

The Magical Quest: Finding The Perfect Ears and Other Stories: Children’s Picture Books Exploring Children’s Confidence in Their Self-Identity

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ABSTRACT

Self-esteem has become an important factor for children’s confidence in shaping their self-identity. As children are growing up, they might face questions regarding their self-identity. Self-identity can be divided into ‘natural self’ and ‘environmental self’ which is acquired through external forces. However, there are cases when their identity does not conform with society’s expectation. In these cases, children might find the need to fit in with their surroundings. Therefore, this creative work explores how self-esteem helps embrace one’s identity to develop one’s life goals. Based on Morwenna Griffiths’ theory that was influenced by American Philosopher William James and an American psychologist Carl Rogers, I will explore how one gains self-esteem in order to grasp self-confidence. Unconditional regard and achievement are significant reasons for solutions to the development of self-esteem. My creative work will tell the stories of five characters. The characters will go on a journey to finally be confident in their self-identity. They will regain their self-esteem by realizing their self-worth and value. Children might learn the importance of embracing their identity through my creative work.

Keywords: achievement, children, confidence, self-esteem, self-identity

INTRODUCTION

Commonly, as children are growing up, they might face questions about their belongings in the society. These questions sometimes also come with follow up questions in themselves, for example; where they belong or what exactly they are. ‘Who am I?’ is a question that humans commonly encounter. This issue of self-identity is not exclusive to adults only; in fact, this begins in early childhood. As stated by Reschke (2020), “[t]his fundamental aspect of being human begins construction in infancy” (para. 2). This aspect of identity construction in early human life is further developed through their life.

To understand this issue, the term ‘self-identity’ should first be defined. In 2003, Joseph Bailey tried to solve the confusion behind the definition of self-identity. He believed that self-identity is a multidimensional concept defined as “Who am I?” which includes ethnic identity and how they are distinguished from other people (2003). The etymology of identity was used to refer to only the nature of self and not one’s experiences (2003). In the 16th century, the word identity refers to a set of “definitive characteristics that made a person a ‘natural self’-a ‘real self’ preserved over time” which he elaborates to the stability of self that creates a pattern of experiences to deal with life (2003).

Bailey (2003) explained that someone always has a ‘natural self’ or real self’. Even though a series of experiences might alter a few actions or reactions, the ‘natural self’ is almost stagnant; meaning one will always be quite the same until death. He then further explained the acquired ‘environmental self’ which can continually change. “By contrast, the acquired ‘environmental self’ has continually changed since birth as a result of mental and physical

growth, of experiences in one's immediate environment, and of experiences associated with society at large" (p. 384). To sum it up, self-identity is required after a series of steps in a long period of time which includes the interweaving of one's fixed human's nature and one's on-going acquired nature (2003).

However, children might frequently encounter a condition where a series of their physical and mental beings do not conform with the normally-considered situation in our environment. Often, children have to conform to their environment in order to dodge marginalization (Valentine, 2000). Through the process of self-identification in their environment, they learn what is accepted and what is mismatched in their social interaction. Once they learn that what they tend to choose does not conform to what is defined as normal in their environment, they feel the risk of being socially excluded from society. Once children start to discover that they are different in terms of mental and physical state, they are going to face a battle of conforming with society or following their identity (Valentine, 2000). When they choose to conform with society, they have to abandon the parts that make up their identity and self (Griffiths, 1993). What they choose to do in certain dilemmas and decision-making processes are influenced by who they are, which are made up from social relationships around them. This can be congruent or incongruent with their identity.

In order to be able to embrace identity, one should be confident with who they are by developing a positive self-image (Griffiths, 1993). Self-image can be defined as a subjective perception of oneself, including body image and impression of one's personality, capabilities, and so on (Bailey, 2003). Self-image is a rough representation of one's measurable things; for example, unchanging genetic attributes like round eyes, changing genetic attributes like one's height, and also material things and possession that can change one's self-image like makeup or luxury items (2003). Poor self-image may result in someone degrading their appearance to feeling inferior. A good self-image can be built by leading the character to accomplish things which will result in self-esteem (Griffiths, 1993). This self-image develops as someone grows so it is important to gain a positive self-image from a young age.

