

## Children struggle towards discrimination in *A Little Princess* by Frances Hodgson Burnett

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### Abstract

This study examines children's struggles in facing discrimination as depicted in *A Little Princess* by Frances Hodgson Burnett using the psychological Self-Determination Theory (SDT) approach by Ryan and Deci, which focuses on the fulfilment of basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In addition, Erikson's psychosocial development theory, particularly the stage of 'industry versus inferiority,' relates to the development of school-age children. Through this approach, the study should be able to deeply reveal the psychological and social processes through which Sara resists injustice within a social context. This study uses the qualitative descriptive method with a literary content analysis approach to explore Sara Crewe's struggle against discrimination. The results show that the novel uncovers the complex mechanisms behind Sara's independence, offering valuable lessons for educators, parents, and mental health practitioners in fostering children's resilience amid adversity.

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## INTRODUCTION

Children's literature is specifically created for children, including stories, poems, and tales, which are adapted to the development of their language comprehension and simpler forms compared to adult literature (Junaid, 2017). It also pushes young readers, especially children, in curiosity as well as their imagination to explore the world, ideas, and other new possibilities (Gilliam, 2024). Children's literature plays an important role in building resilience by providing narration and relevant characters that exemplify problem-solving, emotional comprehension, and diligence (Ramamurthy et al., 2024).

Many recent studies have shown that good children's literature can help children's social and emotional development. For example, the main characters in books often face challenges, which can encourage children to overcome their own problems. Children can improve their capacity for empathy by reading about other people's experiences. Children's literature can teach empathy and problem solving through the conflicts and characters in the story (Junaid, 2017). Isna Kasmilawati (1995) found that children's literature can stimulate emotional and intellectual development in 2- to 3-year-old children through story characters that show expressions of emotions

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such as empathy and awareness of others. The research conducted at the Kreativa Kindergarten (2022) showed that learning through traditional literature, such as legends and fairy tales, significantly improved the social-emotional skills of 5-6 year olds, including the courage to express opinions, express emotions, and respect others. In addition, teaching social and emotional skills through stories is effective in helping children develop these skills as a whole (Batubara et al., 2023). These three studies reinforce the conclusion that children's literature can teach empathy, emotion management, and social skills through the experiences of story characters.

One theme that continues to grow significantly within it is the concept of child struggle. For example, children struggle against discrimination in literary works describes children's efforts to combat various forms of unfair treatment at the hands of adults. Additionally, Lampert and Walsh (2010) state that children's literature or narrative texts help children recognize, resist and report abuse. This suggests that resistance serves as a tool for protection and education. In addition, children's literature can also increase self-confidence and courage to stand up for themselves when threatened.

In addition to increasing children's knowledge about violence and its prevention, children's literature also plays a role in promoting children's cognitive, emotional, and social development (Anshori, 2016) which then challenges adult-dictated adults (Kurnia et al., 2024).

In today's modern era and fast technology development, children face various social pressures, academic demands and complex psychological challenges. Therefore, children's literature can contribute to children's ability to face and adapt to the issues. Campagnaro et al. (2021) emphasise that children's literature can build psychological resilience through stories of characters who successfully overcome difficulties. Such stories play an important role in developing children's empathy and problem-solving skills, thereby preparing them to face real-life challenges.

Recent data shows in Detik.com an increasing trend in cases of violence against children, especially those committed by adults. For example, in East Nusa Tenggara, cases of violence

against women and children increased from 144 cases in 2024 to 198 cases as of May 2025, with perpetrators coming from various circles, such as religious leaders, teachers, and law enforcement officials. In the national level, many cases of physical and sexual violence against children handled during early 2025 were also reported the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection.

Data from the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) shows high reports of physical, psychological and sexual violence, including in the family and school environment. This situation confirms that violence against children is not only an individual problem, but also a social problem that requires serious attention.

In this context, children's literature with struggle themes is crucial as it can help children recognise their rights and build courage to stand up against domination or violence. Stories featuring strong and independent child characters provide concrete examples of how children can think critically and act to protect themselves from their social environment. Thus, children's literature plays a dual role as an effective educational medium to build children's awareness and psychological resilience.

