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The Puppy in the Polka Dot Pajamas: A Multimedia Approach to Children's Literature

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Honors Project

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Abstract

The following written defense describes the guiding research, methodologies, and end results of my yearlong project – creating a digital children's book and accompanying short film. The project was initially inspired by an event at home in which my family was laughing at our small dog for the way he looked after we dressed him in pajamas, after which my dad made a comment that it would be heinous of us to treat a human being the same way. This comment inspired me to take the values of anti-bullying and encouragement of authentic self-expression I already valued and craft a story with canine characters to uplift human readers. The remaining sections of this paper delve into further detail of how I took this isolated moment and created a multimedia storytelling experience that will hopefully inspire young minds to both feel confident with their own self-expression and not bully others for doing the same.

Keywords: children's literature, multimedia, creative writing, visual communication technology

Research Question

How can messages of anti-bullying and self-expression be delivered in a manner palatable to young children?

In a world that seemingly becomes crueler by the day, some topics are not handled with the tact they require and deserve. Issues of bullying and self-expression can often evoke undesirable emotions when discussed. Although it may be difficult to achieve, every child deserves to grow up in a world free of bullying that promotes authentic self-expression. To do my part – however minor it may be – in fostering a more accepting community, I used this project as an opportunity to create a story that shared anti-bullying messaging in a suitable and enjoyable manner for children.

This research question was not in place for the entirety of the project. After focusing less on self-esteem and more on bullying than I initially predicted, I changed my research question toward the end of my project to better fit the final products I created.

Methodology: Project Overview

To address my established research question, I quickly opted to go the route of a children's book; this form of storytelling is renowned for teaching children important life lessons in approachable and enjoyable manners. I also took inspiration from my family pet Louie: a small, delicate-featured male dog believed by most strangers to be female. My family will often simply look at him and laugh, especially if we have dressed him in pajamas to keep him warm. Although Louie enjoys as much attention as he can attract, I would never have this same reaction toward a human because it would be wildly rude, as well as a direct contrast to my values of anti-bullying and acceptance of self-expression. Using this real-life inspiration, I planned to create a

children's story equipping canine characters to share uplifting messages promoting self-expression and discouraging bullying.

With my idea established, the next step of the project was conducting research to compose a literature review. The majority of the finished literature review is composed of children's books containing canine characters, anti-bullying messaging, and various manifestations of authentic self-expression. Many of these reference works used human characters to thoroughly explain authentically human concepts such as self-expression and gender identity, while others focused heavily on the lifestyles and characteristics of dogs. I took inspiration from the simple yet uplifting messaging of Robb Pearlman's *Pink is for Boys,* Jessica Love's *Julián is a Mermaid,* and Theresa Thorn's *It Feels Good to Be Yourself: A Book About Gender Identity,* a handful of works which describe the unique identities and preferences of various children and view them as something to celebrate. The canine-centered tales of Jon Agee's *I Want a Dog,* Maria Gianferrari's *Hello Goodbye Dog,* and Katie Klise's *Stay: A Girl, a Dog, and a Bucket List* established many redeeming qualities of dogs that have cemented their reputation as man's best friend. Of all of the children's books I reviewed, however, the one that most closely emulated my own desired outcome was Kelly DiPucchio's *Gaston,* a tale in which a puppy who was accidentally separated from his biological litter learns to embrace his unique identity; this book proved a key element to my research because it brilliantly amalgamated the journey of affirming one's self-identity with typical experiences in the daily life of a dog.

Literature textbooks, professional blogs, and scholarly articles bolstered the children's literature with a strong academic foundation. When conducting my scholarly research, the focuses of my inquiry were how children can be encouraged while developing their unique self-identities and how they can be equipped to combat early bullying; I achieved this two-pronged

approach by accumulating sources about a variety of subtopics regarding children, from methods of addressing and combating childhood bullying to how to support toddlers when they begin dressing themselves. Supporting a child's journey of self-expression is a process that begins in toddlerhood; when children can navigate the world independently, they develop a desire to dress independently as well. As suggested via an excerpt from a 1990 parenting editorial, toddlers who are starting to self-dress should be encouraged to value function over form, so as not to foster insecurity about their sense of style and appreciate the protective factors of their fashion (Katz, 1990). If bullying should occur, whether as a result of fashion choice or otherwise, speech pathology researchers have outlined a six-step approach that focuses not on punishing the bullies, but rather promoting acceptance and fostering a safe environment (Yaruss, Reeves, & Herring, 2018). I chose to take inspiration from this gentler type of anti-bullying messaging for the resolution of my own anti-bullying story because I admired its commitment to maintaining a positive attitude for all parties and encouraging an environment of acceptance and kindness. When an environment holds these ideals, authentic self-expression becomes easier, safer, and more enthusiastically supported.

