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Research Article

## Children's Literature and Ethics of Understanding

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### ABSTRACT

*The ethics of understanding is a set of values based on the individual's natural curiosity to seek and find the meanings that make life and human beings valuable, to take the ethical responsibility required by the answers they find, and not to seek any interest in these stages. Supporting this set of values starting from early childhood makes significant contributions to the child's affective, social and moral development. In particular, quality texts that comply with the basic principles that children's literature should bear will positively affect the development of the ethics of understanding in children. The aim of this study is to explain the relationship between children's literature and the ethics of understanding and to explain the qualities that children's books should have in terms of the ethics of understanding in line with the views of the literature. This study was conducted with a qualitative research method. The data source of the study is five children's books for preschool children. The data were collected by document analysis method and analyzed by descriptive analysis method. At the end of the study, it was seen that qualified children's books have the potential to support the ethics of understanding. The characteristics that books that support the ethics of understanding should have been determined and suggestions were presented to the authors of children's literature.*

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## Çocuk Edebiyatı ve Anlayış Etiği?

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### ÖZET

Anlayış etiği, bireyin doğal merak güdüsünden güç alarak yaşamı ve insanı değerli kılan anlamları arayıp bulmasına, bulduğu cevapların gerektirdiği etik sorumluluğu almasına ve bu aşamalarda hiçbir çıkar gözetmemesine dayanan değerler bütünüdür. Bu değerler bütünüün erken çocukluk döneminden başlayarak desteklenmesi, çocuğun duyuşsal, toplumsal ve moral bakımdan gelişmesine önemli katkılar sunar. Özellikle çocuk edebiyatının taşıması gereken temel ilkelere uyan nitelikli metinlerin çocukta anlayış etiğinin gelişmesini olumlu yönde etkileyeceği açıktır. Bu çalışmanın amacı çocuk edebiyatı ile anlayış etiği arasındaki ilişkiyi açıklamak ve çocuk kitaplarının anlayış etiği açısından taşıması gereken nitelikleri alanyazın görüşleri doğrultusunda açıklamaktır. Nitel araştırma yönteminin kullanıldığı çalışmanın veri kaynağı okulöncesi döneme seslenen beş çocuk kitabıdır. Veriler doküman inceleme yöntemiyle toplanmış ve betimsel çözümleme yöntemiyle çözümlenmiştir. Çalışmanın sonunda nitelikli çocuk kitaplarının anlayış etiğini destekleyecek bir potansiyele sahip olduğu görülmüştür. Anlayış etiğini destekleyecek kitapların taşıması gereken özellikler belirlenerek çocuk edebiyatı yazarlarına öneriler sunulmuştur.

## **1. Introduction**

In today's world, changing technology has increased the possibilities of interpersonal, international and intercultural communication. Web technologies, cloud computing and augmented reality have played an important role in this progress and diversified communication channels. Despite these developments, there has not been the expected improvement in human understanding of human beings; on the contrary, incomprehension has continued to be widespread. In this regard, Morin (1999: 49) states: Of course, we have witnessed tremendous progress in understanding each other. But incomprehension seems to progress even faster. As a matter of fact, no communication technique has the power to realize human understanding by itself. Only when these techniques meet with a qualified education and when interpersonal understanding is at the center of this education, the ethical solidarity of humanity will be able to show the desired development.

Despite the increasing diversity of communication, paradoxically, the decline in empathic skills, altruistic behavior and ethical questioning in today's individualized world demonstrates that there is indeed a problem of understanding. Indeed, increasing social distance, both on an individual and societal scale, deepens the gulf of incomprehension between conflict sides, whether distant or close. Violence, jealousy and fear, incompatible with a culture of human rights and democracy, prevail on our planet. It is therefore crucial to remember and develop the possibilities to reverse this situation. This value is becoming increasingly important in educational processes. The ethic of understanding is closely related to the concepts of empathy, sensitivity and assertiveness in general. Books that do not have literary qualities are problematic in terms of ethics of understanding. Gürdal-Ünal (2015) gives the following example: In Hüseyin Ergül's story *Sakat Çocuk* (Crippled Child), there is a child on crutches who is saved from the beatings of bullies in the schoolyard. This boy leaves the schoolyard on crutches without saying anything. We know nothing about this character except that his name is İhsan. The narrator asks "What does this boy feel when he hits? Is he sick, sadistic, enjoying it? Let's say this one is like that. What about the others? Why don't they stop him? Why don't they react to injustice, to the powerlessness of a beaten child?"