The urgency of addressing the issue of child struggle is all the more apparent given the increasing trend of violence and the complexity of the challenges facing children today. Through struggle, children can learn to recognise their rights, develop their mental and emotional strength, and be encouraged to actively participate in society. This not only helps prevent violence and abuse, but also builds a strong, independent and highly competitive generation for the future. Therefore, literature and education are an important strategy in the effort to build a safer and fairer future for children.

This research discusses how is the discrimination experienced by Sara Crewe depicted in the novel *A Little Princess* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. The approach used in this study is psychological, applying Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Ryan and Deci, which focuses on the fulfilment of basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In addition, Erikson's psychosocial development theory, particularly the stage of 'industry versus inferiority,' relates to the development of school-age children. Through these theoretical lenses, this

research aims to reveal how children literature can be an effective medium in shaping children's character and independence.

## METHODS

This study will use the qualitative descriptive method with a literary content analysis approach to explore Sara Crewe's struggle against discrimination in Frances Hodgson Burnett's novel *A Little Princess* using Edward Deci and Richard Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory. The primary data are words, phrases, clauses, and dialogues depicting the character's development taken from the novel.

The analysis identified themes related to the fulfilment of basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and social belonging) based on Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Additionally, the analysis explored how Erikson's concept of the 'industrial versus inferiority' manifested in Sara's behaviour and decision-making. Subsequently, researchers employed literary interpretation methods to analyse the symbolic meanings in Sara's actions, dialogue, and social relationships, interpreting them as forms of resistance against discrimination and efforts to build independence and self-confidence. Through this approach, the study should be able to deeply reveal the psychological and social processes through which Sara resists injustice within a social context.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Frances Hodgson Burnett's novel *A Little Princess*, the main character Sara Crewe experiences various forms of discrimination and abuse.

### 1. THE DISCRIMINATION PORTRAYED IN THE NOVEL

#### 1.1 Social Class Discrimination

Social class discrimination refers to treating someone differently based on their economic status. According to Savage (2013), discrimination based on social class arises from inequality in access to economic, social, and cultural capital. This allows certain groups to

maintain their privileges, while groups with less capital are at risk of social isolation. This is what Sara Crewe experienced. At the beginning of the story, she is described as a wealthy and respected student, but after the news of her father's death, she is suddenly treated as a servant by Miss Minchin.

"You are a beggar,...you have no relations and no home, and no one to take care of you." (Burnett, 2017, p.101)

Then, Miss Minchin revoked Sara's privileges of having a beautiful room and luxurious clothes. She is also forced Sara to live in the cold and dirty attic of the dormitory. After that, Sara also had to do rough work for her age such as cleaning, cooking, and even serving other students without pay.

"You are not a princess any longer.... You are like Becky – you must work for your living." (Burnett, 2017, p.102)

Sara was also prohibited from interacting with other students because of her new status as no longer a student, she was considered unequal to other students in the dormitory. This was evident in her dialogue with Ermengarde.

"Miss Minchin does not want me to talk to the girls. Most of them don't want to talk to me. I thought—perhaps—you didn't. So I tried to keep out of your way." (Burnett, 2017, p.118)

During winter, Sara was only given thin clothes to keep her warm. She was also often not given enough food.

"There's some bread in the pantry," said the cook. "That's all you'll get at this time of day."

Sara went and found the bread. It was old and hard and dry. The cook was in too vicious a humor to give her anything to eat with it. (Burnett, 2017, p.198)

Analysis of these situations show that social class discrimination greatly influences how people are treated in society, as evidenced by Sara's experience. After she lost her economic status, she

was immediately considered 'worthless'. This is in line with Savage's (2013) concept, which states that differences in social and economic capital can lead to discrimination and social isolation.

