A Journey to the North Cave and Other Stories:
Creating Children's Picture Books Portraying Bullying towards Children and its Coping Mechanisms to Handle it

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents five children's picture book stories designed for children aged six to eight to discuss the bullying issue in children, particularly highlighting how the act of bullying happens to children as well as how they deal with the issue. Dorte Marie Søndergaard's Process of Bullying in Children and Lazarus and Folkman's Problem-Focused Coping are used as the theoretical framework. From the first to the fifth story, the main characters–Kim, Ruby, Fillo, Lora, Roo–have either different appearances or behaviors that elicit the bullies to point out their differences and bring them into their conversation which later turns into more serious bullying, such as blatant verbal or physical bullying. To successfully overcome this problem, each of the main characters will use one of a few coping mechanisms which are divided into confrontative coping, planful-problem solving, and social-seeking support.

Keywords: bullying, children picture-books, confrontative, planful-problem solving, problem-focused coping, social-seeking support

INTRODUCTION

Living side by side with other people within society may lead to positive peer relationships most of the time. However, coexisting does not always end up on good terms and fulfill their expectations. Despite the nature of human beings wanting to be accepted, some people may experience the opposite. One of the common things that often happen in society is bullying which is always associated with negative outcomes. Bullying does not have a common operational definition. However, a widespread agreement exists (Farrington, 1993) that bullying involves a number of essential components, such as physical, verbal, or psychological assault or intimidation that has the intention to instill fear, distress, or harm in the victim; a power imbalance between the perpetrators and the victims where the powerful children oppress the weaker ones; an absence of provocation by the victim; and repeated actions between the same children over a long period of time. It is possible for bullying to happen in children. The period starting from middle childhood to early adolescence is vital to examine selection and influence in bullying behaviors because children put a high value on forming relationships with their friends throughout this time (Poulin & Chan, 2010).

Bullying can produce poor results for both the victims and the perpetrators. According to Farrington (1993), bullying generates immediate harm and distress as well as negatively affects the victims' mental health in the long term. Researchers show that there is a connection between peer victimization to loneliness, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, social problems, and school maladjustment that the victims experience (Juvonen & Graham, 2001). Meanwhile, for the bullies, they are more likely to participate in other violent behaviors (Farrington, 1993). In addition, adolescent bullies are inclined to grow up to be bullies, who then tend to have children who are bullies (Farrington, 1993). Therefore, bullying can bring damage to both the perpetrators and the victims.

There is some data about bullying that happens in both Indonesia and the global area. According to the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI), they have received a total of 480 reports from children who were bullying victims and 437 reports from children who were the perpetrators of bullying throughout 2016-2020 (Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia, 2021). Meanwhile, data from Comparitech in 2018-2022 conducting a survey in both the United States and other 27 countries involving more than 1,000 parents of children above 5 years old showed that 47.7% of parents of 6- to 10-year-old children stated their children were bullied at school and online (Cook, 2022). The data also indicate that bullying in children is still common within society and adults should be aware of it.

In order to discuss bullying among children, I propose children's picture book stories using fantasy and adventure genres as an effective form that can deliver the message. A picture book is explained by experts as a selected book by an adult to be read with children together (Kotaman & Balci, 2016) and a book containing more pictures and less text (Garcia-Nevarez et al., 2013). Moreover, to support the effectiveness of the children's picture book, I choose both fantasy and adventure genres. Fantasy is characterized by the readers based on the way they think and the events they encounter that depend on their real life, dreams, or fright as it "raises the images of witches, fairies, dark woods, magic wands, spells, time travel, ghost, and dragon" (Gates et al, 2003, p.1). Children tend to transmit educational content and learn if fantastical elements take part in the stories (Weisberg, 2016). On the other hand, an adventure story contains an individual hero or a group of heroes who try to overcome or deal with challenges and risks while carrying out a significant and moral task, as well as endure the most terrifying threats in order to succeed or achieve some triumph (Cawelti, 1976). A study involving 348 primary school students also states that adventure, science fiction, humor, detective, and emotional books are what students mostly read (Gökce, 2012, as cited in Bayraktar, 2021). This shows that the adventure genre is very favorable among children.

