

Wooden Beginnings, Human Struggles: Pinocchio's Character Development Through Erikson's Psychosocial Stages

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*“Start children off on the way they should go,
and even when they are old they will not turn from it.”*
Proverbs 22:6 (NIV)

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes Carlo Collodi's Pinocchio through Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory to trace the character's psychological growth across childhood stages. Using qualitative, descriptive analysis, the research examines how Pinocchio's experiences embody Erikson's developmental crises. The results reveal three key findings: **1)** Pinocchio's disobedience and peer influence illustrate *Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt*, reflecting a child's struggle for independence under external pressures. **2)** His refusal to heed guidance highlights *Initiative vs. Guilt*, as he experiments with choices but risks moral error. **3)** His eventual responsibility and care for Geppetto demonstrate *Industry vs. Inferiority*, showing his attainment of competence and integrity. Pinocchio's transformation into a real boy symbolizes the successful resolution of these crises, affirming Erikson's claim that growth emerges from overcoming challenges. This study concludes that Pinocchio reflects universal childhood struggles and offers psychological insight into moral and social development.

Keywords: *Pinocchio, Erik Erikson, psychosocial development, autonomy, initiative, industry, children's literature.*

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, psychological issues are increasingly prevalent, regardless of age. As times change, there have been changes in parenting patterns, with the role of parents often being replaced by non-family caregivers. *“From a global perspective, the burden of mental disorders generally showed an increasing trend between 1990 and 2021”* (Fan et al., 2025, p. 75). In addition, parenting is often neglected due to the busy schedules of parents. Similarly, this issue exists in literary works that reflect the real world and often reveal psychological problems, as the result of

improper parenting. One such example is the story of Pinocchio, a wooden puppet created by humans who does not have the experience of growth and development since birth. *“That is, children exposed to neglect or abuse have between 2.7 and 3.7 times higher odds of later depression”* (Nelson et al., 2017, p. 96). Literature is a fruit of thoughts connected to real-world experiences; it mirrors what is happening in human real-world conditions. *“Literary work represents product of the artist’s thought and desire or a form of escapism which he could not have gotten ... in the real world.”* (Wellek & Warren, *Theory of Literature*, p. 82); Pinocchio contains psychological issues that are also found in real life that can be a reminder of the pivotal role of parenting.

The story of Pinocchio is a children's literature, a fascinating narrative with a nuance of kinship between the creator, Geppetto and the wooden boy. Pinocchio bursts to life in a magical transformation becoming a real boy who is on an incredible journey of learning to be brave, truthful and unselfish. He faces all kinds of fun and exciting challenges along the way, such as skipping school, telling white lies and joining the circus. With the help of a talking cricket and the Blue Fairy, Pinocchio learns from his mistakes and develops as a person. The story portrays Pinocchio’s transformation from a mischievous puppet to a responsible boy. It is so heartwarming to see how the character has experienced a wonderful personal change, as shown by his lovely choice to put his father, Geppetto, first before his own desires.

This study will be using psychoanalysis on this children’s literature. According to Sigmund Freud, there are three parts of the human psyche which are ‘id’, ‘ego’, and ‘superego’. Id is where you get from birth that is the instinctual part of the mind; it is completely unconscious and operates on pleasure principles. Ego develops in early childhood, it is the realistic part of the mind, it operates on reality principle. Sigmund Freud (1933) stated, *“Where id was, there ego shall be.”* This means that the ego gradually takes over functions that once belonged to the id, bringing unconscious impulses under conscious control. The superego, which develops around the age of five, represents moral and ethical standards and strives for perfection. *“Psychoanalysis has taught us that personality can be understood only as history.”* Erikson, E. H. (1950). This gives the idea of people needing to understand the background or the past that made their personality become like that. This concept explains more on how each child experiences the stage of psychosocial.

Children's literature gives a pivotal role to share moral influence to kids. Based on the narrative of the story Pinocchio is a kid who is made from wood by a carpenter. Whenever he lies to his maker, his nose grows longer. The book of Pinocchio was written by Carlo Collodi and the release date of the book Pinocchio in 1990. The Pinocchio story is one about honesty and responsibility and the troubles resulting from telling lies. On the other hand, the story of Pinocchio

reveals the importance of being honest and helps children understand how to be honest and this is a work of children's literature. The age range of the book "Pinocchio" is three to seven. The narrative belongs to the genre of fantasy and adventure literature, but because it is meant for younger readers, the fantasy element is presented in a manner that is accessible.