My children's picture books will target children aged 5-8 years old. Children aged 5-8 years old are capable of making distinctions about their cultural identity, the social variations and places where they fit in, stereotypes presentable in reality, and understand more complex things better compared to children aged 2-4 years old (LeeKeenan, 2021). They are able to point out differences and are more aware of the needs of other people. They have also started to think about how to fit in with everyone else in a social group (Ackerman, 2018). Because of this problem, I choose the theme of embracing self-identity because children are in the stage of wanting to fit in with their environment. They might seek ways to disregard their 'natural self' and become 'inauthentic' in order to fit in. Children know how to have self-esteem and develop a positive self-image to embrace their identity after reading my creative work.

In my children's picture books, I am going to use adventure as a genre. By definition, "adventure genre is a strong element of danger. It features a fast-paced, action-packed plot in which the hero has to complete a quest or a task in a short amount of time" (The Times of India, 2018). In the adventure genre, readers usually encounter a protagonist wandering around (usually also the hero of the story) who faces different challenges and missions (Green, 1991, p. 2). In the end of the story, the protagonist encounters something life-changing and will come back with something new; either in themselves or a new finding. Relating to this issue, these protagonists will come back knowing that they should be proud of who they are.

As for the theoretical framework, I am going to use Self-Identity and Self-Esteem theories and their relation and implications that were proposed by Morwenna Griffiths in 1993. Her hypotheses are based on a theory originating from a major American Philosopher William James and an American psychologist Carl Rogers. Griffiths, an author and retired Professor of

Alexis; Setiawan: The Magical Quest: Finding The Perfect Ears and Other Stories:
Children's Picture Books Exploring Children's Confidence in Their Self-Identity

Educational Research at Nottingham Trent University developed an alternative theory for self-esteem and drew conclusions about the relations of self-esteem to self-identity.

In "Self-Identity and Self-Esteem: Achieving Equality in Education," Griffiths (1993) began her idea by illuminating the idea of self-esteem from psychological theory influenced by William James and Carl Rogers. William James proposed that "self-esteem is the ratio of one's success to one's pretensions" (James, 1892, as cited in Griffiths, 1993). To define it simply, James believed that self-esteem is the feeling of self-worth when one's expectation consistently matches with what the person believes as valuable, which differs from person to person (Zeigler-Hill & Shackelford, 2020, p. 4738). This idea was then redefined by psychologists, one of them being Rogers, a well-known American psychologist that was best known for his person-centered approach in humanistic psychology.

There are two strands of self-esteem theory; shared by William James and Carl Rogers and another suggested by Carl Rogers. In the first strand, both James and Rogers assume a self which is concerned with what it can do or the ability of someone to achieve something (Griffiths, 1993). In this strand, description of the ideal self tends to be in terms of what it "can work to attain – skills, morals, state of mind or acquired knowledge" (p. 302). Through educational research, the relation of self-esteem to achievement is as follows, "either high self-esteem causes high achievement or high achievement causes high self-esteem" (Griffiths, 1993, p. 303). This means that achievement and self-esteem go hand-in-hand, causing and resulting in an endless loop.

While agreeing with James on the importance of achievement, Rogers also proposes an alternative means of helping achievement which is based on unconditional regard. In this strand of theory, Rogers "places emphasis both on the giving of 'unconditional regard' to individuals so that they may set their own goals in life, and on the role that individual empathy plays in the process" (Rogers, n.d. as cited in Griffiths, 1993, p. 301). Rogers argued that a child who gets unconditional love might gain in self-acceptance and self-liking which will help the child to develop their own life plan and believe in their ability. Unconditional positive regard he mentioned before refers to personal relationships, such as teachers, parents, and friends. Having high self-esteem means that someone views themselves in a positive regard; loveable, worthy, and valuable.

Griffiths (1993) agreed that love and acceptance that come from personal relationships are important to the creation of self-esteem of the child. She even went further by establishing another theory that removed achievement as a variable. As she put it, "[i]t is not that self-esteem is caused by or causes achievement, but, rather, there must be something in the creation of self-identity" which is "constituted by race, gender and class" (p. 304). From the statement above, it can be seen that Griffiths proposed a new idea that self-esteem is constituted somewhere in the creation of self-identity. Self-identity is thus to be driven by external factors as it cannot exist without the connection of other people. "The autobiography is not created in isolation. The author cannot give free rein to the imagination. On the contrary, the story is severely constrained by other people. Indeed, it depends on the author's connections with other people" (Griffiths, 1993, p. 307).

For Griffiths (1993), being wanted and not wanted, belonging and not belonging, are crucial to one's concept and evaluation of themselves. Social acceptance profoundly influences someone's self-evaluation, encompassing self-esteem and, consequently, self-identity. Individuals who feel wanted and included in a community experience a sense of self-worth and develop positive opinions about themselves. This, in turn, leads to confidence in their identity and capabilities.