These children's picture books are to find out how the act of bullying happens to children and how they successfully overcome the bullying behavior. Therefore, there are two theories used in this creative work. The first theory discusses the process of bullying in children. According to Søndergaard (2012), bullying in children is a long process consisting of three steps that starts with the necessity of belonging. It is related to children's characteristics where they are able to read or observe one another's behaviors, interests, and artifacts in a fraction of a second. Children evaluate one another in various ways. They talk about other children, project the representation or stereotype of what they see in media to their peers, or talk about online profiles on social networking sites to which they belong. Søndergaard (2012) states that the belonging process starts to happen as a result of their observations. They determine which is appropriate and which is not through petty debating, mutual appraisal, and appraisal of others. Children use positioning tools within the social-emotional landscape where children can control or influence people or situations in certain ways, in this case, do the inclusion and exclusion that can evoke hope and fear. The second step is social exclusion anxiety. Søndergaard believes that naturally, people indeed want or have the desire to have relations and be accepted by their surroundings (Søndergaard, 2005). Social exclusion anxiety highlights the anxiety that arises when the social embeddedness and the hope, longing, and desire to be a part of a community are jeopardized, threatened, and endangered. In this case, the victims will experience social exclusion anxiety as they start to notice being excluded and talked about by a group of people while on the other hand, the perpetrators will experience a sense of worthiness as they belong to a community. Moving to the last step namely production of contempt, the worse the victims experience bullying, the more satisfied the perpetrators feel. This shows a significant power imbalance where they try to maintain their positions through bullying. The perpetrators can also influence others to bully the victims. On the other hand, the victims experience social panic where they feel more conscious of their existence and question it. They start to think and

impulsively determine why they are bullied. They are doing self-assessment and acting accordingly to be accepted.

In my creative work, the necessity of belonging step starts when the bullying perpetrators in the stories talk about the main characters while occasionally watching them. The main characters–Kim, Ruby, Fillo, Lora, and Roo–still have not realized they are being talked behind. Then, moving to the social exclusion anxiety step, since the perpetrators feel acknowledged by one another for sharing the same negative views toward the main characters, they ambiguously make fun of them. Kim, Ruby, Fillo, Lora, and Roo feel anxious and their helplessness can be seen from their body gestures. On the last step called the production of contempt, the perpetrators feel even more powerful after witnessing the protagonists' pathetic response. They do either verbal, physical, or psychological bullying toward them and manage to influence other people to bully them.

The second theory talks about the coping mechanisms to handle bullying. According to Lazarus & Folkman (1984), there are two kinds of coping strategies which consist of problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Sesar et al. (2011, as cited in Sesae et al., 2016) claim that compared to older children, younger children are more likely to use problem-focused strategies and try to search for social support in dealing with bullying. Therefore, I will use problem-focused coping. Lazarus & Folkman (1984) state that problem-focused coping has three different strategies which are planful problem-solving, confrontative coping, and seeking social support. Planful problem-solving is used when an individual makes a certain effort to change the situation. This strategy is accompanied by an analytical approach in overcoming the problem. When school-age children have to deal with either external or internal stressors, they tend to use their own self-regulatory strategy (Saarni, 1999). According to Davies & Troy (2020), the self-regulatory strategy involves emotional control, goal-oriented, and focus-remained abilities. Then, confrontative coping happens when an individual aggressively tries to change the situation that he or she considers as dangerous or pressuring, including taking a risk. According to Perry et al. (1992), children might struggle to control their emotions during interpersonal disagreements which causes them to overreact and display improperly controlled rage, emotional pain, and frustration. Last but not least, seeking social support occurs when an individual tries to find encouragement or support from third parties. It can be in the form of information, advice, real help, or emotional support. The strategies that are used by children can depend on some factors. Internal factors can consist of self-esteem, physical strength, intelligence, and personality. Meanwhile, external resources can consist of the quality and the number of friends and institutes (Juvonen & Graham, 2001, p. 338). This also should take into consideration the social context and the type of bullying behaviors that the victims have to deal with (Olweus, 1993).