This situation can be explained by open/developed character and closed/undeveloped character in children's literature. The open/developed character is a deep and multidimensional character who is introduced with many features, whereas the closed/undeveloped character is a shallow and one-dimensional type who is introduced superficially. In this regard, Sever (2012: 105) states that the author can make use of closed/undeveloped characters in order to draw attention to the protagonist with whom the child will identify and explains as follows:

For example, a selfish and lazy antagonist can be used to emphasize the sharing and hardworking characteristic of the protagonist. The main purpose here is to give children the opportunity to compare the developed and undeveloped person. This view is problematic in terms of the ethics of understanding because in the example given, it is not explained why the undeveloped person is selfish and does not like to work. A child confronted with this example will not know the underlying reasons for selfishness and laziness. However, the ethics of understanding should illuminate the shadowy areas such as this example. As it is, it cannot explain the questions “Why should I be sharing? Should I be hardworking?”. To summarize, if children’s literature wants to develop children intellectually, it must have the transparency required by the ethics of understanding.

Another controversial issue in the literature is whether the cast of characters in books written for children should be familiar or not. Aytekin (2016: 52) argues that the people in children's books should not be chosen from among people the child does not know or recognize. In other words, he argues that these people should be familiar. When this claim is viewed from the perspective of identification, this choice may be appropriate because it may be easier for the child to identify with people, he/she knows than with people he/she does not know. However, from the perspective of the ethics of understanding, the situation is the opposite. Because the child who encounters only the people, he/she knows in the books he/she reads will never meet the other. In this case, the child will never understand people other than those presented to him/her by society. Moreover, he/she will not even be aware of the existence of people other than these. In short, the people in children's books should be distributed in a balanced way, just like in real life, in terms of whether they are familiar or not. A fiction in which the child can recognize and understand different people should be created.

The man’s search for meaning is the basic motivation of life. This meaning is unique and special to the individual; therefore, it can only be fulfilled by oneself. Thus, the person can satisfy his or her own desire for meaning (Frankl, 2021: 105). For this reason, there should be a content that supports the child's search for meaning. Children's books should not be authoritarian and should leave the responsibility of feeling and thinking to the reader. Frankl (2021: 11) says the following on this subject: To live is to suffer, and to survive means to find meaning in suffering. If life has meaning, suffering and death have meaning, but no one tells anyone else what that meaning is. Everyone has to find this meaning for themselves and accept the responsibility that this answer entails. The person who manages to do this continues to grow in spite of all humiliating situations.

### **1.1. Two Types of Understanding**

Educational processes enable the transfer of knowledge and the realization of learning through communication, but if knowledge is not well communicated or understood, the stage of human intersubjective understanding is not reached. In other words, the act of understanding does not go beyond the act of knowing at the mental level, and as such, it only provides the precondition. The ultimate goal should be human understanding, which involves the subject-to-subject knowledge. For this reason, educational processes should be structured to support human understanding in all areas from goals to content, from educational situations to evaluation processes. Although all subject courses have a responsibility in supporting human understanding, language and literature courses have the greatest responsibility. This is because communication skills and literary forms of communication are at the center of language and literature courses.

Language and literature courses are framed by Turkish Language in primary education and Turkish Language and Literature in secondary education. The curriculum of these courses is also important in terms of defining the prerequisite for the ethics of understanding. For example, the Turkish Language Teaching Program (MEB, 2019) aims to develop students' listening/watching, speaking, reading and writing skills and to create a love and habit of reading and writing in them. Similarly, the Turkish Language and Literature Curriculum (MEB, 2018) supports students to use listening, reading, writing and speaking strategies correctly and appropriately. In short, language and literature courses form the basis for the ethics of understanding in terms of curricula.

The tools used in language and literature teaching are crucial in achieving the aforementioned goals. The most important tool of language and literature education is quality literary texts. Although the texts used in these courses vary, literary texts will make the greatest contribution to the ethics of understanding. Literary texts are fictional texts written in a genre such as poetry, short stories, novels, etc. and have the potential to develop the reader's feeling/thinking skills. As Sever (2012) states, Literature offers us a life constructed with an artist's sensibility. It adds new meanings to our lives and enriches our experiences. It makes us partners in the experiences of others.

Reading is an action that does not separate us from other people, on the contrary, it brings us into much deeper relationships with people. It can reveal a deeper understanding that we can never achieve in daily life (Güven, 2020: 20). Literary quality children's books present a wide variety of life situations to their readers. Even a single children's book shows how different other people are in terms of their mental characteristics, social status and

character traits. As Göktürk (2010: 22) states, the author modifies the natural language in order to convey the human condition he wants to express.

The feature that makes life meaningful in children's literature is the aesthetic relationship. According to Erinc (2011: 25), aesthetic relationship is the experience of creating and developing certain designs through objective beings; but at the basis of these designs lies aesthetic appreciation, or in other words, beauty. Accordingly, for a children's book to be admirable in terms of its internal and external structure, it must be beautifully constructed.

