

# Wonder: Overcoming Hidden Fear of Independence

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**Abstract** - This paper focuses on the basic needs that children require during their developmental stages through the novel *Wonder* (2012) by R.J. Palacio. The theoretical framework used for analysing the novel is *Social Learning Theory*, a developmental psychological analysis propounded by Albert Bandura. The vital paradigm for the successful development of a child can be measured with his/her relationship with family, friends, relatives, and society as their growth is often linked with cultural and social influences. Through the character of August Pullman who is affected by Treacher Collins syndrome, a genetic condition or disorder which left him with a disfigured face, Palacio educates the readers about the problems endured by children with physical impairments. Implication of Bandura's social learning theory to the text reveals how the society should be treating them with equal consideration and care.

**Index Terms** - children with special needs, developmental stages, psychological analysis, social learning theory.

## INTRODUCTION

Childhood determines how successful one can be in handling life; as it lays the foundation of one's ability to recognize his/her identity. While gauging humanity, relationships within family, friendship, love, and fraternity stays as a vital paradigm. The present scenario witnesses numerous broken relationships along with alienation and loneliness but dreams, desires, and ambitions motivate people to move forward in life. Children for instance crave to paint their dreams with vibrant colours and their fairy tales will be complete only with the love and support of their parents. Meanwhile there are few children who need special attention to finish their dream picture as they are victims of physical, intellectual, or emotional impairments. This paper focuses on the requirements of children with physical impairments during their developmental stages that include social, cognitive, educational, and emotional growth.

The novel *Wonder* opens by stating how normal August Pullman, a homeschooler of fifth grade feels about his physical impairment. August by birth was affected by Treacher Collins syndrome, a situation which has left him with a disfigurement on his face. August says,

*I know I'm not ordinary ten-year-old kid. I mean, sure, I do ordinary things. I eat ice cream. I ride bike. I play ball. I have an Xbox. Stuff like that makes me ordinary. I guess. And I feel ordinary. Inside. But I know ordinary kids don't make other ordinary kids run away screaming in playgrounds. I know ordinary kids don't get stared at wherever they go. (Palacio 5)*

Disability is a social label tagged to the individuals with impairments and victims like August are forced to fit into this socially constructed terminology. The agony that he feels is clearly evident when he states that he is an ordinary child, which shows that it is the society that does not allow him to feel normal. An innocent child who is unaware about the concept of social exclusion can feel traumatized when he/she is treated differently from the other children. August feels, "If I found a magic lamp and I could have one wish that I had a normal face that no one ever noticed at all. . . the only reason I'M not ordinary is that no one else sees me that way" (Palacio 5). Society that dishonors them with stigmas, also cover them with shame. Complicated prejudices can produce negative impacts in the cognitive development of an individual. The family and society should never fail their role of being an active participant in the development of a child as their encouragement and involvement lays foundation to their future endeavours.

This paper tries to question 'How does an individual feel when people stare at him/her?' One would certainly experience discomfort and embarrassment if they are placed in such a position. The situation of an individual with any physical impairment is more pathetic as they see the whole world staring at them;

which is a stare filled with pity or even disgust. Bandura states, “A great deal of human behaviour is activated by events which become threatening through association with painful experiences” (60). Disdainful approach towards individual who possess impairments can experience a dilemma in how to lead their life successfully. When the inner child is affected by fearful thoughts, it will continue to disturb them even when they grow old. Successful life depends on the good experiences an individual attain from his/her caregivers.

Children during their school days will be vibrant as they are full of passion, dreams, creativity, and imaginations. This stage prepares them to be a part of society by understanding and accepting the outside space other than their home. While stepping into the outer world, they would partake in new tasks or activities which until then were done with parental assistance. Excelling in school activities and getting appreciation for their achievements can invoke pride and joy. If their tiny steps are left unnoticed, a child will create an aura of inferiority complex which gradually leads to seclusion or isolation. Proper acknowledgement for their activities is an assurance for them to proceed in their life with self confidence.

A child of ten should feel free to dream but August felt bounded or caged as his thoughts were chained. “I can’t say I always wanted to go to school because that wouldn’t be exactly true. What I wanted was to go to school, but only if I could be like every other kid going to school” (Palacio 7). He was frightened to face the real world because of his condition and the only way he could overcome this is based on the way how people look at him. Right from birth, people treat children like August differently by categorizing them as victims of fate. This is evident when August states that “When I came out of Mom’s stomach . . . the whole room got very quiet” (Palacio 10). A moment of pitiful silence filled up in the room due to the deformity he was naturally gifted with. The children with physical impairments have been marginalized from the mainstream society without any consideration.

