction books. The character brings the theme into the open and allows the reader to connect the text with real life (Kiran & Kiran, 2011). The character is responsible for unfolding an event or initiation action and bringing other components (setting, time, plot, etc.) together. While some components (e.g., setting) can exist alone, events are strictly character-dependent (Stevick, 2004). Above all, stories are about characters' experiences than they are about episodes or actions (Brown et al., 2019).

There has always been a philosophical discussion of the ontological dimensions of characters. However, fictional characters are coincidental; that is, they do not necessarily exist in real life. Instead, they owe their existence to human actions (Heidbrink, 2010). According to Wolf (2008), fictional characters are living beings with feelings, motivations, and intentions. They move through the time and space of the storyline, interact with others (friends and foes), and take action accordingly.

How a fictional character looks, speaks, thinks, and behaves is characterized by other characters' or the narrator's interpretations. Therefore, there is not much difference between getting to know a fictional character and a real person (Applebee et al., 2002; Glazer, 1997; Sever, 2013; Şen, 2020). This similarity has a psychological effect on the reader or the author, putting them under the illusion that fictional characters are real.

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Taylor et al. (2003) reported that almost all authors (92%, n= 50) were under the illusion of independent agency. The authors believed that fictional characters determined the creation process and, after a certain point, got out of hand and leaked into the real world.

Nikolajeva (2014) argues that readers approach fictional characters in two ways; ontological and semiotic. According to the semiotic approach, fictional characters are only ideological or aesthetic and linguistic figures of stories. According to the ontological (mimetic) approach, fictional characters represent real people in real life. Psychological studies show that the semiotic approach is more prevalent despite its shortcomings.

Mikhail Bakhtin, a modern literary theorist, associates fictional characters with the creation process and addresses two types of approaches: classic and romantic (Bakhtin, 2005). The former is about fictional characters whose fates are sealed by the author, while the latter is about fictional characters with agency.

The sense of reality that fictional characters create is also about the human mind because it is capable of and enjoys thinking about imaginary things. According to Vermeule (2013), literary works influence people and get them to worry about fictional characters. However, this is not surprising because communicating with fictional characters is a cognitive endeavor that shows how the human mind operates.

We should look into the influence of fictional characters on young readers (Karagül, 2018) because they play a key role in their personal and moral development (Yavuzer, 2001).

Children are influenced as strongly by fictional characters as by real people (Almerico, 2014). Fictional characters have long-lasting effects on young readers. Stories play a functional role in this process because they help young readers make sense of complex behavior, establish bonds, and get to know people in real life (Gamble & Yates, 2002). Identification is the primary cognitive skill that helps young readers comprehend and adopt fictional characters' views and actions.

Bakırcıoğlu (2012) defines "identification" as a defense mechanism used to internalize the way another person (real or fictional) hears, thinks, and acts. Identification is a critical skill that enables young readers to communicate with books in a healthy and permanent way and recognize that there are other people who think and act like them, which instills a sense of confidence in them (Sever, 2013). Identifying with fictional characters is not as simple and ineffective as it seems because it sometimes blurs the distinction between fiction and reality.

When reading fiction books, most readers cannot tell fiction from reality (Eco, 2011). In particular, young readers identify with every character and lose their sense of reality, which deprives them of the opportunity for an artistic experience (Booth, 2012).

The blurring of the lines between fiction and reality due to identification with fictional characters poses a danger for young readers (Nikolajeva, 2003). A young reader who identifies with a fictional character might end up thinking that she and the character are "very much alike" or makes judgments about what the character likes or dislikes as real people do. In other words, she accepts the fiction "as if real" (Gamble & Yates, 2002). For the correct identification, she should put a distance between herself and the fictional character and associate it as something external to herself. Critical reading is essential in this respect (Şen, 2020).

Nikolajeva (2014) argues that we should distinguish between immersive and empathic identification to minimize the confusion surrounding identification. Immersive identification is a process through which the young reader faces a controlling approach in which she has a hard time distinguishing what is imposed by the text and her own subjectivity. She may attribute a factual reality to a fictional character because she does not have enough experience and developmental capacity to tell the difference. Therefore, she may incorporate the character's experiences into her life without turning them into authentic experiences of her own. This is an undesirable situation for the fictional reading process because reading fiction books requires the reader to tell her own memory from fiction.