The child who participates in this relationship as a reader becomes a part of the aesthetic relationship and the book creates aesthetic experiences in him/her. Fictional reality in children's books can enable children to gain experiences that make life meaningful, to identify with fictional characters, and to understand themselves and others by developing empathy skills. In short, with quality books, children both become a part of this aesthetic world and take an active role in the process of understanding. On the other hand, poor quality books do not contribute to children's understanding skills, nor do they contribute to their aesthetic development. These books are designed only to give advice, convey a message and condition the reader; they have a dull, boring, unbelievable and uncreative narrative.

## **1.2. Teaching Obstacles to Understanding**

As Morin (1999: 50) points out, the exterior obstacles to comprehension are numerous. Understanding the meaning of the another's words, his ideas, his world view, is always, everywhere, endangered by a variety of factors. These factors can be classified as *noise, polysemy, cultural blindness, egocentrism, ethno-sociocentrism* and *reductive mind*.

*Noise* is defined as any phenomenon that disturbs the transmission of a message, in communication theory, (TÜBA, 2013). Accordingly, anything that causes communication disruption due to various reasons such as incorrect coding and incorrect decoding of the message can be called noise. In this regard, Elgünler and Fener (2011: 36) stated that noise elements such as prejudiced attitudes, stereotyped beliefs, value judgments, and differences of opinion prevent communication.

*Noise* in children's literature may originate from the author, the publishing house or the reader himself/herself. People and institutions with different responsibilities in this regard should make critical evaluations. For example, it should be questioned whether children's books are free of political, ideological and religious indoctrination (Aslan, 2014: 52), depict cultural groups without exaggeration or romanticization (Russell, 2009:

86), and present a complete profile of the cultures, contributions and experiences of ethnic groups (Gay, 2014: 156). It should also be analyzed whether stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination are present and whether they are affirmed in literary fiction (Uslu, 2019).

*Polysemy* is when a word, phrase or sentence has more than one meaning (TÜBA, 2013: 529). In his work *Fatal Identities*, Maalouf (2018: 15) writes: "My life as a writer has taught me to avoid words. The ones that seem the most obvious are often the most dangerous." This statement is used for all ideologically problematic and fundamentally irreconcilable words. Özüdoğru (2016: 144-145) gives examples of polysemous words such as democracy, freedom and justice and defines them as words that are fundamentally ideologically irreconcilable. For example, the word tolerance, which is generally attributed positive values, can conceptually mean understanding/respecting the thoughts and behaviors of others, but on the contrary, it can also mean inequality, hierarchy, asymmetry. For this reason, it is important to recognize the tolerant and tolerated sides in children's books. Otherwise, even the best intentions can lead to the reinforcement of negative messages, the reproduction of social inequalities and the legitimization of discrimination. Especially in the early years of school, when, as Sever (2012: 43) puts it, many new words are being added to children's vocabulary, the polysemy of each word in children's books should be carefully analyzed.

*Cultural blindness* means seeing one's own cultural characteristics as a normative value and being closed to other cultures. According to Morin (1999: 50), ignorance of the rites and customs of others, namely rites of courtesy, may lead to unknowingly insulting the other or disgracing oneself. For this reason, children's books should include not only national culture, but also international culture and social contact should be improved. At this point, translated children's books also play an important role. It is important that more translated children's books meet children's readers and that the translations are sensitive to cultural values. In this way, children will have the opportunity to look from the perspective of other cultures and understand themselves better. In this regard, Russell (2009: 93) states that our biases generally stem from ignorance and books can be a bridge to a greater human understanding.

*Egocentrism* means being insensitive to the needs and interests of others, being concerned only with one's own interests and considering one's own values as valid for everyone (TÜBA, 2013). Egocentrism takes different forms at each stage of cognitive development. For example, egocentrism in the preschool period means seeing things from someone else's point of view and being incapable of recognizing the feelings/needs of others (Gander &

Gardiner, 2010: 259). However, over time, children begin to realize how others think or feel. It is precisely at this stage that quality children's books are needed to support the expected developmental task.

*Ethno-sociocentrism* is one of the biggest obstacles to understanding. In this regard, Morin (1999: 51) states, these centrism's feed xenophobia and racism, sometimes to the point of treating foreigners as if they weren't human beings. The fight against all for racism would be more effective if it were aimed at the ego-sociocentric roots, not the superficial symptoms. For this reason, children's books that center on their own cultural group should be questioned. Because societies aim to transfer their language and cultural codes to children, whom they see as the guarantee of their existence, through children's literature. For this reason, every society wants to give children's literature a content according to the type of child it wants to create; it wants to make directions for this purpose (Çağan, 2006: 41).