To reach self-esteem that will bring confidence in who they are and their capabilities, children need to be backed by feeling belonging, love, want and acceptance by their

surroundings. This will then make them realize the value in themselves. Rogers and Griffiths (1993) both believe that relationships; being accepted, loved, and valued comes first before achievement for self-esteem that will affect them being proud of their identity. "I am loved and valued, therefore what I do is good", rather than "What I do is good therefore I am loved and valued" (p. 313). Therefore, no matter what the child is able or not able to do, he or she is still loved and valued either way.

In my creative work, I am going to use this as a base for my character's reaction when they develop a low self-esteem regarding their identity in the society. Cassie the Rabbit, Gerald, Ray, Little Tommy, and Purple feel unwanted by their surroundings due to several reasons. As a result, their self-esteem suffers a blow. Their self-esteem will be triggered by external factors; love, acceptance, value and worth from the people around them which will help regain their self-esteem. Internally, their belief in themselves will be strengthened because now they know their value and worth.

CONCEPT OF CREATIVE WORK

Theme

The theme of my creative work is 'Children can embrace their identities when they know their worth, feel loved and accepted'. I want to show children to be proud of who they are and feel worthy of love and acceptance as a final outcome of their embracing identity journey. When the basic needs for self-worth, love and acceptance are fulfilled, they will have higher self-esteem which may impact their ability to embrace their identities. My characters will try to overcome the feeling of being discouraged while trying to conform with society. I am going to apply this theme to the five main characters of my story. In the end, they will understand the importance of owning up to their identity.

Plot

There will be five stories for my creative work which consists of five different journeys in embracing each identity.

1. The Magical Quest: Finding the Perfect Ears

Cassie is the only rabbit that lives in the rabbit kingdom who has short ears. Her life is as normal as others, until she feels discouraged one day because of a special event that takes place in the kingdom. In the event, one has to decorate their ears as pretty as they can. She hears someone say that she cannot participate because of her small short ears. Starting from that day, she always uses fake ears. One day, she hears the tale of a magic stone that can transform someone into anything. Cassie thinks it is her chance to finally wish for the perfect ears. Cassie sets on a quest to find the magic stone. She goes on a journey and passes different obstacles. On her last obstacle, she passes a kingdom full of odd-animals. They tell her where to find the magic stone. Cassie finds the magic stone, wishes for the perfect ears and nothing happens. Cassie understands that the mirror always shows perfection which means that she is perfect just the way she is. Cassie goes back to her kingdom feeling content and proud of her short ears. She sees her worth and value and feels loved by her friend, Kyra.

2. Gerald The Gummy Bear and The Circus Show

In Gerald's world, all characters are gummy bears. However, he is the only big brown grizzly gummy bear in his family. Unlike the others, he has rough furs and sharp teeth. One day, Gerald is old enough to be a part of the circus show with his family. He learns several acrobatics, but due to his big posture, he can't fit the ring and pass through different obstacles easily, unlike the rest of his family. The twins laugh seeing Gerald and he loses his confidence.

Alexis; Setiawan: The Magical Quest: Finding The Perfect Ears and Other Stories:
Children's Picture Books Exploring Children's Confidence in Their Self-Identity

Seeing the difference between him and his family, he feels that he is unsuitable for the family. He sets off on a journey alone to go find his real family. Gerald has to pass different obstacles in order to go to a different world. In his dangerous adventure, Gerald meets other different creatures. But he still cannot find his kind. Gerald meets a creature on his way that tells him that Gerald's kind has been long gone because of a tragedy. Only Gerald is left and found by his step family. Gerald goes back to his family and sees that they have prepared different acrobats for him that no one else can do. Gerald is the only one capable of balancing a stick with other gummy bears on it. Gerald then smiles and realizes his place in the family. He realizes that his family needs him and loves him either way. Gerald then slowly gains confidence in himself.

