

Representation of Black Girl Discovering Self-Esteem in Akeelah and The Bee Film

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to discover the self-esteem portrayed in Akeelah and the Bee film by Doug Atchison. The film's theme is about Akeelah Anderson achieving success in a spelling bee competition and having a challenge to build her self-esteem. Self-esteem is a person's overall sense of self-worth or personal value. It significantly influences motivation, behavior, and overall well-being. Collectively these characters graphically portray a powerful theme regarding academic motivation. This study employs a qualitative approach which focuses on content analysis. The analysis of self-esteem is applied by using four aspects of Coopersimth's self-esteem namely competence, power, significance, and virtue. Each aspect is elaborated based on the scripts and depicts self-esteem regarding the theory. As a result, Akeelah has all aspects of self-esteem in her personality that help her to achieve her goal. The important message sent to the audience is that Akeelah's story demonstrates self-esteem is not something we are born with, but rather something we build through challenges, support from others, and a belief in our abilities

Key words: Self Esteem; Spelling Be; Film

INTRODUCTION

Film as a literature product which is not only an interesting medium for entertainment but also can support the aspects of educational values. By integrating film into academic settings, it will make people study more easily and the learning process will be more fun. There are a lot of benefits taking film as educational material. As stated by Harmer (2001) movies can help people understand language, understand the culture of other regions, and allow people to communicate with the rules of social and business situations. The combination of visual and auditory elements, narrative framework, and moral values are considered a special quality for teaching material. It provides a stimulating learning experience that accommodates various learning styles which could enhance the educational process.

A study conducted by Vanessa, & Arie, (2019) investigated the usage of films as an educational tool for enhancing English language skills and character development. This examined how films demonstrated vast roles of humans affect students' character qualities. The writer highlighted the benefits of using films to teach psychological concepts, improve critical thinking, and engage students successfully. This study also offered practical ideas and best practices for integrating films into human psychology courses.

Furthermore, Wegner in Rajpopat, (2023) cited films can foster critical thinking and analytical skills by presenting multiple perspectives and moral dilemmas. The wide narrative of the film portrays the characters of human behavior. Moreover, the emotional impact of films can elicit empathy and deeper reflections on societal issues and human behavior in a real-life context. So presenting various characters will encourage learners to discuss and analysis of human life especially those who interested in psychological theories and concepts

Concerning film as a medium for character development, the film industry has created a variety of genres in which educational situations can be inserted into the narrative framework. The children's narrative is a suitable theme for providing educational values, particularly for young people who require frequent exposure to positive character development during their developmental phase (Champoux, 2001). Watching films is one activity that kids like to do in their free time. Therefore, choosing the appropriate film is pivotal in providing accessible instruments that can inspire them and cultivate pedagogical aspects in their life. Characters such as loyalty, respect, tolerance, never giving up, self-confidence, and other positive attitudes are frequently shown in movie stories. It can be a hero and a role model for children, providing motivation in their lives.

Akeelah and the Bee is one example of a children's film that teaches educational values to help children achieve their goals. This film also shows the social challenges that occur as a result of a successful education. The baseline story not only relates to the technical aspects of learning English but also depicts the process of character development. Akeelah's film is about a young black African American living in a low-income area who tries to win a national spelling bee competition. Akeelah is unsure of herself and afraid she is not as brilliant as she thinks, especially when it comes to spelling and the demands placed on her. Overall, this film demonstrates a person's journey to develop self-esteem, which is one aspect of positive psychology that is examined in this study.

According to Coopersmith (1967) in Santrock, (2003), self-esteem is an appraisal of oneself in an assessment, success, and value where individuals believe themselves to be capable, significant, successful, and worthy. Similarly, Branden, (1987) noted that self-esteem is one's ability to handle the issues in his/her life and feel worthwhile, no matter what the conditions are. It can be said that self-esteem is a person's overall sense of self-worth or personal value. It reflects how much confidence and respect one has for themselves. High self-esteem leads to positive

self-perception and confidence, while low self-esteem can result in self-doubt and insecurity. Coopersmith divides self-esteem into four aspects namely power, significance, virtue, and competence. *Significance* refers to the feeling of being valued and important to others, particularly in one's social environment. It involves having a sense of belonging, acceptance, and popularity. *Virtue* relates to an individual's moral character and their adherence to values and principles. It involves feeling good about oneself and having a strong sense of right and wrong. Power encompasses an individual's physical and emotional fortitude, including their resilience and ability to cope with challenges. It involves having the strength to stand up for oneself and one's beliefs. And lastly, *competence* regards an individual's perceived ability to perform tasks, achieve goals, and succeed in various areas of life. It involves feeling confident in one's abilities and having a sense of mastery.