*Reductive mind* is the explanation of a complex phenomenon in terms of a more basic and simpler conceptual scheme. Reducing a complex knowledge has very negative consequences, both ethically and physically. According to Morin (1999: 52), it is this reductive, simplifying, dominant mode of thought, combined with mechanisms of incomprehension that reduces the naturally multiple personality to one of its features. Children's literature should be free from all kinds of reductive, simplifying and narrowing approaches. For example, characters in children's books should be portrayed as individuals with genuine feelings, thoughts and beliefs, and not as types representing a specific group (Russell, 2009: 86).

### **1.3. Ethics of Understanding**

Morin (1999: 52) states that the ethics of understanding is a refinement that begins with disinterested understanding. This demand great effort, because there can be no hope of reciprocity: the person threatened with death by a fanatic understands why the fanatic wants to kill him and knows that the fanatic will never understand him. Understanding that the fanatic cannot understand us means understanding the roots, forms, and manifestations of fanaticism. It is understanding why and how a person feels hatred or contempt.

Since the situation that the ethics of understanding seeks to understand is incomprehension, it is necessary to closely recognize the unethical attitudes and behaviors that constitute incomprehension. These attitudes and behaviors include moral exclusion, dehumanization, abuse, creating social hierarchy, devaluing the victim, stigmatizing, marginalizing, lynching, using political labels, exorcism, delegitimizing the system and establishing social dominance. In addition, ideologies such as essentialism, sexism, ageism, racism, ethnocentrism,

sociocentrism also have unethical characteristics. The common aspect of all these attitudes and behaviors is that they constitute an obstacle to the ethics of understanding. Ethics of understanding requires the rational use of one's skills; thus, there is a need to develop cognitive and affective skills such as ethical reasoning, empathy, valuing diversity, and loving/being loved.

*Ethical justification* is a way of reaching valid and reliable knowledge, and reality can only be known through a rational reasoning. In children's literature, opinions and assumptions without any rational basis should not be affirmed; on the contrary, they should be problematized and criticized. However, for a real ethics of understanding, one should think about why and how people with unjustified/ungrounded opinions and assumptions reach these assumptions. In addition, for ethical justification in children's literature, books should be questioned in terms of randomness. As Sever (2012: 138) states, if the child reader is confronted with an unacceptable result that is disconnected from the emotion and thought preparation, he/she made during the act of reading, the problem of reliability between the author-book-child begins to occur.

*Empathy* is the ability to put oneself in the other's shoes through a temporary and voluntary identification and to understand their feelings, thoughts and behaviors (TÜBA, 2013: 427). Empathy skill in children is realized through modelling the protagonist. According to Sever (2013: 64), modeling is an important factor that nourishes children's learning and development. Children develop their own behavior examples by modelling the others around them.

*Valuing diversity* is an opportunity to recognize different cultural characteristics through children's literature. Books featuring characters from different cultural backgrounds help young readers to internalize multiculturalism. First reading experiences allow children to feel the emotions of diverse people. As Russell (2009) points out, one of the great benefits of children's literature is that it can broaden young minds and show children the essential humanity in all people, regardless of their color, religious beliefs, languages and traditions and show children the fundamental humanity in all people regardless of their color, religious beliefs, language, and customs.

Loving/being loved is one of the leading themes in children's literature. Love is the only way to understand a person to the very depths of their personality. No one can comprehend the depths of another person unless they love them. Through love, one gains the ability to understand the important aspects and characteristics of the loved one (Frankl, 2021: 116-117). In this regard, as Morin (1999: 52) states, understanding neither excuses nor accuses. It teaches us to refrain from condemning hastily, irremediably, as if we ourselves had never erred. If we

learn to understand before condemning, we will be on the way to humanizing human relations. On the other hand, there are some methods that facilitate understanding: *thorough thinking* and *introspection*.

*Thorough thinking* is a way of thinking that can grasp text and context, individual and environment, local and global, the multidimensional, in a word, the complex: the conditions of human behavior. And this thorough thinking helps us understand the objective and subjective conditions of behavior (Morin, 1999: 53). Thinking, which is the independent and unique action of the mind, is the ability to grasp connections and forms, to make comparisons, to separate and combine (Başarer, 2021: 1). Thorough thinking gives the opportunity to understand all aspects of the conditions that constitute a behavior. An individual who has developed good thinking skills is more successful in controlling their attitudes and behaviors. Because thinking is a mental behavior used to understand facts, events and people (Başarer, 2021: 2). The main function of children's literature is that it contributes to children's conceptual development process and their ability to understand and explain; it operates cognitive processes such as labeling and associating new concepts learned (Sever, 2013: 32).

*Introspection* is the observation and examination of one's own feelings, thoughts, cognitive processes, perceptions, memories and motives (TÜBA, 2013). The mental practice of continuous self-examination is necessary because when we understand our own weaknesses and failings, we can understand the weaknesses and failings of others (Morin, 1999: 53). In children's books, the introspective method is seen especially in the conflict with oneself: Through internal conflict, a character's indecisions and confusions are embodied.