This theory is applied in Kim, Ruby, Fillo, Lora, and Roo's stories when they overcome bullying behavior. Kim musters a lot of courage and confronts them by saying that the perpetrators are bad people because they hurt her feelings and make fun of her. Ruby and Roo use planful-problem solving where Ruby takes time whether he wants to save the perpetrators from the trap they are in or not, and Roo shows his perfect plan to defeat an ogre monster. Meanwhile, Fillo and Lora use a seeking social support strategy where Fillo holds the magical scarf given by his best friend Ozzy the owl, and encourages himself that he can go through such a difficult situation, the scarf glows and punishes the perpetrators. For Lora, she asks for help from a dragon who then helps her fly with her broom and gives her wand more magical power that can punish the perpetrators.

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CONCEPT OF THE CREATIVE WORK

Theme

The theme in my creative work is that children are capable of dealing with bullying when they experience being bullied or oppressed either verbally, physically, or psychologically by their surroundings for being different. In order to portray this theme, the five main characters display either different appearances or behaviors from their surroundings and are bullied for it. When these differences result in some peers later mocking, hitting, shoving, or manipulating them, they then take some actions to overcome the bullying. Each of them is using one of a few coping mechanisms namely planful-problem solving, confrontative coping, and seeking social support.

Plot

Here are the summaries for all five children's picture book stories:

A Journey to the North Cave

Kim is a sailor promised by her late grandfather to find a treasure in the North Cave at Mystic Desert Island as her birthday present. He leaves her with a map, a necklace, and a letter. In the letter, he says that only the bravest of his descendants can access the treasure. After that, Kim embarks on her journey to Mystic Desert Island with her boat. When Kim arrives there, people are dancing and singing as a ritual to make the rain come. Kim decides to imitate them since she believes that by following their dancing and singing, they will tell her where the treasure is. However, despite her attempts, some children are not pleased. They bully her and influence other people to mock her. The bullies ask her what she is looking for in the North Cave, and Kim answers a treasure. Then, the bullies take Kim to the place. However, the bullies accuse her of lying since there is no treasure there. Kim stands up for herself and suddenly, her necklace shines and the treasure glows as well. Within the treasure, there are gold and magical gems. Kim prays on the gold and gems and later, the rain comes. In the end, the bullies apologize to Kim.

Let's Escape the Labyrinth!

When Ruby the rabbit is in a queue with Bernie the bear, Kate the cat, and Piggle the pig at a carnival, they suddenly get sucked into a black hole where a labyrinth exists. They look for a way out but do not find any. When they start to get hungry, they see a board and a big table serving french fries, hot dogs, sausages, pizza, and hamburgers. Bernie, Kate, and Piggle gobble the food right away. When Ruby warns them that there is a small sentence telling them not to be greedy, the three of them ignore him. Ruby only eats a little, and he is bullied by Kate and Piggle who think that Ruby is stupid since he does not eat a lot of delicious food. Later, Kate and Piggle influence Bernie to verbally and physically bully him. Suddenly, the labyrinth changes and asks them whether they are being greedy. Everyone lies except Ruby. The labyrinth gives him the key to escape. When the labyrinth asks whether he wants to save his friends, he considers the question. This makes his friends feel anxious. They apologize to him for their wrongdoings. Ruby decides to forgive them and help them get out of the place.

Fillo and His Long, Long Hair

One day, Fillo the dog receives a party invitation from his best friend, Ozzy the owl, that his dog friend, Poppy, has a new sister. However, before Fillo embarks on his journey, Ozzy gives him a scarf that he can use if something bad happens. Thus, Fillo brings that and flies with his air balloon to attend the party held in a castle. When he arrives at the place, he thinks that the dog guests are all gorgeous. However, there are two dogs namely Max and Gracie who judge Fillo for his long hair. They say sarcasm to Fillo. Max and Gracie also influence other dogs to bully Fillo. They manipulate Fillo by deceiving him that they will help make his appearance

better, while in reality, they take him into an empty closet, physically bully him, and leave him there alone. Remembering Ozzy's message, Fillo holds his scarf and encourages himself. Then, the scarf glows. Fillo runs toward the bullies and throws the scarf. The scarf turns longer and ties up the bullies. The bullies apologize for their mistakes. Finally, the knot unties itself and they become friends.