On the other hand, empathic identification is a process through which the young reader tries to understand a fictional character without empathizing with what the character feels. In other words, she can tell her feelings from those of the character. For example, she recognizes the character's anger, but she does not feel anger because she knows that it is only a representation or overrepresentation. Therefore, empathic identification may yield results faster than immersive identification.

According to Smith (2010), fictional characters lack real agency, although they symbolize real people. Therefore, when the reader treats such figures as real, they may face moral risks dramatized by the fiction.

Authors should be careful when developing fictional characters because young readers tend to identify with them (Zivtçi, 2007). The realistic portrayal of a character and its acceptance by the reader run parallel to each other. The more realistic the character is and the more in control he is of his destiny, the more believable he will be (Özdemir, 2014). Many experts agree that the characters in children's books should be more realistic than idealistic. This is particularly important for young readers to identify with fictional characters in a healthy way (Alp & Kardaş, 2013; Aslan, 2013; Dilidüzgün, 2004; Glazer, 1997; Karatay, 2014; Nas, 2014; Sever, 2013; Şimşek, 2004).

Characterization methods are similar in adult and children's literature. However, when the target audience is children, we see a range of fictional characters due to varying interests, needs, and developmental characteristics. Books for children younger than five years have more visual content and depict characters' physical traits in more detail. However, books that appeal to children aged 5-10 years have more written content. Therefore, the way authors use language becomes more of an issue (Aslan, 2017; Barone, 2011; Dilidüzgün, 2004; Glazer, 1997; Sawyer, 2012; Sever, 2013; Yalçın & Aytaş, 2005). In other words, character-building focuses on the inner world rather than physical appearance.

The fictional universe has a hierarchy. The main character (protagonist) is generally the one the reader follows or knows well. The protagonist stands by the reader during the reading process as if they were close friends. In accordance with the principles of fiction, the author creates three-dimensional characters, depending on the affective or moral influence he wants to evoke in the reader. The author presents some characters in more detail and brings them closer to the reader's axis of empathy. This is how we distinguish between the protagonist and other characters (Şen, 2020). The protagonist is the most important character, while the others are minor characters (Applebee et al., 2002).

The protagonist determines the reader's point of view. Although still a moot point, experimental studies show that the reader looks at the narrative's spatial framework and perspective through the protagonist's lenses (Coplan, 2004; Rall & Harris, 2000; Vermeule, 2013; Ziegler et al., 2005).

Aside from their positions and roles, characters are classified as dynamic/round or static/flat/unchanging based on the change they go through. The difference between a dynamic/round and static/flat/unchanging character is that the former experiences changes in their personality, whereas the latter do not (Forster, 2016; Glazer, 1997; Sever, 2013; Şen, 2020; Wolf, 2008). Dynamic/round characters are multidimensional and more convincing in creating a sense of reality than static/flat/unchanging characters. According to Jago et al. (2011), the protagonist is always a round character who undergoes a series of emotions and resolutions throughout the story. Round characters are like real people because they have numerous personality traits. On the other hand, flat characters have only one or two personality traits and just set the background for the protagonist.

Children's books feature way more non-human animate (animals, plants, etc.) or inanimate (objects) fictional characters than books for adults - with some exceptions (Gamble & Yates, 2002; Sever, 2013). Many children's books feature pets or wild animals as main characters (Kellert, 2002; Wolf, 2008). This process is called "anthropomorphism," used by authors to expand the limits of narration and help the reader experience the fictional world more vividly and dynamically.

Anthropomorphic characters represent human nature (Gamble & Yates, 2002). However, anthropomorphism may cause ethical problems in forging the reader-character bond, and therefore, the author should take into account some factors when building fictional characters. According to Suvilehto (2019), anthropomorphic characters in children's books play a symbolic role. However, it raises the question of how such characters might affect young readers. Nevertheless, they may help young readers cope with developmental problems by addressing their experiences.

Nikolajeva (2014) argues that animal rights are a recurrent theme in children's books. This raises the question of whether it is ethical to encourage the young reader to bond with an animal that humans will eventually eat. Although the animal survives at the end of the story, the dilemma remains. The reader is expected to take the animal character's side. For example, a story about the friendship between a cat and a mouse always features a dog as the antagonist, thereby fostering a negative image of dogs.