Understanding others demands *awareness of human complexity* (Morin, 1999: 53). Children's books offer various opportunities to understand this complexity. For example, children who break their toys in everyday life may receive similar accusatory reactions from the adults around them on the grounds that they use their belongings rudely and show violence. However, if children's books question why children break their toys in literary fiction, the social and psychological reasons underlying this behavior can be revealed.

#### **1.4. Planetary Understanding, Ethics and Culture**

Planetary understanding, ethics and culture is a global understanding that serves the human species. This understanding means that Oriental and Western cultures can come into contact with each other without losing their core values or becoming identical. For example, in fields such as science, literature, art and philosophy, it is necessary to sincerely seek to know the other culture; to take into account the historical, social and economic

conditions in which that culture exists; and to nurture and be nourished by that culture. In this way, global civilization will be able to realize itself.

Planetary understanding requires first and foremost the existence of a culture of democracy. "The culture of democracy in the sociological context means the way of life in a country governed by democracy. In its intellectual context, the culture of democracy means knowledge, thought, sensitivity, morality and artistic understanding appropriate to the democratic order" (Fuat, 2000: 56). Understanding between societies implies open democratic societies, which means that the path to understanding between cultures, peoples, and nations implies a generalization of open democratic societies (Morin, 1999: 55). In contemporary democracies there is no higher power that distributes or withdraws freedoms. Thought, speech, action and freedoms do not depend on the tolerance of a higher power. Within the framework of laws made in the name of the people, everyone uses their freedoms in the direction they want without anyone tolerating them (Fuat, 2000: 15).

One of the most important characteristics of the person that the culture of democracy wants to raise is to be developed in terms of emotion and thought. Considering that this characteristic is not sufficiently developed in today's people, it is inevitable that the culture of democracy will be replaced by a culture of violence. However, a planetary understanding requires analyzing the underlying causes of violence, such as frustration, anger and the perception of superiority. In other words, it reveals the causes of violence and can foster interpersonal and intercultural understanding. As Sever (2013: 63) states, children's emotional and intellectual health is harmed by violent, ideological and didactic books. Children are surrounded by ideologies that are manipulated, contrary to human nature, aim to destroy human sensitivity, and naturalize aggression and violence (Sever, 2013: 63). Children's books also have important roles and responsibilities in this development. Children's books should fulfill their responsibility for children to carry democratic values and develop democratic culture through the characters and messages they construct.

The culture of democracy requires the existence of individuals with autonomous identities; therefore, children's books also play a role in the development of autonomous identities. As Aslan (2016: 729) states, in order for children's books to contribute to children's autonomy, they should not contain obstacles to thinking skills. Examples of these obstacles include blind obedience to a certain authority, belief or ideology, making inferences based on limited or few evidence, making overgeneralizations and simplifications, making negative evaluations of others, defending prejudice, stereotypes and discrimination, egocentric, dogmatic conditioning, labeling.

### 1.5. Children's Literature and Ethics

The title "ethics in children's literature" encompasses two important concepts. One is an ethical understanding that can be called "children's literature ethics" and whose main purpose is to determine the basic principles and rules of children's literature. In this respect, children's literature ethics is a field ethics just like "bioethics", "medical ethics" and "business ethics". As Tepe (2015: 99) states, "field ethics primarily aims to develop norms related to their field of endeavor and to define them as the ethical codes of the field in question." When it comes to children's literature, the basic characteristics of children's books and the internal/external structure of children's books (Aslan, 2017; Erkmen, 2017) are concrete examples of children's literature ethics. Although the principles and features of children's literature have been frequently on the agenda in the literature in the last decade or so, the discussion of the issue in the context of "children's literature ethics" is largely new. In this regard, Sever (2013: 73) states that works of children's literature should create a common language that comprehends and reflects the sensitivities specific to children, and this common language, which draws its strength from the universal principles of literature, should contribute to the formation of children's literature ethics.

The second important concept is *ethical inquiry in children's literature*, which is an intellectual inquiry activity that takes place through children's books. Ethical questioning in children's literature is multifaceted and requires certain characteristics of the people involved in the questioning process. For example, the experience of the teacher who engages in philosophical inquiry with children's books and the student's ability to receive the children's book are decisive for ethical inquiry in children's literature. For this reason, *thorough thinking* is indispensable for ethical inquiry in children's literature, because thorough thinking is a way of thinking that enables us to perceive the text and its context, existence and its environment, the local and the global, in short, the complex as a whole.