### 1.2 Psychological Discrimination

Psychological discrimination is defined as repeated behavior by parents that conveys to children that they are worthless, inferior, unloved, unwanted, or only valuable for fulfilling the needs of others (Spinazzola et al., 2014). Psychological discrimination refers to mentally harmful treatment of a person, which often involves manipulative behaviour, such as gaslighting. This is where someone tries to make the victim doubt themselves. This is what Sara Crewe experienced. She was openly humiliated with false accusations and insults, giving the impression that she was worthless. As can be seen in the following dialogue.

"Are you so stupid that you cannot understand? I tell you that you are quite alone in the world, and have no one to do anything for you, unless I choose to keep you here out of charity." (Burnett, 2017, p. 101)

From the dialogue above, it can be seen that Sara is receives ridicule and insults from Miss Minchin, which isolates her from society and makes her feel worthless and lonely. Spinazzola (2014) explains that such treatment threatens Sara's basic psychological needs and damages her emotional stability.

### 1.3 Educational Discrimination

Educational discrimination refers to unfair treatment in access to education. According to Anyon (2017), educational discrimination occurs through differences in curriculum and treatment based on social class, whereby students from lower social classes have limited access to learning. As Sara experienced, even though Sara was previously known as a bright student, she was still prohibited from attending classes and had to work

She had been kept at work until after the hour at which the pupils went to bed, and

after that she had gone to her lessons in the lonely schoolroom. (Burnett, 2017, p.117)

This quote emphasizes Sara's perseverance and intellectual resistance, despite her emotional and physical exhaustion. This scene reflects that education can be a means of self-realization and mental escape in stressful situations. Nikolajeva (2009) argues that child characters who engage in intellectual activities despite facing difficulties demonstrate psychological maturity and resilience. Sara's perseverance in continuing her studies after working shows that she has regained control over her identity and future.

These various forms of discrimination did not continue indefinitely. Sara Crewe, described as an intelligent child, found her own way to fight against such discrimination. This article will explore how Sara Crewe struggles against such discrimination in the novel *A Little Princess* by Frances Hodgson Burnett using the Self-Determination approach (SDT). Then, it is deepened with Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory.

## 2. THE CHARACTER'S INDEPENDENCE CONSTRUCTION

Based on the analysis of the novel of *A Little Princess* using the Self-determination Theory (SDT) by Deci & Ryan (2012) approach and E. H. Erikson (1963) Psychosocial Development Theory, it is found that Sara Crewe shows independence through the fulfillment of three basic psychological needs (SDT) while successfully resolving the crisis of industry vs. inferiority (Erikson). The following are the results of the analysis.

### 2.1 Dimensions of Autonomy

Sara's desire for independence is clearly shown in various forms of resistance and self-determination, which are consistently shown throughout the story. One example is in her words "I am a princess inside. It would be easy to be a princess if I were dressed in cloth of gold, but it is a great deal more of a triumph to be one all the time when no one knows it" (Burnett, 2017, p.159)

This statement shows that Salina has a strong awareness of her identity and self-worth without relying on external recognition. This reflects the core of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), particularly the principle of autonomy. Autonomy means acting in accordance with one's true self and personal values (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Sara chose to act with dignity and kindness, even though no one was watching or rewarding her. Research by Vansteenkiste et al. (2004) supports this idea, showing that autonomous motivation leads to greater satisfaction, perseverance, and moral development. Sara's internal belief that she remains a princess despite suffering demonstrates that she acts in accordance with her internal control, not due to social pressure or fear. Sara's internal belief that 'despite suffering, she remains a princess' shows that she acts based on internal control, not social pressure or fear, meaning she has developed emotional and ethical resilience.

Furthermore, Sara strengthens her self-confidence through fictional conversations with a doll named Emily, which acts as a positive internal dialogue mechanism and helps her maintain her mental strength and determination, even in difficult situations. Finally, Sara has retained the noble values she learned from her father, which are reflected in the following words:

"If nature has made you for a giver, your hands are born open" (Burnett, 2017, p.75)

which shows that she remains committed to the principles of kindness and generosity as part of her identity. These three aspects together illustrate how Sara maintains her psychological autonomy despite facing discrimination and social pressure. The dimension of autonomy is evident in her ability to maintain control over herself and her imagination as a form of escape from social pressure, even though she has lost her social status.