## Methodology

### *Research Goal*

This study investigated secondary school students' perceptions of fictional characters. The main research question was, "How do secondary school students perceive fictional characters?" The study sought answers to the following sub-questions:

1. What kind of traits would secondary school students like to see in fictional characters?
2. Which fictional characters would secondary school students like to be?
3. How do secondary school students react to fictional characters' experiences?
4. What kind of attitudes do secondary school students have toward fictional anthropomorphic characters?

### *Participants*

Qualitative research generally involves a small sample recruited using purposive sampling (Patton, 2014). In a case study, the researcher first identifies the phenomenon of interest and then draws a sample from the population (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). Participants were recruited using criterion sampling, which is a purposive sampling method. The main objective of criterion sampling is to recruit a sample that satisfies a set of predetermined criteria, which is a

common strategy in quality assurance research (Patton, 2014; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). In other words, criterion sampling is an efficient method by which researchers select participants most suited to the research purpose. The inclusion criteria were as follows:

1. Having read 20 fiction books in the last five years (derived from Ministry of National Education Information Systems [MEBBIS] data)
2. Having read at least five books in the 2018-2019 academic year
3. Being among the top ten students of his/her school for reading the highest number of books.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics

Characteristics	Groups	n
Gender	Male	28
	Female	17
Age	11	9
	12	14
	13	12
	14	10
Grade level	5	9
	6	9
	7	12
	8	15
Average number of books read per month	1-3	17
	4-6	13
	7-9	7
	10+	8
Literary genres of interest	Adventure	27
	Science fiction	6
	Action	6
	Crime	5
	Tales	3
	Thriller-Horror	3
	Historical Fiction	2
	Realistic Fiction	1
Fantastic	1	

Table 1 shows the participants' demographic characteristics (n=45). Participants were fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth graders between 11 and 14 years. Twenty-eight participants were boys. Only eight participants read more than ten books per month, while the rest read 1-9 books per month. Most participants (n=27) were interested in adventure books.

#### Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through interviews. Prior to participation, all students were informed about the research purpose, procedure, and confidentiality, and informed consent was obtained from those who volunteered. Participants were interviewed (about 25 minutes) in their schools. An 11-item form was used during the interviews. The form was checked by five experts, and goodness of fit values were calculated for each item. Those with the goodness of fit values of > 0.80 were included in the form.

After the interviews, participants read four stories (Raven, A Crow with a Thorn in Its Foot, Saliha the Plotter, and Bank Robber) for three weeks. Five experts assessed the stories for literary quality, age-appropriateness, and originality and concluded that they were suitable for the study.

Ten participants (P30, P31, P32, P36, P37, P39, P40, P41, P42, and P45) were handed out evaluation forms and asked to evaluate the characters in the stories.

The data were analyzed using content analysis, which is generally employed to assess interview transcripts, diaries, and documents in detail (Patton, 2014) and bring inconspicuous themes and dimensions into the open (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018).

The content analysis involved three stages. First, we analyzed the transcripts to develop subcategories. Second, we merged similar subcategories. Third, we finalized the subcategories and evaluated them within the framework of the main categories. For example, we first assessed the categories of "helping the good character," "helping the character in

need," "helping the favorite character," and "helping the poor character" individually and then merged them under the subcategory of "helping the characters," which we then evaluated under the main category of "interventionist" because we thought that participants wanted to change the storyline. We followed this procedure throughout the whole analysis.

We tabulated the subcategories and the main categories. We obtained two different codes for some statements and included them separately. For example, one participant (P40) stated, "I would like to be 'Fete,' because I would like to be a strong girl like her. I wouldn't want to be the commander because I wouldn't want to separate the four brothers." From these statements, we concluded that the participant would like to see "good" and "strong" characters. Therefore, we obtained two different subcategories.

Some participants stated that they had never read fiction books with anthropomorphic characters in them. For example, one participant remarked, "I have never read a book with animal characters in it." I have three beautiful budgies. I would be sad if something bad happened to them, so, I wouldn't want to see any animals being hurt (P12)." Therefore, students who had never read fiction books with anthropomorphic characters were excluded from the analysis (Table 5).

#### *Validity and Reliability*

Some measures for validity and reliability in a case study are prolonged interaction with the phenomenon of interest, using different data collection methods, seeking confirmation from participants or different researchers, using direct quotes, and reporting results in detail (Patton, 2014; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). We employed "expert opinion," "participant confirmation," "temporal correlation," and "rich and dense description" to assess the validity and reliability of the data.