Considering the textual dimension of children's literature, the most important requirement is that children's books have a style that is conducive to philosophical inquiry. The first example that comes to mind in this regard is the so-called philosophy books for children. However, as Erdem (2013: 138) states, although these books give great hope for the development of the field, they have not yet been subject to comprehensive scientific analysis and have problematic aspects in general. Making philosophy the subject of a text is not a sufficient condition for philosophical inquiry. Moreover, the concept of ethical questioning in children's literature is not limited to philosophy books for children. Fictional children's books and textbooks should also be matched in terms of ethical values and suitability for philosophical inquiry.

The concept of *ethical questioning in children's literature* covers a different concept area than children's literature ethics. The concept of ethics in children's literature should be understood as the questioning of ethical issues in the content of literary texts addressed to children. For example, morality, justice, obligation, responsibility, values and values are ethical issues (Tepe, 2015). In addition, questions such as "Why shouldn't I lie?", "Why should I be moral?", "What is good or bad?", "Which of my behaviors am I responsible for?" (Direk, 2006: 6) are also questions with philosophical potential. All children's books that allow philosophical reflection on these and similar issues have a potential for philosophical inquiry.

On the other hand, there are some similarities between *ethics in children's literature* and *ethical inquiry in children's literature*. In other words, both are in search of solutions to problems that are contrary to human rights, inhibit human development and violate the value of human beings. In this context, it should be emphasized that group antagonism, which consists of the components of stereotypes-prejudice-discrimination, is an important ethical problem. This importance stems from the ethical responsibility of children's literature. Therefore, both "ethics of children's literature" and "ethical inquiry in children's literature" should jointly seek solutions to the problem of group antagonism. It should be an integral part of this responsibility that children's literature, both as a field of scientific study and as a literary product, should be able to criticize itself, find and discuss the unethical aspects within it.

The development of children's literature ethics requires the cooperation of authors, illustrators, publishers, teachers, parents and children. This cooperation should aim to produce a children's book in which ethical inquiry can be made and to develop critical and universal literacy skills. For this purpose, the literary fiction of children's literature should be constructed in a way that supports children's skills such as empathy, love, respect, nonviolence, cooperation, conflict resolution and reflection. The messages in children's books should suggest ways to cope with group antagonisms. It should be taken into consideration that books that are fictionalized with the influence of the cultural characteristics of past years, but do not have a literary quality and are far from today's children's reality, may cause emotional damage to children. The character fiction of children's books should also be structured with democratic attitudes and behaviors. The cast of characters should consist of characters of various genders, races, ages, religions, classes and physical appearances, and these characters should be portrayed with their dynamism and diversity. The traditional approach, which affirms static, uniform, normative characters and marginalizes others, should be replaced by a contemporary modern approach. In children's books that can contribute to the development of democratic culture, the protagonist should have certain characteristics:

internalizing democratic culture, complying with the requirements of modern life, being balanced in terms of personality structure are some of them.

If the aim of language and literature teaching is to raise thinking and sensitive individuals, and if this aim is to be realized through children's literature, both language and literature teaching and children's literature are expected to include ethical issues. According to Nikolajeva (2012: 1-4), children's literature has an important potential that enables the questioning of ethical issues. Children who have not yet developed a full cognitive comprehension can take cognitive and affective responsibility and increase their life experiences through literature. In this regard, as Sever (2013: 75) states, "The basic condition for the formation of children's literature ethics is that children's literature can respond to the interests and needs of the child. If children put into practice the rules they are forced to follow or the ideas they are asked to adopt without understanding them sufficiently and without testing their importance in human and social life, they may be distanced from their own reality.

Children's books that do not take into account the ethics of children's literature may cause some emotional damage to the child. For example, as Sever (2013: 81) states, if adults direct children according to their truths, they can turn them into passive people unaware of their rights by distancing them from their own truths. As Aslan (2017: 11) states, if societies cannot raise children with a developed sense of autonomous self, children may make biased, guided, rote and uninformed. Based on these views, it can be argued that it is necessary for authors, illustrators, teachers and researchers to question children's literature books from an ethical perspective. Works of children's literature should create a common language that comprehends and reflects child-specific sensibilities, and this common language, which draws its strength from the universal principles of literature, should contribute to the formation of children's literature ethics (Sever, 2013: 73).

The aim of this study is to explain the relationship between children's literature and the ethics of understanding and to explain the qualities that children's books should have in terms of the ethics of understanding in line with the views of the literature. For this purpose, the following question was analyzed: Are children's books addressed to preschool children capable of developing an ethics of understanding?