A lot of studies have been conducted to investigate the role of self-esteem in psychological aspects of people's lives. Scholars have found significant relationships between the said levels of specificity of self-esteem and positive emotions (Anna & Guban-Caisido, 2020). Many results indicate that high self-esteem correlates with positive emotions, better social adjustment, positive psychological outcomes, and overall life satisfaction (Leary, M. R., & MacDonald, 2003). Conversely, low self-esteem is associated with low self-appreciation, self-defeating attitudes, and psychological and social problems (Narafshan, M. H., & Noori, 2018). Furthermore, in educational settings, the correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement has been shown in many investigations over time. For example, students with higher self-esteem tend to have better academic outcomes (Mann, 2006). Others, in language learning self-esteem has indicated a positive correlation to improve speaking skills (Dewi & Jimmi, 2018; Kalanzadeh et al., 2013; Sa'diyah, 2012)

Considering this topic has been extensively explored and the findings are highly substantial, any study item regarding self-esteem remains interesting to discuss, including self-esteem in a film theme. Concerning the object of this research, *Akeelah and the Bee* has supported the theme of self-esteem as central to developing the protagonist's character, Akeelah Anderson. Akeelah's story demonstrates young girls' journey in overcoming self-doubt, developing self-esteem, and ultimately embracing one's potential. There are some key aspects of how self-esteem plays a pivotal role in achieving success in her life. This film has been the subject of earlier investigations. The themes of analysis range from moral principles to self-concept, politeness, and linguistic abilities, but there has been little inquiry into self-esteem. So, the author is eager to elaborate on Akeelah's journey to success and find her dynamic self-esteem along the way.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Black Girlhood and Media Representation

In the last decade, there has been a growing call for media to portray Black girls beyond harmful stereotypes. June Eric-Udorie (2016) emphasizes that *Akeelah* and *the Bee* offered one of the first widely visible portrayals of Black girlhood that felt authentic and aspirational to young Black viewers. She notes, “*Akeelah* didn’t just look like me; I felt like she was me,” reflecting how rare and impactful it is for Black girls to see themselves represented as brilliant, soft-spoken, and deeply capable. Hananto (2021), in a semiotic and race-centered analysis, argues that the film challenges the stereotype of Black girls as academic underachievers. Through narrative elements such as mentorship, community involvement, and personal growth, *Akeelah* is framed not only as a spelling prodigy but also as a symbol of resilience and potential within her community. The spelling bee competition becomes a metaphor for her self-discovery and resistance to societal limitations.

Self-Esteem and Identity Development in Black Girls

Akeelah’s transformation from self-doubt to self-assurance resonates with scholarship on self-concept and esteem in young Black girls. Mobegi (2016) identifies several turning points in the film where *Akeelah*’s confidence develops—especially as she begins to internalize the support and encouragement from figures like Dr. Larabee and her community. Rather than depicting self-esteem as an innate trait, the film portrays it as a developmental process influenced by relationships, mentorship, and overcoming adversity. This trajectory mirrors real-life findings in youth psychology, where affirmation from one’s cultural group and role models plays a crucial role in shaping identity and self-worth. Hananto (2021) also supports this view, suggesting that the character’s progress shows how values like hard work, discipline, and community trust can nurture self-esteem and success among marginalized youth.

Intersectionality and Cultural Representation

The film’s narrative engages with race, class, and gender in subtle but powerful ways. *Akeelah*’s environment—marked by socio-economic struggle, single parenting, and under-resourced schools—contrasts sharply with the elite spaces she later navigates. Yet, instead of succumbing to tokenism, the film emphasizes her ability to thrive while staying rooted in her culture and community. This aspect is key in Eric-Udorie’s (2016) commentary, where she argues that *Akeelah*’s representation breaks the mold of traditional “success” stories by showcasing a Black girl who doesn’t have to reject her background to achieve her goals.

Educational Empowerment and Psychological Growth

Education is not just a tool for competition in the film—it is a space for *Akeelah*’s emotional and psychological growth. Hananto (2021) interprets the spelling bee not

merely as an academic pursuit but as a symbolic reclaiming of self-worth. The role of Dr. Larabee as a mentor is significant here, reflecting real-world research on the importance of culturally affirming mentorship in boosting academic engagement and personal development among Black youth.