Three experts (an associate professor and two academics with a Ph.D. in Turkish Universities) assessed the main categories and subcategories to check whether they were relevant and overlapping. We finalized all categories based on their feedback. For example, we first grouped the subcategories of "characters with a disability" and "vulnerable figures (girls, children, etc.)" under the main category of "capacity." After deliberations, we decided to group those subcategories under the main category of "disadvantaged groups."

We also obtained "participant confirmation" a process in which researchers have all participants check the data and results to see whether they corroborate them (Arastaman et al., 2018). We tabulated all concepts and interpretations and sent them to participants to check and confirm them.

One way of assessing reliability and validity in qualitative research is the "temporal correlation" (Tavşancıl & Aslan, 2001), for which the researcher analyzes the same documents at different times to see whether they agree with each other. From the first stage on, we noted down the date when we analyzed each interview form. One month later, we analyzed five of the interview forms again (first analysis: 11.13.2020; 11.17.2020; 11.22.2020; 11.25.2020; 11.27.2020; second analysis: 12.27.2020). The number of agreements and disagreements was 49 and 12, respectively. We calculated the reliability [(number of agreements)/(number of agreements + number of disagreements)] (Miles & Huberman, 1994) as 80%, indicating high reliability.

Another way of assessing validity in qualitative research is "rich and dense description," for which the researcher shares their data collection experiences and describes the setting, participants, and results in a robust and detailed manner (Arastaman et al., 2018). We used direct quotes to make the categories distinctive and ensure validity.

## **Results**

This section addressed the results on participants' views' of the fictional characters in the stories they read.

#### *Personality Traits of Favorite Fictional Characters*

Table 2 shows the personality traits of the favorite fictional characters of the participants.

Table 2. Personality Traits of Favorite Fictional Characters

Main category	Subcategory	Distribution (N)	Total	Participants
Personality	Fighter	14		P4, P7, P8, P15, P23, P26, P27, P28, P29, P30, P35, P40, P43, P44
	Honest	3		P18, P36, P39
	Good	3		P9, P19, P39
	Adventurer	3		P17, P41, P42
	Autonomous	1		P6
	Successful	1	31	P6
	Wise	1		P10
	Courageous	1		P15
	Hardworking	1		P6
	Problem-solver	1		P4
	Respectful	1		P39
	Hopeful	1		P43
Developmental stage	Child	23	23	P1, P3, P5, P8, P11, P13, P15, P20, P21, P23, P24, P25, P26, P27, P28, P29, P30, P34, P35, P36, P38, P44, P44
Connection with readers	Reliability (personality, age, etc.)	11	14	P2, P3, P18, P20, P22, P24, P26, P28, P29, P33, P40
	Aspired personality	3		P5, P22, P34
Capacity	Superpower	7		P8, P10, P32, P36, P38, P41, P42
	Smart	1	10	P15
	Talented	1		P24
	Strong	1		P42
Method of development	Realistic drawing	9		P1, P4, P9, P21, P24, P25, P26, P27, P28
	Main character	7	17	P2, P4, P14, P18, P35, P36, P37
	Dynamic/round	1		P25
The disadvantaged characters	Disabled	8		P5, P11, P13, P25, P26, P27, P31, P33
	Vulnerable characters (girls, children, etc.)	2	10	P5, P39
Gender	Male	4	6	P8, P27, P41, P42
	Female	2		P31, P44
Class position	Aristocrat	1	1	P18
Duty	Military figures (sniper, spy, etc.)	1	1	P12

Six characteristics (personality, developmental stage, connection with readers, capacity, method of development, disadvantage, gender, and class position) determined participants' interest in the fictional characters (Table 3).

The personality of fictional characters was more important to participants than their other traits. Most participants were interested in characters with a "fighter's" spirit. Reliability (connection and similarity) was another factor that determined their interest in characters. In other words, the more relatable the character, the more appealing it was to them. They were more interested in young characters of their age with similar personality traits or personality traits they wish to have in real life. It is noteworthy that gender was not an essential factor that determined their interest in characters. For example, one of the participants stated, "Young characters fascinate me, girls or boys, doesn't matter. I think it's mostly because they are about the same age as me. I can relate to them. I feel like I understand them, and I know what they feel" (P28).