## 2.2 Dimensions of Competency

Sara Crewe's fulfilment of competency requirements is evident through various aspects that reflect her development in dealing with difficult situations. First, Sara demonstrates strong

cognitive strategies by learning independently in the attic, an effort that reflects her knowledge and ability to learn without direct guidance, as described in the novel,

"I know when she is alone until midnight, learning from her books;" (Burnett, 2017, p. 193)

This indicates that despite feeling isolated and tired, she has a deep desire to acquire knowledge. According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), competence is a basic psychological need to feel effective in one's own actions (Deci & Ryan, 2012). By continuing to learn despite challenging circumstances, Sara demonstrates that she is not merely seeking survival but also personal growth. Research by Jang et al. (2010) supports this, showing that individuals with self-confidence become more persistent, committed, and emotionally resilient. Sara's resilience reflects her inner desire to overcome difficulties and maintain her identity through intellectual endurance.

In addition, Sara also demonstrated adaptive creativity by transforming a cramped and dilapidated attic space into a place full of imagination and hope, turning it into an escape from harsh reality. Sara has high emotional literacy, as seen in her ability to articulate her feelings and experiences through the internal narratives she creates herself.

Her imagination was beginning to work for her..... "that will be a good place to pretend about. I am a prisoner in the Bastille"..... "I shall pretend that," she said; "and it will be a great comfort." (Burnett, 2017, p.119-120)

This quote shows how Sara uses imagination as a cognitive and emotional strategy to cope with suffering. This reflects her adaptive creativity and high emotional intelligence, enabling her to express her emotions through rich inner narratives. According to Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012), this behaviour fulfils the 'need for competence', which is the feeling of efficiency and ability. Sara's ability to transform an unfavourable situation through her imagination demonstrates

her intellectual, emotional, and creative development. Research by Vasalampi et al. (2009) shows that emotions can control the environment and that emotions enhance resilience and happiness. Sara's imagination is not merely fantasy but a form of self-control and survival that enables growth even in difficult conditions.

The analysis collectively illustrates how Sara's competencies developed not only intellectually, but also emotionally and creatively, helping her to survive and thrive in challenging circumstances.

### 2.3 Dimensions of Relatedness

Sara's social network was limited, her friendships with Becky and Ermengarde provided her with emotional support and a sense of belonging in a harsh environment,

"I told you we were just the same—only two little girls—just two little girls. You see how true it is. There's no difference now." (Burnett, 2017, p. 105)

This reflects a strong desire to relate with others, which is one of the main elements of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SDT refers to the human desire to relate with others, feel valued, and seek close emotional relationships (Deci & Ryan, 2010). Sara's desire to connect stems from several key elements that help her cope with discrimination and life's challenges. Despite her limited social network, her friendship with Becky and Ermengarde provides emotional support and a sense of connection in a difficult environment. By acknowledging Becky as an equal, Sara rejects the class barriers imposed on her and chooses empathy and solidarity. Research by Furrer & Skinner (2003) shows that a sense of connection strengthens emotional security and motivation, especially in high-pressure situations. Sara's actions demonstrate that meaningful relationships strengthen personality and provide emotional strength during difficult times.

Secondly, there is a strong symbolic attachment through her doll named Emily, who helps Sara express her feelings and alleviate her loneliness,

"There was nobody but Emily—no one in the world. An there she sat." (Burnett, 2017, p.145)

Although Emily is not a real person, Sara's feelings of connection and comfort onto her, and uses her imagination to create a sense of relatedness. This reflects the interdependence aspect of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which suggests that humans have a need for emotional connection and a sense of belonging (Deci & Ryan, 2012). In the absence of support from real people, Sara symbolically fulfils this need through Emily and maintains her psychological balance. Recent research by Van den Berghe et al. (2014) shows that emotional support (including through imagination) can enhance the ability to cope with difficulties and protect against emotional distress. Although the relationship between Sara and Emily is fictional, it plays a real role in fulfilling her need for connection in a lonely world, thereby supporting her emotional survival.