3. I Didn't Know I was an Otter!

Ray is an otter that lives with a group of penguins. Even so, he thinks he is a penguin because he lives together with his penguin friends. He follows everything that his friends do, like a penguin. His friends never point out his differences and accept him as he is. One day, Ray encounters a big block of ice and sees his reflection. He realizes he does not belong with them. He goes on a journey to make himself a penguin; by learning how to be a penguin from penguin masters. There are three lessons in order to be a penguin. Ray tries to learn every lesson by following the teachings meticulously but he still cannot do everything perfectly. Ray finishes all the teachings and feels sad. Suddenly, Ray sees Flappy stuck on a statue and a shark is approaching them. Ray helps Flappy get out of the situation. Ray realizes his ability as an otter could help his friend. He goes back and sees that Frosty has been looking for him. Ray realizes that he is loved even though he is not a penguin.

4. Little Tommy, The Farmer's Boy

Little Tommy is a farmer's boy. His parents own a farm and he lives in rural areas. Little Tommy always helps his parents out on the farm. But one day, a group of kids passes by and laughs because of his 'dirty' activity. On his first day of school, Little Tommy gets to know his friends' parents' jobs. He is afraid that other kids at school will think that his parents' jobs are 'dirty', thus he lies and tells everyone that his parents are adventurers. Little Tommy goes home from school and goes on a journey around town to look for answers about what an adventurer is. The next day, Little Tommy goes to his friends and brags about the information that he knows. His friends are amazed and impressed. He goes home feeling proud, although something feels off. Christy, Little Tommy's friend caught Little Tommy lying when he was helping his parents bringing supplies from the farm to the market. However, she did not discourage Little Tommy of his identity as a farmer's boy, unlike what he expects. Little Tommy then realizes that he does not need to hide his identity. He then proudly shows and tells everyone that he is a farmer's boy.

5. Painting Yellow

In an abstract world full of puzzle pieces, Purple is the only purple-colored puzzle piece. Purple realizes that she doesn't fit in the group, so Purple goes on a journey to the Yellow Forest to change herself yellow. Purple tries many ways to color herself yellow. First with crayons, then with yellow leaves. However, nothing changes. Purple then finds the Yellow River. Purple plunges herself into the river, only to realize that she still stays purple no matter how many times she tries. Purple meets a red-colored puzzle piece who is looking for a missing piece. Purple realizes that she fits. Purple realizes that she does not need to be the same in order to fit in, because every color is needed to complete the bigger picture. Purple understands her worth even though she is not a yellow-colored puzzle piece.

Characters

Main characters:

Cassie is a young female rabbit born with short ears. In the story, other characters sometimes mistake her as a young beaver. She has light brown fur with white belly. She is cheerful, brave, and curious about the world, but she secretly feels insecure due to her short ears. She loves participating in new things and is not afraid of new unfamiliar places. She does not have a family. Cassie is always prepared and she loves the color yellow.

Gerald is a young male brown grizzly bear shaped gummy bear. He likes to wear a blue bucket hat to hide his face. He is introverted and has a low self-esteem. He is adopted by a family that consists of a father, mother, and a younger brother. Even though he is insecure, he is very goal-oriented. However, his emotions are unstable. He is passionate and determined.

Ray is a young male otter. Ray likes to wear his favorite blue and yellow hat with his name on it. Ray does not have an otter family. He is found by his penguin friends and they bring Ray in their group. Ray is cheerful and perseverant. He does not easily give up. Ray does not like it when others see his weak side. Ray likes to learn new things. He is not afraid to go explore new things. Ray is mature for his age and thinks about others a lot.

Little Tommy is a 7 years old boy from a farmer family. His family is very modest. He has blond short hair and likes to wear denim overalls and a red checkered shirt. Sometimes he wears a cowboy hat. Little Tommy is a friendly kid, but he likes to hide his flaws in front of his friends. He likes to keep his image dignified. Little Tommy is kind and loves his family.

There is no exact gender for purple because Purple is an object character. Purple acts like a young child. Purple is a quiet character and has a great insecurity. Its personality is mellow and emotional. Purple is a softer character and does not show its ambition that much. Purple does not have a family. Purple wants to be useful for others. Purple wants to be the color yellow.

Supporting Characters:

Kyra is Cassie's friend at the rabbit kingdom. She looks normal with brown fur and long ears. Kyra is a bit timid and shy, but she has a kind heart and will be on Cassie's side. Barry is a bear she meets during her quest to find the magic stone. Barry is a bear with neon blue fur, looking as odd as ever. However, Barry is kind and helps Cassie realize that she is perfect the way she is.

Grazie is Gerald's step mom. Grazie is kind and caring and looks just like the normal gummy bear characters. Grazie is not too talkative but is wise. Cane is a furry creature that acts like a hint for Gerald. Cane is a furry green like bush creature that looks bouncy and silly.