Gender and age were important to participants because they associated them with some personality traits and experiences that characters had. For example, one of the participants noted, "I like young and male characters because they are more adventurous. I'd love to be Robinson Crusoe because he fights cannibals, and he's an adventurer (P8)." Personality traits mattered more to participants than some other qualities (disadvantage, duty, class position, etc.). For example, a character impressed one of the participants because she was not a quitter even though she was disabled. The participant pointed out, "I like characters with a disability better. I'd read the book 'Roller Girl,' and I loved the character 'Şerare.' She never gave up despite her disability. She was a fighter" (P7).

There was a correlation between literary genres (adventure, science fiction, action, and crime) and characters (fighter, adventurer, and autonomous) that appealed to participants (Table 1). This result showed that characters' personality traits determined participants' genre preferences. For example, one of the participants stated the following:

I read. I try to read about four books a month, and I love adventure books because I find the others a bit boring. There is this book, 'The Rockingdown Mystery,' there is a character by the name 'Diana.' So, Diana, her brother, and one of her cousins have the most amazing adventures, which is impressive" (P17).

#### *Why Participants Identify with Some Fictional Characters More Than Others*

Table 3 shows the personality traits that helped participants identify with some fictional characters more than others.

*Table 3. Personality Traits of Fictional Characters with Whom Participants Identify*

Main category	Subcategory	Distribution (n)	Total	Participants
Personality	Good	20		P1, P6, P9, P10, P11, P12, P16, P20, P21, P23, P26, P28, P29, P34, P35, P37, P38, P40, P42, P45
	Loveable	6		P7, P11, P25, P29, P33, P42
	Fighter	5		P8, P25, P26, P28, P39
	Strong	4		P21, P25, P40, P41
	Helpful	4		P10, P25, P34, P35
	Humble	3		P19, P33, P37
	Honest	2	58	P19, P26
	Evil	2		P32, P41
	Empathetic	1		P19
	Pursuing his/her Dreams	1		P24
	Interesting	1		P6
	Innocent	1		P36
	Patient	1		P44
	Respectful	1		P25
	Hopeful	1		P25
Fictional Position and Role	Protagonist	6		P3, P4, P14, P30, P37, P43
	Someone the protagonist knows	2		P4, P5
	The character responsible for the unfolding of events	1	9	P12
Living conditions	Resourceful	2		P13, P44
	Resilient	2		P31, P32
	Someone who would not lose a loved one	1	7	P2
	Happy	1		P27
	Survivor	1		P8
Connection with readers	Aspired personality	4		P12, P13, P14, P17
	Similarities (Age, Personality, etc.)	2	6	P38, P39
Capacity	Superpower	5	6	P9, P11, P15, P17, P45
	Talent	1		P25
Physical Appearance	Beautiful	2	2	P11, P45
Class Position	Aristocrat	1	1	P18

How much participants identified with characters depended more on the characters' personality traits than on their capacity, physical appearance, and class position. Most participants stated that they identified with characters with positive personality traits. In other words, participants paid much more attention to personality traits than physical strength and skills. Two participants made this clear by stating that:

I would like to be the male character in 'My Left Foot.' I would like that, trying hard to do everything by myself. I would like to be Şerare in 'Roller Girl,' too. She is disabled, but everybody treats her so nicely, not because she is disabled but because she is fair and honest" (P26).

I would like to be the girl character 'Bilge' in the book 'A Pair of Shoes,' because she doesn't think of herself, but thinks of others. I wouldn't want to be the girl in the book 'Fadiş' because she is evil (P35).

Participants made similar points regarding the characters in the stories they read within the scope of this study. They stated that they would like to be the characters who were friendly, fair, and innocent with a fighter's spirit. Only two participants (P45, P32) liked Saliha, an evil character, but only one (P45) wanted to be her. The other participants did not like her. For example, one of the participants noted:

I liked none of the characters in the story. I didn't like 'Saliha the Plotter' at all. If I could, I would make her tell the truth at the end (P30).

Reliability was another factor making participants more likely to identify with a character. For example, one of the participants noted:

"I like the characters of my age. I would like to be 'Şerare' in the story 'Roller Girl.' She improved herself, despite her disability, and she was respectful and well-mannered. Her disability did not stop her from leading a good life. Everybody loved her. She was helpful and treated older people with respect" (P25).

Some participants (n=9) stated that they were more likely to identify with the protagonist or someone he/she knew. This result showed that the protagonist played a key role in the identification process. For example, one of the participants noted, "I will talk about more than one character because I read a lot. I would like to be the protagonist. I would like to be a courageous, honest, agile, but shy at times, and helpful character who keeps changing his mind, but can do anything once he puts his mind to it" (P3).