### 2.4 Industry versus Inferiority Crisis Resolution

Sara successfully overcame the developmental crisis of industry versus inferiority in several significant ways. First, she achieved productivity by continuing to learn and help others despite her limitations,

"She taught the younger children French and heard their other lessons," (Burnett, 2017, p.109)

This is consistent with the 'hard work versus inferiority' stage in Erikson's proposed psychosocial development stages, which occurs during middle childhood and focuses on the child's need to develop abilities and gain recognition for their efforts (E. H. Erikson, 1963). By taking on the role of a teacher, Sara demonstrated her usefulness and developed a sense of hard work, thereby avoiding feelings of inferiority despite her declining social status. Recent research by Côté (2015) supports this idea, showing that children who play a role in confirming their abilities develop self-confidence and perseverance more effectively. Sara's ability to teach and provide support demonstrates how she maintains her

identity and self-confidence through goal-oriented activities.

Secondly, Sara uses creative compensation by utilising her imagination as a tool to cope with deprivation and severe hardship.

“I like this attic—I like it! It is nicer than downstairs!”

“It is so little and so high above everything,” she said, “that it is almost like a nest in a tree..... I can lie in bed and look right up into the sky.... It is like a square patch of light... You see, it’s really a beautiful little room.” (Burnett, 2017, p.125-127)

This reflects Erikson’s psychosocial stage “Industry versus Inferiority,” where children develop self-confidence by overcoming difficulties and finding meaning in their actions (E. H. Erikson, 1963). Sara transformed the attic space not as a punishment but into a beautiful and imaginative personal space, demonstrating emotional strength and adaptability. Recent research by McLean et al. (2010) shows that children can develop stronger identity and self-confidence by finding meaning in negative experiences. Sara’s positive assessment of her attic indicates that she developed emotional resilience and self-control in an unfavourable situation, thereby fostering a sense of ‘work.’

Third, she reflects on her identity and changes her self-image from a rich princess to a strong and dignified princess, a moral princess.

“When things are horrible—just horrible—I think as hard as ever I can of being a princess. I say to myself “I am a princess, and I am a fairy one, and because I am a fairy nothing can hurt me or make me uncomfortable”. (Burnett, 2017, p.178)

This shows how Sara maintains her emotional strength through imaginary inner dialogue when facing difficulties. This reflects Erikson’s psychosocial stage of “industry versus inferiority,” where children learn to overcome difficulties, sharpen their skills, and find meaning in life (E. H.

Erikson, 1963). Through this process, Sara overcomes her feelings of inferiority and gains greater self-confidence and independence. McLean et al. (2010) research supports this, showing that children who use personal stories to find meaning in disasters develop more courageous actions, a clear identity, and emotional stability. Sara’s moral imagination becomes a strong adaptive strategy for establishing her self-worth and maintaining her inner strength even in the most difficult moments.

## CONCLUSION

This study successfully revealed that Sara Crewe’s resilience in facing discrimination in the novel *A Little Princess* is a manifestation of the fulfilment of basic psychological needs according to Self-Determination Theory (SDT) proposed by Ryan and Deci. The aspect of autonomy is clearly seen through Sara’s rejection of the definition of self-determination by her environment, as expressed in her statement, ‘I am a princess inside.’ Sara’s competence is manifested through self-directed learning and creative adaptation in facing difficult situations. Additionally, social relatedness is formed through limited yet meaningful relationships with Becky and the doll Emily, who serve as sources of emotional support for her.

Furthermore, from the perspective of Erik Erikson’s psychosocial development theory, Sara successfully resolves the crisis of the ‘industry versus inferiority’ stage by transforming the threat of inferiority into productivity through imagination and actions. She does not allow social pressure to make her feel inferior but instead uses creativity and perseverance to build self-confidence and independence.

This study demonstrates that *A Little Princess* concrete is not merely a children’s story but a literary case study on psychological resilience. The combination of the SDT and Erikson approaches successfully uncovers the complex mechanisms behind Sara’s independence, offering valuable lessons for educators, parents, and mental health practitioners in fostering children’s resilience amid adversity.

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