## **2. Method**

This study, which aims to analyze children's books in terms of ethics of understanding, is qualitative research. As Miles and Huberman (2016) state, qualitative research looks at a field or social section from a holistic perspective, uses qualitative data collection tools, and performs most of the analysis with words and clusters of words. The

object of the study consists of children's books addressed to the preschool period. The study was formed through "criterion sampling", one of the purposeful sampling methods. The criteria are as follows: (1) to be written in accordance with the age and developmental characteristics of preschool children, (2) to be written in Turkish or translated into Turkish, (3) to be published in 2010s, (4) to be written in story genre, (5) to have a literary quality. Information about the books in the study group is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

*Study group*

	<b>Book Title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Illustrator</b>	<b>Publisher</b>
1.	Farklı ama Aynı	Feridun Oral	Feridun Oral	Yapı Kredi Publishing
2.	Oyuncaklarını Kiran Çocuk	Canan Aslan	Ferit Avcı	Kök Publishing
3.	Pezzettino	Leo Lionni	Leo Lionni	Elma Publishing House
4.	Sophie Poni: Tekboynuz Uzmanı	Morag Hood	Ella Okstad	Pearson Publishing
5.	Nokta	Peter H. Reynolds	Peter H. Reynolds	Altın Publishing

Document analysis was used as a data collection tool in the study. Document analysis examines the materials containing information about the subject of the research. In this study, the written texts of the books in the study group were analyzed. This analysis aimed to conceptualize and theorize the ethics of understanding in children's books. Descriptive analysis method was used in the presentation of qualitative data. As noted by Coşkun (2019: 178), descriptive analysis used in qualitative research method involves summarizing and interpreting the data according to the themes revealed by the research questions. Ethics committee approval was not required as this was not a human study.

### 3. Result

#### 3.1. Results for The Book "Farklı ama Aynı"

Oral (2015) tells the story of a newborn goat with disabilities in his book. At the beginning of the story, he says *This was a very cute kid with black ears. But she was born a little different from the other babies in the herd. The shepherd immediately noticed the weakness in his legs.* At first the goat has difficulty keeping up with the herd and the shepherd carries it in his saddlebag. As the goat grows older, it becomes difficult to carry it in the saddlebag, so the shepherd builds a wheeled carriage for it. So, the goat can roam freely in the fields. One day she also has two kids. One is black and one is white. They are different from their mother but the same.

In this story, the phenomenon of disability is not dealt with in a reductive manner. There are no stereotypes, prejudices and discriminatory behaviors against the disabled from a sociocentric perspective. There is no

exaggeration or romanticization in emotions. On the contrary, the goat's emotions, dreams and what it likes to do are described in detail. The feelings and thoughts of the shepherd are also clear. His empathy with the goat, carrying it in his saddlebag, making a wheeled cart for it and rejoicing when he sees it running in the fields are altruistic behaviors. The relationship between the goat and the shepherd is based on understanding. A child reading this book knows why the goat and the shepherd think and behave the way they do. This is because people are in the foreground with their character traits, not their typical characteristics. In short, this book is designed to support the ethics of understanding.

### 3.2. Results for The Book “Oyuncaklarını Kıran Çocuk”

Aslan (2011) tells the story of a boy who breaks his toys. Taylan, the protagonist of this story, breaks and destroys his toys and even tears them to pieces. Taylan's toys couldn't stand it and one day they decided to talk to him. In reality, Taylan was taking the toys apart because he was curious about how they worked. In this story, why the protagonist broke his toys, how he felt when they were broken into pieces, whether he felt regret, and what he thought about his broken toys were explored in detail. He is not blamed, judged or punished for breaking his toys. He was not advised to break his toys again and was not threatened or intimidated.

The fact that the broken toys in the story communicate with the protagonist, ask him why he broke his toys, and listen attentively to the answer shows that there is open communication. This open communication is important for understanding the others' feelings, thoughts and behaviors along with their reasons. A child who reads the story can have empathy with the protagonist and the toys. It can be seen that a behavior that is seen as an act of violence at first glance is actually caused by the child's sense of curiosity. Of course, the book does not advise the child on violence, but it provides an opportunity for the child to question the situations that constitute the act of violence.

### 3.3. Results for The Book “Pezzettino”

Lionni (2012) tells the story of Pezzettino, who thinks he is a small part of a whole and searches for the whole. . At the beginning of the story, he says *His name was Pezzettino. All the others were big and did daring and wonderful things. He was small and surely must be a little piece of somebody else, he thought. He often wondered whose little piece he could be, and one day he decided to find out.* In the story, Pezzettino asks different people who he is part of, but gets no answer. The answer comes when he goes on a long journey and has an individual experience: “I am myself!” he shouted full of joy. His friends didn't quite understand what he meant, but Pezzettino seemed happy, and so they were happy too.

All the characters in this story are different and unique. The other characters are not indifferent to Pezzettino, on the contrary, they share his adventure. Differences and diversity are valued. There is an effort to understand life, but the answers to questions about life are not given by an authority. Pezzettino searched and found it himself. In terms of the ethics of understanding, the introspective method is used. A child who reads this story may be willing to respect differences, get to understand them closely, recognize the reasons for their behavior, and move away from egocentrism.