A character needed to be more than "the protagonist" for participants to identify with because they looked to personality traits and position. Most participants identified with the protagonist or someone he/she knew. For example, only one participant (P45) identified with the protagonist "Saliha the Plotter," who was an evil character, and that participant did it only for fun. These results showed that participants evaluated characters' position and personality traits before identifying with them.

Participants focused more on the protagonists or someone he/she knew in the stories they read within the scope of this study. For example, they were more likely to identify with Hardi (P30, P32, P36, P42, P45) and Alex (P30, P32, P36, P42, P45), the main characters of the story "Bank Robber." One of the participants explained this as follows:

"I would like to be Alex in the story 'Bank Robber' because he has a heart of gold, and I like that. I would never want to be the narrator of the story because he was a bit dry" (P30).

#### *Participants' Reactions to Fictional Characters' Experiences*

Table 4 shows how participants reacted to fictional characters' experiences.

*Table 4. Participants' Reactions to Fictional Characters' Experiences*

Main category	Subcategory	Distribution (n)	Total	Participants
Wanting to change the storyline	Helping characters	40	61	P1, P2, P3, P5, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P16, P16, P17, P18, P19, P20, P21, P23, P24, P25, P26, P27, P28, P29, P30, P31, P32, P33, P34, P35, P36, P37, P38, P40, P41, P42, P43, P44, P45
	Changing the ending	20		P1, P2, P3, P8, P10, P11, P12, P13, P16, P18, P24, P25, P26, P27, P29, P30, P34, P36, P40, P41
	Punishing characters	1		P23
Being affected too much	Taking fiction as real	6	8	P2, P3, P7, P10, P17, P31
	Crying for characters	1		P2
	Having dreams about characters	1		P8
Not caring	Letting characters be	3	4	P6, P22, P33
	Taking things as they are	1		P39
Taking as a role model	Seeing characters as role models	2	3	P4, P10
	Feeling empowered through characters	1		P40



Participants had four types of reactions to what the characters went through. Only four participants (P6, P22, P33, and P39) gave no reaction (not caring). One of them explained it as “I don’t care If a character is happy or unhappy” (P22).

Participants wished to change the storyline, especially when good characters or their favorite characters were in trouble. As put by one of the participants:

When the character is happy, I feel like I got good news, so I feel happy, too. I feel sad if they do. I am happy and feel empowered when they overcome challenges because I find them friendly. If I could, I would change the sad endings into happy ones (P40).

Another participant noted that she wanted to help the characters when they were in trouble:

“I’d like to help them when they were in trouble. I say to myself, ‘I wish I was there to help him out.’ I feel that way because I feel bad when they are in trouble. For example, I’d love to help that boy in the book ‘Mon Ster - Cowardly Pets Shop’ to catch that ruthless doctor he was chasing after. (P11)

Participants wanted to change the storyline, especially when evil characters were about to win. This result shows that young readers’ attitudes toward fictional characters depend on the personality traits of those characters:

“I would like to see evil characters being punished because they keep bothering the good ones” (P23). “I would like to change the endings. I would like to see the kid’s father in ‘The Boy in the Striped Pajamas’ turn out to be a good person. I wish the characters in the book ‘Trash’ made it to the end without telling lies” (P24). “I would want to help the characters in need because I feel sorry for them. I would like to help Rapunzel” (P34).

Participants made similar remarks about the stories they read within the scope of this study. Most of them (P31, P32, P36, P37, P39, P41) wanted to change the ending of the “Saliha the Plotter” because they were bothered by the fact that Saliha got everything she wanted by doing evil things:

“If I had a chance to change the ending, I would expose all evil things Saliha did.” (P31)

#### *Participants’ Attitudes Toward Fictional Anthropomorphic Characters*

Table 5 shows how participants reacted to fictional anthropomorphic characters.

*Table 5. Participants’ Attitudes Toward Fictional Anthropomorphic Characters*

Main category	Subcategory	Distribution (n)	Total	Participants
<b>Taking Fiction as Real</b>	Think of the character as a living being	22	37	P1, P2, P3, P4, P7, P9, P10, P11, P14, P20, P22, P29, P30, P32, P34, P35, P36, P37, P39, P40, P41, P44
	Reaction (crying, getting mad, getting sad, etc.)	15		P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P8, P9, P10, P13, P15, P18, P19, P21, P23
<b>Seeing Fiction as Fiction</b>	Imaginary	7	13	P10, P23, P28, P33, P42, P43, P45
	Symbolic function	6		P8, P16, P24, P26, P27, P28

Participants had two types of reactions to the anthropomorphic characters. Some thought of them as real (n: 37), while the others saw them as imaginary characters with symbolic functions (n: 13).