METHOD

The writer used a library and descriptive–qualitative research in this study. It focuses on how self-esteem portrays the main character of Akeelah Anderson to achieve success in spelling bee competitions. The aspects of self-esteem will elaborate on her journey showing the process to overcome the obstacles. There are two sorts of data sources: primary and secondary. The primary data is taken from the *Akeelah and The Bee* film which is released and directed in 2006 by Doug Atchison. The writer used the script of the film that has been made in a book. Secondary data can be gathered from books, journal articles, or other sources of information related to the topic of self-esteem. The data was gained and analyzed using content analysis which is a study of the content concerning the meanings, contexts, and intentions contained in messages (Roberts, 2015). In analyzing, Coopersmith's theory was employed to identify the self-esteem portrayed in the main character. There are several steps to be carried out during the research. First, watch the film frequently to learn about the whole story. Second, read the script to identify self-esteem in Akeelah's character. Third, collect the data and categorize self-esteem into some aspects. The last, analyze the data based on Coopersmith's theory and write it into the final report.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The object of investigation is *Akeelah and Bee's* film directed by Doug Atchison in 2006. This film is about Akeelah Anderson, an eleven-year-old girl from South Los Angeles who wins the spelling bee competition. Akeelah is a smart and talented girl, especially in the spelling bee. However, her lack of self-confidence, her weak economic family background and living in a less conducive environment caused her to hide her abilities. Dr. Larabee, a former professor and spelling coach, saw her potential and pushed her to compete in the spelling bee competition. However, Akeelah is unsure of herself and fears she isn't as intelligent as he believes. It is stated in the dialog below.

Excerpt:

Akeelah: Maybe I'm not as smart as you think I am.

Dr. Larabee: Perhaps you're afraid that you are. You know, Akeelah, our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.

Dr. Larabee: It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, "Who am I to be brilliant, talented, fabulous?" Actually, who are you not to be?

Akeelah took in Dr. Larabee's words and realized that she had been holding herself back. This moment is significant because it highlights Akeelah's internal struggle with self-doubt and fear of failure. Dr. Larabee's words inspired her to embrace her intelligence and potential which became the turning point in her journey to become a spelling bee winner. Having coaching from Dr. Larabee is also a pivotal stage in increasing Akeelah's self-esteem. The level of self-esteem gradually changed when she started participating in spelling bee competitions at her school. According to Coopersmith., (1967) a psychologist who is famous for his work on Self-Esteem, there are four main characteristics of healthy Self-Esteem, namely power, significance, virtue, and competence. Those aspects of self-esteem indicated through this film will be elaborated on in the following explanations.

Competence

Competence demonstrates high performance to meet needs and get achievements to lead further success in various areas of life. Competence also indicates a person's performance in carrying out tasks and on a large scale the ability to achieve predetermined goals which gain self-confidence in a particular field.

Akeelah's competence, especially in spelling, has been shown since she was little when her father introduced her to words as her activity for playing. Nevertheless, she hid this ability and did not want other people to know because she avoided being a spot lite. However, this attitude gradually changed after she was forced to join in the spelling bee competition. Dr. Larabee as her mentor also has a big role in disclosing Akeelah's potential and perspective on success. Increasing number and the level of competition, her self-confidence and ability in spelling were boosted as well. Initially, Akeelah's competence has been recognized by her friends and her enemies in the school. As revealed in one moment when Akeelah got conversation with her close friend Georgia after school "Well, you are good, you know" Georgia said quietly. "you gonna do it?" (p.16). This script came up after Akeelah was offered to join a spelling bee competition by her teacher.

Another scent shown that her haters in the class admitted her academic ability as well. "Me and Elaine, we want you to take care of our English homework. Everyone calls you a brainiac." (p.25). This recognition is expressed when they ask Akeelah to do their homework. Akeelah's intelligence was officially proven when she initially won a spelling bee competition at her school and became a representative candidate for the next competition at the regional level. Her school principal was very excited with this victory "You did absolutely great. You were spelling words I can't even spell." (p.35. From the school to the national level competition, Akeelah's ability in spelling had been developed well. The increase in her competence also greatly affected her self-esteem growth. The school's persuasion and the family's encouragement change the level of her confidence on her ability and belief. This is an important message in building self-esteem: that self-confidence comes with effort and experience, not just natural talent. The process of learning and self-improvement greatly influences the level of self-esteem.