Lora's Great Dreams and Nightmares
Lora is a little girl who has a dream to become the best witch. She is born and raised by the Queen and the King of Witch and Wizard who own dragon pets. To pursue her dream, Lora embarks on her journey to a place called The Little Witch Palace. Lora can do all of them except flying. Thus, she practices how to fly but her weird flying triggers her friends, Iona and Draven to judge and mock her, especially knowing the fact that Lora comes from the most honorable witch family. Iona and Draven even influence others to bully her. They manipulate her by telling her they know a good place for her to practice. However, on their way to the said place, they keep nudging Lora's broom until she falls near a cave and leave her there alone. Lora meets a dragon who then helps her how to fly and sprinkles the magical powder on her wand. On her way back, she flies greatly in front of the bullies and punishes them by pouring rain on them. They apologize and in the end, the rain turns into drizzle and all of them enjoy it.

Little Roo Fights Ugly Moogy
When Roo is about to open his flower shop, the villagers are scared because Moogy the ugly ogre has attacked the next village. Even when Moogy has gone, the anxiety that the villagers feel has not gone. Therefore, the village chief makes an announcement that they need brave people to come to West Mountain to fight Moogy. Reading this, Ruby decides to come to West Mountain. Roo only brings binoculars, a pencil, and a piece of paper. When he arrives at the place, everyone holds swords, shields, bows, and arrows. Fellow brave people namely Violet and Freed start to judge him and laugh at him. They even influence other people to verbally bully him. Then, Moogy growls. Everyone stands in their positions except Violet and Freed. They physically bully him. After that, Roo says that he has a perfect plan to defeat Moogy. In order to make them believe in his words, he lends his binoculars to them. They start to believe Roo tells the truth. Then, all of them agree to work together to defeat Moogy. The plan succeeds and everyone apologizes to Roo for treating him badly.

Characters

A Journey to the North Cave
Protagonist: Kim is the only child in her family. Kim has long, braided black hair with big brown eyes. She often wears her sailor uniform because she dreams of becoming a good sailor like his late grandfather used to be. She used to live with her grandfather since her parents are so busy with work. However, ever since her grandfather passed away, she only lives with her mom while her dad is busy working. Kim is full of curiosity and likes to explore new places. She is a brave sailor.

Antagonists: Beatrix and Damien are arrogant and love to look down on people. They like to use insulting words to mock Kim. They are also materialistic people who put a high value on worldly things.

Let's Escape the Labyrinth!
Protagonist: Ruby the rabbit is the third child of six. He acts like an eight-year-old human child. Ruby has soft white fur and big wide eyes. He only wears a simple outfit. He tends to be quite an optimistic, careful, and detailed animal since he loves to pay attention to small things. He also has brilliant intelligence. Since Ruby is an introvert, he only likes to hang out with a small group of people.

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Antagonists: Kate, Bernie, and Piggle are respectively a cat, a bear, and a pig who are judgmental since they tend to assess someone solely based on what they see. These animals are gluttonous. Moreover, they are inattentive since they do not pay attention to small matters.

Fillo and His Long, Long Hair

Protagonist: Fillo is a dog who is the only child in her family. He acts like a six-year-old human child. His family is harmonious. He only wears a simple shirt and short pants. He tends to feel lonely easily since he has no siblings. Thus, he loves to spend his spare time going out. He is also easily pleased by simple compliments. Despite having long hair, he is not embarrassed about his unique features. He hates getting involved in things he does not understand.

Supporting character: Ozzy the owl is a lively, bright, energetic, and caring owl. He is also a kind-hearted animal. He still has the willingness to help Fillo despite not physically being able to be there for him during his difficult time.

Antagonists: Max and Gracie are judgmental dogs who will immediately talk about something they think is unusual or uncommon. They like to use insulting words and sarcastic remarks, which tell the opposite of what they mean or intend to deliver. Moreover, they are also manipulative.

Lora's Great Dreams and Nightmares

Protagonist: Lora is an 8-year-old little girl who has long dark brown hair and short bangs. She wears a black coat and a necklace given by her parents on her fifth-year-old birthday. Her parents are both the Queen and the King of the Witches and Wizards, so they expect so much from their only daughter to "save their faces". Despite her heavy upbringing, Lora is an eager learner who loves to learn new things. She loves to explore, study, and experiment with things she never does before. Lora is an introvert, so she prefers to be alone rather than hang out with friends.