Participants stated that the anthropomorphic fictional characters impressed them and raised their awareness. They pointed out that, in some cases, animal characters could be more effective. Two participants put it that way:

“I’ve read a book called ‘Suna’s Sparrows,’ which had an animal character, which I think makes the reader more aware. I’ve empathized with the animal, and so I treat real animals better now. So, that’s the difference between human and animal characters. I mean, we try harder to empathize with animals. I think of all animal characters as living things, so I get upset when something bad happens to them. I feel the same when it’s a human. After all, we’re all living things.” (P2)

I read a book with animal characters, which was ‘Animal Farm.’ I think that the animal characters make the book more meaningful. I think of people and animals as living things. I cry when something bad happens to animals. (P6)

Participants thought of anthropomorphic characters as living things. Both the interviews and the story evaluation process point to this result. One of the participants (P39) stated that the character of the story “Raven” was an allegory of real people:

"I was blown away by that bond between an animal and a human. Everyone thought that the crow would go away, but he didn't. He did, only when Ömer told him to, which affected me very much. Even in real life, people wouldn't do what that crow did."

Some participants thought of the anthropomorphic characters as symbols and products of imagination. What is noteworthy is that the literary genre of their choosing also determined what they thought about anthropomorphic characters. One of the characters put it that way:

I love human characters. Animal characters always have superpowers, but I like realistic books. Animal characters are symbols of real people; they are just products of imagination.

### Discussion

This study addressed secondary school students' perceptions of fictional characters. The interviews show that most participants look to the personality traits of a character before identifying with it.

The less relatable a character (emotional reactions or actions), the less likely the reader is to identify with it empathically (Child et al., 2019). Kucirkova (2019) argues that fictional characters with different personality traits help readers develop empathy and bond with them. Young readers use more cognitive resources to identify with protagonists who have personality traits different than theirs. Both the reader and the author put more effort into higher levels of identification and bonding. Eleven participants were interested in characters who resembled them (personality, age, etc.), while four participants stated that they would like to identify with characters who were different from them (aspired personality). Therefore, we can state that participants were more interested in fictional characters with personality traits similar to theirs but wanted more to identify with characters who had personality traits different than theirs.

Research shows that students of different ages are interested in different characters. Erdem (2011) reported that third and fourth graders focused on fictional characters' personality traits and physical qualities. Jose and Brewer (1984) found that the older the children, the more attention they paid to personality traits than actions. They concluded that seven-year-olds focused on the consequences of actions, while older ones took personality traits into account before passing judgment on fictional characters. Most of our participants were interested in (n: 31) and identified with (n: 58) fictional characters based on their personality traits. Our results are consistent with the literature.

Bulut (2018) and Yılmaz (2016) determined that adults (teachers and parents) attributed functional roles to characters. Adults who regard fictional characters as role models are likely to pay more attention to their positive personality traits. Our participants also paid more attention to fictional characters' positive personality traits (honest, fair, prosperous, wise, courageous, hardworking, problem-solver, etc.). This may be related to the meaning that adults attribute to fictional characters in formal education environments because pedagogy or adult guidance determines what books children prefer to read. Therefore, we can argue that young readers under adult supervision also judge fictional characters by their moral values and virtues.

Erdem (2011) reported that third and fourth graders liked realistic characters (49%) and child characters (38%) better, which is in line with our results because our participants were also more interested in realistic (n: 9) and young characters (n: 23).

Some researchers argue that fictional characters should be of similar age to readers (Kırıtöğlü, 2012; Şimşek, 2004), whereas others state that it is not necessary (Firat, 2006; Karataş, 2014). Jose and Brewer (1984) found that girls identified more with female characters while boys identified more with male characters, but that age did not make much difference. Our participants noted that age [reliability (personality) (n: 11)] and gender (n: 4, n:2) determined how much they were interested in and identified with [reliability (n: 2)] fictional characters. However, based on the distributions, it is difficult to argue that those two factors play an essential role in our participants' preferences.