Significant

Significant refers to the attention, affection, and expression of love received by a person from others, which indicates the individual's acceptance and popularity in the social environment. Warmth, friendliness, social assertiveness, assistance, and positive responses from others indicate environmental acceptance. The interest of the individual is exhibited by accepting who they are. Akeelah is an introverted girl who is unappreciative of her potential. Initially, she was reluctant to enter the competition because she did not want to be popular or the focus of attention. However, when more people approached Akeelah about participating in the tournament and how important it is to everyone around her, that feeling diminished and her self-esteem gradually grew.

The statements that support the condition can be seen in the following examples. The first is when Devon, Akeelah's old bother convinced her to join the competition. "Tell you what, Just do this contest - and if you make it all the way to DC, I'll parachute down to see you." (p.38). Devon encouraged Akeelah and wanted her to compete in the Spelling Bee, even promising to make a parachute jump if she wins in Washington DC. A significant aspect of Akeelah's existence is also shown by her friend Javier, who is a spelling bee contestant from a prestigious school in Woodland Hills. Javier asked Akeelah to come to his birthday party and introduced her to the club members in Woodland Hills. Akeelah considers herself extremely fortunate to have a close buddy such as Javier. Even though Akeelah is a black kid from a low-income family, Javier recognizes and values her abilities and potential in the spelling bee. Akeelah feels very lucky to have a good friend like Javier. Although Akeelah is a black girl and comes from a poor family, Javier still appreciates her personality and abilities. Javier's attention and encouragement are what motivate Akeelah to enter the tournament.

Akeelah's spelling bee has been known in her school. Mr. Welch, the principal of Akeelah's school, demanded that she join the competition. He asked Akeelah to bring her school's name to participate at the regional level because it could improve the school's prestige and provide some rewards. "Mrs. Anderson, I beg you to reconsider. Akeelah's doing this as much for Crenshaw as for herself. If she wins, there is so much we'll be able to accomplish for the school." (87). According to dialogues above, Akeelah's existence is significant for her family, friends, and school. As a result, this feeling refers to the perception of being appreciated and important by others, as well as a sense of belonging, acceptance, and popularity. Feeling respected by family, friends, and society fosters strong relationships that reinforce positive self-esteem.

Virtue

Virtue shows obedience to follow moral and ethical standards and religion. The individuals will avoid bad behavior and do what is permitted by morals, ethics, and religion. They consider to have an attitude that can develop positive self-esteem

towards himself. Akeelah's good attitude has been characterized since childhood taught by her parents. Even though she lives in a tough and crime-ridden environment, her family tries to keep their children from a bad environment.

Akeelah's good character were demonstrated on several occasions. One example is when Akeelah was bullied by her school friends. She chose to leave and ignore them to prevent confrontations and fights. Another fact is that Akeelah always tries to obey her mother's rules. Even though she doesn't like or agree with her, she always follows her mother's demands. A positive personality is also depicted during the competitions. Akeelah is a nice kid and always supports Javier, her buddy, and her opponent as well in the spelling competition. Even though Javier is her competitor, she constantly wishes for him to win the challenge as well.

Akeelah upheld the friendship and sportsmanship. She thanked everyone who helped her win, including her family, her teacher, Ms. Cross, Mr. Welch, Dr. Larabee, her friends and classmates. She appreciated everyone, even if it was simply a modest contribution and help. The value of friendship is further demonstrated when Akeelah asks her best friend Georgia to accompany her to a national competition in Washington, DC. Their friendship, which had been slightly strained owing to Akeelah's busy schedule, was finally rekindled when Akeelah apologized and requested Georgia to accompany her, 'But, you know what, I'd give it all up if it meant to you and I could hang out again. Friends are more important.' (p. 148).

Another moment at night before the final of the national spelling bee competition in Washington DC. Akeelah invited Dylan, her big opponent to hang out together with other participants to relax before the competition. This demonstrates Akeelah's nobility and sympathy since Dylan faced pressure and harassment from his haughty father. Although Dylan was her main competitor, she felt sorry for Dylan who was very stressed by his fierce and ambitious parents

A remarkable action in the final competition is shown when Akeelah competes with Dylan to get the winner. She purposefully misspelled one of the terms assigned by the judges. She wanted to give Dylan the win that his parents so desperately craved. But in fact, they both finally won since they had the same score. This was the first spelling bee competition in which two people won the champions. This was due to Akeelah's generosity, as she was prepared to give in despite having the ability to beat Dylan. Akeelah and Dylan congratulated each other after winning the National Spelling Bee. The rivalry is fading with the new friendships. They are thrilled since they received the award jointly. The virtue and being appreciative demonstrated above are a value of compassion that contributes to a person's strong self-esteem.