Parents, siblings, relatives, and teachers should play the vital role in making these children attain success by making them feel comfortable and equal. Bandura specifies that encouragement and support obtained from parents and friends would make children feel industrious and courageous. August’s dad was

thoughtful and suggested that they are supposed “. . . to help him deal with it” (Palacio14). The family decided to send August to school, considering that it might help him to socialize more with people. The world must provide a space for its residents with equal share of opportunities. Denying the rights of other individuals is not a politically correct ideology. Bandura mentions developmental studies helps children to learn through their observations and negative incentives can attribute to defective behavioural pattern.

August was frightened by the decision of his parents planning him to send to school. He was never worried of meeting young children because he felt that kids do not say things that hurt one’s feelings. He proclaims that it is teenagers or young adults that tend to exploit the emotional feelings of other individuals. Proper education and knowledge to accept individuals with impairments should be provided by family members, and teachers. August tried growing his hair long to ensure that his bangs would cover his eyes by blocking things that he did not desire to see. Through his statement, “I noticed Julian staring at me out of the corner of his eye. This is something I see people do a lot with me. They think I don’t know they’re staring, but I can tell from the way their heads are tilted” (Palacio 37), August highlights the attitude society has towards individuals with impairments. Conflicting opinions and behaviour shared can induce confusion in young adults and this could result in them questioning their abilities and existence.

August on his first day of school was “. . . so nervous that the butterflies in my stomach were more like pigeons flying around my insides. Mom and Dad were probably a little nervous, too, but they acted all excited for me, taking pictures of me and Via before we left the house since it was Via’s first day of school too” (Palacio 46). His parents were so proud of him for the way in which he started handling situations. When kids stared at him, August pretended that he did not notice them. At school everyone denied to sit next to August and when the teacher directed one of his classmates Henry to take his seat, he placed his backpack on the desk building a wall between himself and August. He was not much bothered by Henry’s attitude towards him as he by the time had gone through such rough situations. But August used to question himself “Why do I have to be so ugly. . .” (Palacio 77).

When a child is treated with difference at school, “They fear and avoid things that have been associated with aversive experiences, but like and seek those that have had pleasant associations” (Bandura 58-59). Painful experiences can activate the anxiety and fear resting in their unconscious mind. Such incidents can also make an individual turn defensive or aggressive. Vicarious situations can also debilitate the performance of a child at school or home. Rather than trying to extinguish one’s anxiety, not to induce any by the society is a right strategy to be implemented. During Halloween, August decided to dress up in his favourite costume of Boba Fett. He was immensely excited as this was the only day where he could walk straight without bending down his face as the mask would cover his wounds. But his happiness faded as he overheard how his classmates called him by different names such as “Rat boy. Freak. Monster. Freddy Krueger. E.T. Gross-out. Lizard face. Mutant” (Palacio 98). This painful realization regarding how others viewed him made August to feel that he would never go to school again. What caused him more pain was seeing his best friend Jack Will mocking him along with his classmates. Such negative attitudes may impede an individual’s development psychologically. This could possibly diminish his/her interest in socializing and could result in self isolation.

Complexities faced by children might affect their identity as well as future. August’s only solace was his sister Olivia to whom he shared his inner frustrations and though she tried to pacify him, one question raised by August made her go speechless. August stated “Do people go out of their way to avoid touching you Via?” (Palacio 143). They shared a moment of silence as she was not able to answer his question. Judgments passed based on appearance should be eradicated as it could hurt one’s feelings and confidence. An individual’s competence should not be evaluated based on physical impairments. Each child is different and depressive statements give rise to feelings of worthlessness and discouragement. Perplexed thoughts about self, resulted due to environmental and social influences should be debated and the society is supposed to be held responsible for snatching away from them their beautiful childhood.

Though August had to undergo many harsh criticisms and experiences, he decided that nothing would affect him by any means. Palacio in *Wonder* depicts the harassment and segregation experienced by children

with physical impairments. August shifted his thoughts from being concerned about his face; to people who are genuinely happy to be around with him. The concluding words of August Pullman is “Everyone in the world should get a standing ovation at least once in their life because we all overcome the world” (Palacio 365). Every individual may undergo through problems at some point in their life and their success relies on how they overcome such predicaments. One should try to train their mind to overcome fears without letting their peace affected by fear or anxiety.

“Self-motivation through self-reactive influences, wherein individuals observe their own behaviour, set goals, and reinforce their performances, is a major factor in a variety of motivational phenomena” (Bandura 162). August from being a shy boy with low self-esteem transformed into a tough person and achieved the standing ovation he yearned for from his schoolmates for being kind. Limited freedom and shallow experiences can curtail one’s dream resulting in unwanted fears. A transition can be made possible by providing equal access to opportunities as well as the practice of inclusion. Improving the quality of education by expanding the curriculum with proper information regarding disability can educate young readers with the hardships suffered by other children around them. Physical impairment is not a subject to be neglected, neither are the individuals who endure them. The paper suggests on taking measure that could eradicate the negative implications marked upon individuals with impairments. It aims to establish the concept of respecting diversity by emphasizing the rights of children.

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