Our participants remarked that they were more interested in and identified more with fictional characters based on their position and roles in the story [the protagonist (n: 6), someone the protagonist knows (n: 2) or the character who is responsible for the unfolding of events (n: 1)], which is consistent with the literature. Bálint and Tan (2019) interviewed a group of 25 people between the ages of 21-72 with different ethnic backgrounds and found that they were more interested in the protagonists' inner worlds than other characters. Çevik and Müldür (2019) found that almost all students (25 out of 28) wanted to be one of the characters around the protagonist (except the protagonist's mother) or one of the characters in the book.

Our participants did not identify with the characters with poor living conditions and experiences with death. They identified with resourceful (n: 2), resilient (n: 2), and happy (n: 1) survivors (n: 1) who would not lose a loved one (n: 1). This shows that students prefer to identify with fictional characters who have positive mood or positive experiences. Igartua (2010) showed three movies of different genres (a comedy, a thriller, and a drama) and found that identification with characters was associated with spectators' (n=300) degree of enjoyment (partial (280) .51,  $p < .001$ ). Öztürk (2017) also reported that ten out of 17 students gave significant emotional reactions (sadness, crying,

anger, etc.) when faced with the subject of “death.” Therefore, we can argue that young readers are more interested in and identify more with characters with positive mood or positive experiences.

According to Doherty (2001), it requires a moral attitude to choose topics that children have difficulty understanding. Sawyer (2012) argues that the subjects of illness and death cause more anxiety in children than in adults. It is even more traumatic for sick children or children who have recently lost a loved one. Therefore, authors should be cautious when treating those subjects in their books. According to Nikolajeva (2003), children’s books rarely treat the subjects of death, fear of death, or coping with loss. Authors can treat death as an issue or an existential problem. However, in children's books, it is mostly the protagonist who loses one of her old relatives or a pet, while it is rarely her parents, a sibling, or a friend who dies.

Anthropomorphic characters facilitate identification more than human characters. However, many studies (Kotaman & Balci, 2017; Larsen et al., 2018) show that human characters are better at helping readers make sense of characters' actions and understand the moral lesson of the story and put it into practice than anthropomorphic characters. Our participants were more interested in realistically drawn characters (n: 9) and child characters (n: 23). Most participants saw the anthropomorphic characters as real (n: 37), suggesting that they attribute an ontological meaning to them. However, this may pose a problem for critical reading because it may prevent young readers from discovering anthropomorphic characters' symbolic functions. Therefore, we should make sure that such children recognize that anthropomorphic characters are just symbols of human beings and life.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, secondary school students’ perceptions of fictional characters are affected by characters' personality traits. The personality traits of fictional characters are important for secondary school students. They are particularly interested in identifying with fictional characters who are similar to them or have qualities they want to have. They care more about fictional characters’ personality traits than their physical strength or skills. Therefore, we can state that fictional characters’ personality traits are more important than other factors (physical strength, skills, social class, gender, etc.).

Secondary school students also display various behaviors and attitudes towards the events that fictional characters go through. For example, they want to change the storyline or help the “good character” in need of help. Secondary school students attribute an ontological meaning to anthropomorphic characters. In other words, they tend to view such characters as real people. This result suggests that students attribute an ontological meaning to fictional characters. We can also state that adults and children would like to see similar personality traits in fictional characters. What is more, personality traits are what make a character attractive. As a consequence of the identification process, they generally want to change the storyline when something bad happens to their favourite character.

### Recommendations

Future studies should look into how children of other age groups perceive fictional characters in cartoons and animations. Adults (teachers and parents) should take fictional characters’ traits into account when choosing books for children. They should recommend books with flawed, believable, good, strong, helpful, and ultimately successful characters. To help children identify with characters, adults should remind them that those characters play a symbolic role and are products of authors’ imagination.

### Limitations

Within the scope of this study was limited to determine the ways of perceptions about the fictional characters in views of the study group (the secondary school students in grade 5, 6, 7, and 8). The further studies may be elaborated by aiming at determining the way of perceptions on the fictional characters of the students in various grades or levels.

### Ethics Statement

The data collection and handling in this study were declared to correspond strictly with the usual norms of research ethics [(Date: 10.09.2020; Number: 85157263-604.01.02-E.67457)] accepted by Van Yüzüncü Yıl University. Moreover, approval for the research was obtained from the students who participated in the research.

### Authorship Contribution Statement

The authors contributed equally this work.

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