Power

Power shows the ability of a person to regulate and control behavior and get recognition for that behavior from others. Power is also expressed by the

recognition and respect that an individual receives from others. Emotional control, people respect, resilience to cope with challenges, and the strength to stand up for one's self and belief are indicators that reflect the power of self-esteem. Akeelah initially lacked confidence in her abilities but with the help of her family and a good mentor like Dr. Larabee, her lack of confidence gradually transformed into a strong belief in her own ability and determination to succeed. When first trained by Dr. Larabee, Akeelah promised and committed to practice, "Well, I'm committed." (p.76).

The thing that changed her perspective was when Dr. Larabee delivered a quote that changed her paradigm towards herself, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. You have to stand up and show people what you can do." (p.78). Akeelah's strength emerged from her belief in her mentor, Dr. Larabee, and her desire to win the competition. She worked harder than she had ever imagined before that was appreciated by Dr. Larabee, "That 's all right. Most of them aren't ...as compliment as you." (p. 99) The first compliment Akeelah had ever received directly from Dr. Larabee and she cherished it. But her power was tested when Dr. Larabee withdrew from coaching before the national competition event in Washington DC. At first, Akeelah felt down, but supported by her mother and the people around her, she stood up and committed to continue the competition. The power to control emotions and to cope with the challenge is shown by Akeelah when her mother asks her, "You feel confident? more and more Akeelah said. "All people know about you, they've seen you on TV. And believe me, they're pullin' for you. Look around you; there's probably fifty thousand folks who'd like to coach you, starting with me." (p.113). Tanya her mother supported her in practicing by herself and help from other people. With the mental strength to win the competition, Akeelah trained hard without Dr. Larabee. When the moment came for the national spelling bee competition, Akeelah was ready with her mental and physical preparation. As she stated before entering the national spelling bee at DC, "As I ready as I'll ever be. I know I'm up against a bunch of genius spellers. But I don't let that bother me. I'm pretty good myself (p. 153). This demonstrated Akeelah's mental power to face the challenges that retarded her goal to win the national spelling bee.

Through this film, Akeelah demonstrated her growth in spelling and her development of self-esteem which is increased gradually in line with her effort to cope with the challenges. Supported by Rosenberg's theory (Rosenberg, 1995) that self-esteem is shaped by early experiences- parental support, social interactions, and life experiences influence self-esteem development. The four aspects of self-esteem portrayed by Akeelah can be stated in the following statements: Akeelah's growing confidence and spelling skills, fostered by her supportive teacher and family, showcase the aspect of *competence* in self-esteem. Akeelah's capacity to overcome obstacles and push herself to participate in the competition highlights the *power* aspect, where she learns to exert influence over her own life and goals. Akeelah's journey to the National Spelling Bee exemplifies her rising feeling of *significance* as she recognizes her ability and the value of her efforts. Akeelah's

commitment to study and optimistic attitude in the face of adversity represents *the virtue* part of self-esteem, in which she learns to appreciate her ideals and principles.

Coopersmith's theory also emphasizes that these four aspects are interconnected and influence one another. A strong sense of competence, for example, can increase one's sense of significance and virtue. In contrast, experiencing a lack of significance or ability can have a detrimental impact on one's total self-worth.(Coopersmith., 1967). The research also revealed several key themes, including the collision of social power differentials, the value of mentor/mentee relationships, a performance-focused learning environment, and the relevance of community support for learners. The challenging environment for young people who make a place for themselves in the face of racism, class, and poverty is impotence presented in this film. It is critical to provide some solutions to ameliorate the situation.

CONCLUSION

In *Akeelah and the Bee*, self-esteem is portrayed as a dynamic and evolving trait. Akeelah's story demonstrates that self-esteem is not something we are born with, but rather something we build through challenges, support from others, and a belief in our abilities. The film is an inspiring reminder that no matter where we come from or what obstacles we face, we all have the potential to achieve greatness when we believe in ourselves. The film explores how self-esteem is intertwined with identity—how we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us. Akeelah's journey reflects the process of self-discovery and how important it is to remain true to oneself, even when others might question or challenge you. This journey is crucial because it shows that self-esteem is not fixed and can be cultivated through experiences, support, and effort. By the end of the film, Akeelah has gained more than just spelling skills; she has developed a strong sense of self-esteem. She understands that her value is not dependent on external validation but on her ability to recognize and embrace her potential

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