Supporting character: Mr. Dragon is a helpful friend and an easily provoked dragon. Despite having a bad first impression of Lora and leaving awful comments regarding her exclusive background, he still has the willingness to help Lora. Mr. Dragon is Lora's parents' dragon pet.

Antagonists: Iona and Draven like to talk about Lora's special upbringing to bring her down. Moreover, they are also manipulative and cunning. They dare to harm Lora by leaving her at an unknown place without thinking much about the consequences.

Little Roo Fights Ugly Moogy

Protagonist: Roo is a florist villager who wears a white shirt and long jeans. He has blonde hair and green eyes. His dad is a peasant while her mom is a seamstress in the village. Roo is a down-to-earth person who has a strong desire to defend his village and fight those who bother it. He is also brave and intelligent since he tends to use a strategic approach to violence. He also prefers to fight with rationality and strategy instead of emotions and feelings.

Antagonists: Freed and Violet tend to underestimate Roo's strategic ability based on their basic assumptions which come solely from their poor judgments. They also use sarcastic remarks to deliver what they do not mean.

Conflict

In all of my five stories, I am using external conflict. The specific external conflict that I am applying in my creative work is Man versus Man where the main characters are against the other character or characters' actions, reactions, and motivations (Lavanya, 2021). My main characters are going to have to deal with the bullying that they experience from their peers since they are viewed as different from the appropriate norms according to their surroundings. They are affected physically or emotionally as a result of the poor treatment that they receive. Therefore, in order to overcome the issues, my main characters have to use different kinds of coping mechanisms to go against the perpetrators.

CONCLUSION

This creative work aims to explore the process that leads to bullying behavior and how the main characters deal with the issue. First of all, the stories show how the act of bullying happens in each character. Starting from the first phase, the necessity of belonging, Kim, Ruby, Fillo, Lora, and Roo, who are different in terms of either behavior or appearance, are being talked behind by their peers. Their differences trigger reactions from them since they see them from a negative perspective. Therefore, these peers point out the protagonists' distinction, discuss it, and bring it out in their conversation. Moving to the second phase called social exclusion anxiety, Kim, Ruby, Fillo, Lora, and Roo's peers start to ambiguously make fun of them or mock them. This leads the main characters to feel anxious and question what is wrong with them since they think that something is not right. At this point, Kim, Ruby, Fillo, Lora, and Roo show that they are mentally defeated through their obvious body gestures. It is as if indicating that they are completely cornered, powerless, and helpless. Then, the act of bullying arrives at the last phase namely the production of contempt. After witnessing such negative reactions from Kim, Ruby, Fillo, Lora, and Roo, their respective perpetrators feel even more powerful. They utilize their dominant power by taking control of the circumstances and influencing others into bullying the victims. Some perpetrators committed not only verbal bullying but also physical bullying. Some even manage to manipulate the victims, causing further harm.

Secondly, these children's picture book stories also show how each character successfully overcomes bullying behavior. Starting with confrontative coping, Kim confronts the perpetrators since she feels pressured and thinks that no one can help her. In addition, her personal traits such as brave, outspoken, and full of determination make her say something to the perpetrators. Then, Ruby and Roo use planful-problem solving. Ruby is a very-simple minded rabbit and does not have such a complicated plan. He also strongly holds on to what he believes. Thus, his belief becomes his plan to escape the labyrinth he and his friends are trapped in. It even makes his friends quiver in fear since they are scared that Ruby will not help them out after bullying him. On the other hand, Roo just simply does what is right for him. Roo has his own plan, uses that plan to show the perpetrators that he is not as useless as they say, and executes the plan perfectly. In the end, his heroic actions are able to tear down the perpetrators' negative assumptions and mockery toward him which leads them to apologize for bullying him. Last but not least, Fillo and Lora use a coping mechanism called social-seeking support. Fillo receives social support and takes advantage of the magical scarf given by his best friend Ozzy, to overcome the problem. Then, the magical scarf becomes a boomerang to the perpetrators for their wrongdoings. Meanwhile, Lora asks for help from a dragon she meets. She uses this opportunity so that later she can deal with the perpetrators and prove their degrading words wrong.

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