Following my research period in early 2021, I spent the summer of the year drafting the text of my story. I opted for a higher reading difficulty for my story so that it would suit the standards of transitional literature rather than an early reader picture book since this is an underappreciated sector of young literature. To accomplish this, I relied heavily on guidelines established by Kathleen Horning for transitional literature; resulting decisions included factors such as 8-12 words per line, "lines per page never [exceeding 15]", "a full line of leading between every line of type", and "simple vocabulary without too many … multisyllabic words" (Horning, 2010). Although Horning discusses anthropomorphism as being a more apt choice for

early readers than transitional works, I still chose to write the story from the perspective of a young, pajama-loving puppy to both increase the palatability of the subject matter and to honor the real-world pajama-loving dog who inspired this project from the very start.

　　　　With the written text finalized at the end of the summer, I proceeded to illustrate the story. I intended to commission a student to illustrate for me; when the stage of the project finally arrived, I concluded that I would rather produce a final product that was as much my own work as possible. My key consideration when deciding what to draw was a balance of what parts of the written story were most important to show and what specific details I omitted from the text for the purpose of showing in the art. This balance of text and illustration – and how it can be tinkered with to the taste of the creator – is a vital characteristic in the discipline of children's literature, as it directly impacts the suitable age and reading level of a story's audience. I modeled the protagonist of the book after my own dog, a Yorkshire Terrier who I dress in a red and white polka dot pajama set when the weather grows cold. For the dogs that would bully him, I wanted multiple dogs that were diverse in size appearance to add interest to the illustrations. I opted for one large, one medium, and one small dog with several varying features – a Labrador Retriever with floppy ears, a long tail, and dark brown hair; a Pitbull with semi-folded ears, a short tail, and gray hair; and a Chihuahua with pointy ears, a medium tail, and long orange hair. I created these illustrations digitally using a combination of Adobe Creative Cloud programs Illustrator and InDesign; the characters and backgrounds were created individually in Illustrator, then imported and arranged them in InDesign, and added any additional final details in InDesign to complete each page.

　　　　Once the book was fully assembled within InDesign, I exported the pages and spreads as individual Portable Network Graphic (PNG) images. I then used Acrobat to organize the

pages in the correct order and created a Portable Document Format (PDF) document to serve as the digital copy of the book. With the same PNG images, a recorded voiceover, and a sound effect, I used Premiere Pro to create a read-aloud video to serve as an additional medium for viewing the story. The PDF and video deliverables both showcase the full story and can be viewed individually or in tandem.

Methodology: Justification

Creating a children's book that lives solely in digital formats is not a common practice. However, since my personal strength is as a digital media creator as opposed to a print media creator, I chose to take this more unique approach. Rather than hand-drawing with physical materials, I used Adobe Illustrator and InDesign to digitally create and assemble my artwork. Once my book was fully written and illustrated, I did not have it printed; I instead chose to assemble a PDF and read-aloud video as options for viewing the story. I felt these options were more suitable for my strengths (as opposed to the print medium) because both could be fully assembled digitally while providing variety for readers. Although the project was still a challenge overall, I felt better equipped to take it on because I still played to my strengths.

Many of the more specific creative details within this project were inspired by my own experiences and values. The protagonist's appearance is a result of my best effort in digitally recreating my dog. This character's journey in the story is inspired by both my dog's experiences (being laughed at while wearing pajamas, frequent misgendering by strangers, etc.) and my desired themes (anti-bullying and self-expression). To combine these experiences and values, the protagonist encounters bullying for his choice in self-expression: wearing pajamas. The bullying is verbalized in multiple forms, including intentional misgendering, but the story ends on a positive note to offer an optimistic outlook to those who are struggling with bullying and/or finding the comfort for authentic self-expression. As someone who was bullied as a child

(although not for any reason of self-expression) it was important to me to end the story on a positive note; even though my own experiences with bullying have permanently shaped my personality, they did not defeat me.

Methodology: Interdisciplinary

This project amalgamates the disciplines of creative writing, children's literature, visual communication technology (VCT), digital art, and basic aspects of child psychology. As a VCT major whose interests are geared towards video production and away from print media, I knew from the earliest stages of the project that I wanted to veer away from the more physical formats in which children's literature is traditionally produced. As an alternative, I embraced my strength in and experience with video production and page layout software to create a PDF copy and read-aloud video . To compensate for my lack of experience with other disciplines of the project, I conducted extensive research on writing and psychology – utilizing a combination of literature textbooks, parenting editorials, and psychology journals – which centered around the minds of young readers, from supporting them through their experiences with bullying and self-expression to their ability to comprehend varying difficulties of the written word. Once I felt confident that my written story aligned with both a child's reading level and adopts a sensitive approach to young hardships, I used Adobe digital illustration and layout software that I am familiar with – despite not having much raw artistic skill – to give myself as much of an advantage as possible with an aspect of the project I had little confidence in. Finally, to incorporate my interest and skill in video production, I chose to make a video read-aloud as one of two primary methods of viewing my story.