### **3.4. Results for The Book “Sophie Poni: Tekboynuz Uzmani”**

Hood (2018) tells the story of what a unicorn expert girl does in one day: *I have so many unicorns at home ... If I remember correctly, I have 17 unicorns. Taking care of so many unicorns, taking care of each and every one of them, is no easy task. Lucky, I am a unicorn expert.* In this story, the protagonist Sophie thinks about the needs and interests of her unicorns, feeds them, protects them, entertains them. She teaches them lessons and reads book. These are altruistic acts and Sophie does them every day without expecting anything in return. The story is humorous and ironic. Therefore, egocentric thoughts and behaviors are criticized in an enjoyable way.

In this story there are unicorns of different shapes, colors and types, showing that diversity is valued. A child who reads this story understands that there can be differences in feelings, thoughts and behaviors and that these should be tolerated. He/she can also easily interpret the reasons behind the protagonist's behavior and thoughts. He/she can put himself/herself in the protagonist's shoes and identify with him/her.

### **3.5. Results for The Book “Nokta”**

Reynolds (2014) tells the story of an unhappy child who has never been able to draw in art class and discovers his own talents. The art teacher asks Vashti to make at least one dot. The following week a picture in a decorated frame hangs on the wall in the classroom: Vashti's dot! From that day on, Vashti keeps making different dots. A few weeks later, Vashti's drawings are displayed at the school exhibition. In this story there is a protagonist who analyzes his own feelings and abilities through introspection. He realizes his inadequacies, works to unlock his hidden potential, overcomes difficulties and finally encourages another friend.

In the story, the art teacher's recognition of Vashti's unhappiness is important for the ethics of understanding because it is an empathic act. She recognizes Vashti's nervousness and makes a joke to soften her. This corresponds to the degree of intersubjective human understanding. A child reading this story might identify with Vashti and reflect on her own inadequacies. If he/she is hesitant to reveal his/her hidden strengths, he/she can focus on the

reasons for this. He or she can also encourage others around him or her to look inside themselves and avoid egocentrism.

The children's books analyzed in this study have some similarities and differences. The most important similarity is that subject-to-subject knowledge, which forms the basis of the ethics of understanding, is supported through fictionalized characters. In other words, the protagonists in the stories are of a quality that child readers can identify with. This supports children to develop empathic skills. Another similarity is the disapproval of reductive ideas such as egocentrism and ethno-socio-centrism. In this way, the child reader can internalize tolerance and develop an ethic of planetary understanding. The last similarity is the opposition to reductive ways of thinking. In other words, these books are appropriate tools for exploring the complexity of human beings. On the other hand, these books differ from each other in terms of the themes they address. These books focus on sensitivity towards people with disabilities (Oral, 2015), abilities and competencies (Reynolds, 2014), belonging and autonomy (Lionni, 2012), responsibilities (Hood, 2018) and personal interest (Aslan, 2011).

#### **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

Children's literature plays an important role in the cognitive and affective development of children. One of these roles is to contribute to the ethics of understanding in children. A children's book that responds to the child's age and developmental characteristics, interests and desires enables the child to understand himself/herself and his/her environment without judgment. It enables them to get rid of egocentric thinking and think empathetically, to identify with people and to understand the reasons underlying their thoughts and behaviors. The findings obtained in the study are parallel to the views in the literature. As Aslan (2017) states, contemporary children's literature should include sensitive issues and address these issues from an ethical perspective. Similarly, Erdem (2013: 24) considers it important to provide thinking education based on works of literature that children can read. Sever (2012: 23) also stated that in children's books, the author supports the child to think and understand by giving some fictional clues.

Developing an ethic of understanding through children's literature is a key concept in lifelong learning. Because reading activities carried out independently of time and space can contribute to the individual's understanding of all kinds of marginalizing behaviors and to recognize social problems and produce solutions. The individual's ability to continue his/her life in harmony with the society depends primarily on the acquisition of empathic skills

and the maintenance of these skills throughout life. Thus, reading culture is the basic condition for lifelong learning.

The following suggestions can be offered for children's books that support the ethics of understanding. Characters in children's books should not only include the usual characters, but on the contrary, they should value diversity by including differences in gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, age, physical appearance, disability, etc. Children's books should not have an authoritarian approach. Children should reach conclusions by making their own logical inferences. Children's books should not blindly follow an ideology or make inferences based on limited or few evidence.

### **Ethical Declaration**

In this study, all scientific ethical rules were followed.

### **Conflict Interest and Author Contributions**

All stages of study were organized and conducted by Author. There is no conflict to interest.

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