Frosty and Flappy are both Ray's penguin friends. Frosty is taller and slimmer than Flappy. Flappy is shorter but has a sporty build. He has a yellow fur on top of his head and likes to wear his favorite red jersey.

Bobby is Little Tommy's father. He does not use a hat often, but has blond short hair. He has an average slim figure. Charlie and Christy are Little Tommy's friends from school. Charlie has short brown hair and likes to wear a green polo shirt to school. Charlie is curious and talkative. Christy has long brown hair that she wears into pigtails to school. She is kind, caring and also talkative.

Yelly, Browne and Reddy are different color puzzle pieces in the story. Yelly is a yellow color puzzle piece. He is the one that makes Purple feel not belonging in their place. Browne is a brown colored puzzle piece. He is a leader with a kind heart. He is focused towards his goal. Reddy is a red colored puzzle piece. She is strict but kind.

Conflict

Alexis; Setiawan: The Magical Quest: Finding The Perfect Ears and Other Stories:
Children's Picture Books Exploring Children's Confidence in Their Self-Identity

For my creative work, there will be internal conflict as well as external conflict. For the internal conflict, it will be man vs. self. This happens when a character experiences tension within themselves and involves the character to experience opposing needs, desires or values. Sometimes these struggles represent conflict between a character's mind or subjective knowledge and their heart or feelings (Indeed Editorial Team, 2023). Another conflict is the external conflict which can be defined as "a struggle that takes place between the main character and some outside force. Therefore, it is outside the body of the protagonist" (LiteraryDevices Editors, 2017). There are different types of external conflict. I will be using character vs. society and character vs. nature. By definition, character vs. society occurs when "the main character stands up to support his beliefs and struggles against the social forces" and character vs. nature occurs "when the protagonist struggles against the forces of nature or an external environment" (2017).

CONCLUSION

Based on the statement of the problem and the purpose of the creative work, I believe that the creative work answered and achieved the goals that are targeted. I showed in my work that what causes my characters to lose self-esteem is the feeling of not belonging and being unwanted in their surroundings. Also, I showed that when my characters lose their self-esteem, they try to conform with society by pretending or hiding their identity. Lastly, my main characters successfully regain their self-esteem by realizing their self-worth and value in themselves.

For Cassie the rabbit, her self-esteem drops because she hears other rabbits mock her short ears which makes her insecure. Cassie then realizes that even without long ears, she is still a rabbit because that is who she is. She comes to realize her worth even with short ears after realizing that the mirror projects perfection as who she is already and getting validation from the other creatures and Kyra, her friend that she does not need to have long ears to be a perfect rabbit.

For Gerald, his self-esteem drops when Uncle Greg's twins laugh at him for being unable to do acrobats due to his big posture. Gerald's self-esteem drops when he realizes that his body is different from the rest of his family and feels not belonging. He takes a journey to find a place where he belongs; although all he really wanted was to be accepted and feel belonging in his current family. When he realizes that his family loves him and accepts him for who he is, his confidence in his identity is raised.

For Ray, his self-esteem drops when he realizes that he does not belong with his penguin friends because he is an otter. He tries to reject his identity as an otter by 'pretending' to be a penguin. Later, when he notices that he can be himself with his penguin friends, his self-esteem is raised. He sees that there are things he is capable of doing and can be a good help to his penguin friends. He realizes that his friends accept and love him either way.

For Little Tommy, his self-esteem drops because he is afraid his friends will not accept who he is. When he sees that there are kids that view his identity as a farmer boy to be 'dirty', he immediately 'pretends' to be someone else, although he loves his identity as much. His self-esteem is then raised after he sees that his friends accept his identity and welcomes him to be his friend either way.

Lastly, Purple's self-esteem has always been low because she never feels surrounded by yellow puzzle pieces. She tries several ways to conform with society by 'pretending' to be yellow. She realizes that she cannot be another color and comes to meet with other puzzle pieces where she finally finds a place where she belongs.

I have answered the statement of the problem and achieved the purpose of creative work with the theory as a base and the story as the product. First, my characters lose their self-esteem. Second, my characters try to 'pretend' to be the same in order to feel accepted and belonging. Lastly, my characters realize their worth of being loved and accepted after knowing that they got 'unconditional love'. Indirectly stated, my storyline follows the basic idea from the theory. My creative work has fulfilled other criteria of children stories as applied in chapter 2. I conclude that most of my goals are achieved in my creative work.

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