Project Strengths

An evaluation conducted in November 2021 revealed that my book left a strong positive impression on its first-ever readers. This evaluation, which was intended to gauge initial reactions to the work I had done, was conducted by showing 25 participants the first three spreads (introduction of the protagonist through his decision to remove his pajamas) of the story and asking a variety of questions regarding the story's message and quality.

The first short-answer question posed to participants was, "Based on the excerpt you viewed, what themes/messages do you think the full story is trying to share?". The purpose of this question was to determine if the intended themes of anti-bullying and self-expression were being picked up early in the story, rather than just in the end pages that these readers were not given; in response, 56% of participants mentioned anti-bullying in their responses, with many other responses also suggesting various concepts of self-identity. The second question asked participants how they think the proportion of text to illustration compares to the average picture book; I intended for the story to be slightly more text-heavy to suit the standards of transitional literature, so I was curious if readers noticed this decision. While 8% thought the opposite was true, 40% recognized the greater amount of text.

I then posed two different questions asking participants what they thought of the quality of the story – one about the quality as compared to published works and one about the benchmark of student-quality work. The quality of my book was always a concern of mine since I do not have the skillset of a published author, but I wanted to ensure that the quality was not going to be harmful to the reception of the story. Fortunately, 48% of respondents considered my work to be around the same quality as published works they have seen, and 80% believed the story was a suitable benchmark of student-quality work. The final question asked before

allowing participants to fill out a general comment form was if they would recommend the book to children starting their transition from picture books to more complex pieces, with an impressive 80% saying yes; the general comments following were also overwhelmingly positive, with many participants eager to see the rest of the book and finding the text and illustrations to work together well.

Project Limitations

Although many choices were made that played to my unique strengths (as mentioned in Methodology: Justification), the overall project was still one that pushed me beyond the limits of what I have previously utilized my skillset for. This resulted in several shortcomings in the final deliverables. The limitation that most heavily impacted the quality of my project is my artistic capability. I have never had much inherent artistic talent, nor have I received much training to improve my artistic skillset. However, it was important to me that I used this project as an opportunity to step out of my comfort zone and create something that was entirely my own work, so I opted to not commission an illustrator – a decision I had contemplated in the earliest stages in the timeline – and create my own artwork.

When the illustration phase of the project did arrive, I had to make decisions as to what to prioritize within the artwork. I knew that I did not have the artistic capability to make both the backgrounds and the characters of sufficient detail and quality. To address this, I pondered what I was more confident in illustrating and what was more important to the story to focus my efforts on. I concluded that focusing on making detailed characters and keeping the backgrounds simple was the best route, feeling that detailed characters were more crucial to the visual storytelling. These characters – particularly the protagonist – are what truly carry the themes of the story and what the readers connect with, so I believed them to be the most vital component of the artwork.

I also had concerns that a detailed background would distract from the characters and was not as confident in my background design as my character design. Although I thought this decision would benefit my project, it resulted in a disconnect with the finished book; while the text is apt for a third-grade reading level, the illustrations only suit a kindergarten interest.

If I were to make any further revisions to my book, the backgrounds of my illustrations would be the first component edited. I feel that making full-page backgrounds with little detail hindered the overall quality of the project; to remedy this, I would either add more scenery and detail to the background, or I would make smaller, vignette-style backgrounds that surrounded only the characters and feather out before the edge of each page. I would also consider adding more variety in the body language of the characters. Throughout the story, I adjusted the characters' facial expressions based on the events in the accompanying text, but I never varied the bodies. Although the faces were effective in conveying each character's mood, adding more diverse body language may have assisted with this while adding more visual interest to the story.

Conclusions

Addressing my research question exposed me to many areas of research and inquiry I had little to no experience with prior. I ventured into the new and unfamiliar territory of transitional literature, a category of children's literacy I had never heard of before but eventually came to grasp the finer nuances of. In crafting my own transitional work, I needed to familiarize myself with fairly basic aspects of child psychology – a topic I had never even shown interest in prior to this project. However, I was able to gather lessons from my research into this subject and use them to create a story that focuses on encouragement over punishment. I utilized this gentler approach in my story by showing readers how happy one can feel living in an environment where choices of self-expression are not met with bullying, rather than focusing on what

punishments await those who choose to bully. By focusing on the positive consequences of a change in action instead of the negative, the deliverables I created address the heavy themes specified in my research question in a manner that children can garner inspiration from to lead with kindness.

Although I learned an abundance of new information about academic subjects I was previously inexperienced in, this project has taught me an even greater amount of personal lessons. Many of the creative choices I made were implemented to play to my strengths as a video producer and digital creator, but the project still pushed me far out of my comfort zone by forcing me to use my skills in tandem with unfamiliar subjects. For example, I have little skill in creating hand-drawn art, which was a necessary component to the book, so I used a software I had prior experience and comfort with to create them. I wrote many stories for fun in my childhood, but the text of this book needed to adhere to stricter requirements than I had ever imposed on myself before. This blend of old techniques and new subjects has encouraged me to take more risks and be more creative in my work as I move forward in my professional life.

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