The Children's Transitions to Adulthood and Midlife Parents' Depressive Symptoms and Activities of Daily Living Conditions in the United States said "*In most parent-child relationships, parents provide children with instrumental and emotional support on the road to adulthood*" (Xing Zhang, Anna M. Hammersmith, 2023). Children are inherently dependent on adults, and when authority figures present certain actions as 'right,' they are likely to accept them unquestioningly, even if such actions are morally problematic. This often results in moral confusion, as children lack the developmental maturity and adequate guidance necessary to discern ethical boundaries independently. Pinocchio is a child who lies, disobeys, and is easily influenced by other people. Around that age, Pinocchio is still in a stage where he still has not experienced the conscious mind to choose right or wrong. According to children these days also show many similarities with Pinocchio such as, being disobedient, lying, and are also easily influenced by other people. "*Disobedient behavior in early childhood is often a developmental phase, as children test limits and assert autonomy.*" Berk, L. E. (2013). All of our personality traits develop in early childhood, this paper is analyzing those specifically using the theory of Erikson, E. H. 's psychosocial development from his book of 'Childhood and Society' (1950). Although Pinocchio is depicted as a wooden puppet rather than a human child, his characterization reflects the psychological processes of childhood. This is clarified and reinforced through Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, which provide a framework for understanding his struggles and growth. Pinocchio's psychological state illustrates the developmental conflicts typical of childhood, and therefore, this paper seeks to analyze the underlying causes of his behaviors through Erikson's theoretical lens.

While Erikson's psychosocial development model is extensively validated in empirical developmental psychology, especially in its application to human populations, its transposition into literary criticism remains notably underdeveloped. For instance, one qualitative study of the novel Eleanor & Park applies four of Erikson's stages to analyze the protagonist's trauma and developmental delays, offering a rare but descriptive case of literary application (Kinanti & Daulay, 2020). However, systematic, stage-by-stage applications of Erikson's framework to literary characters are scarce. Moreover, existing literary-critical traditions, such as structuralist and post-structuralist approaches often dismiss the notion of treating fictional characters as

psychologically realistic agents. Instead, they emphasize characters as “textual constructs,” “paper beings,” or as embodiments of narrative grammar rather than psychological subjects (Bortolussi & Dixon, as cited in "Fictional Characters in Literary Theory, A Short History") This study focuses on the application of Erikson’s stages to Pinocchio: a non-human, symbolic figure, addresses both these gaps by offering a systematic, replicable psychosocial analysis of a literary character, and by challenging prevailing assumptions about the relevance of psychological frameworks in literary critique.

This analysis is directed towards Pinocchio who is adapting to his human life environment. The significance of this study is to learn the reasons for Pinocchio's psychological personality, by using the theory of Erikson, E. H. (1950), *Childhood and Society*. This study is focusing on learning the importance of children’s psychological development and the reason people should focus more on children while they are experiencing such psychosocial stages.

Moral Integrity	Temptation/Desception
<p>Pinocchio struggles to tell right from wrong and often lies, showing he has not developed a solid moral compass. His poor choices stem from a lack of guidance. Negative influences like the Fox and the Cat worsen his problems and prevent his growth. <i>“The danger in this stage lies in a sense of guilt over the goals contemplated and in the fear of punishment for acting on them.”</i> Erikson, E. H. (1950)</p>	<p>Pinocchio lies and is being influenced by others. His friends, the fox and the cat, and the coachman lead him astray, causing trouble and confusion about right and wrong. <i>“Children love to be alone in some solitary place, as long as it is secret, which they control”</i> Erikson, E. H. (1963)</p>

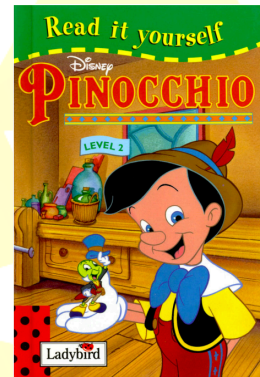
METHOD

This study applies a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach by examining Carlo Collodi’s *The Adventures of Pinocchio* through the lens of Erikson’s psychosocial development theory. The primary data consist of narrative episodes in which Pinocchio exhibits developmental conflicts, such as disobedience, moral confusion, or identity-seeking. These episodes were identified through close reading and subsequently categorized according to Erikson’s childhood stages (Erikson, E. H: 1950) (*trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame, initiative vs. guilt, and industry vs. inferiority*). Secondary

sources, including scholarly works on Erikson’s model and literary psychology, were used to support the interpretation and provide theoretical triangulation. In analyzing the data, Pinocchio’s behaviors were treated as symbolic representations of developmental crises, allowing for an interpretation that bridges psychological theory with literary character analysis. This methodology provides a systematic framework for exploring how a fictional, non-human character embodies psychosocial struggles typically associated with human childhood. The stages that are used to analyze the psychological condition of Pinocchio in his early age. As days go by, his actions around the villagers proves more of this theory.

DISCUSSION

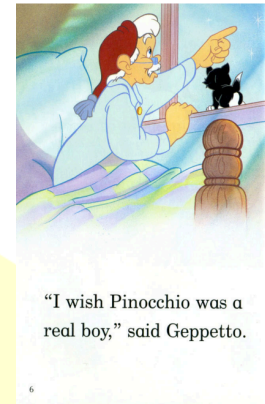
The original pinocchio was written in 1883. To understand the themes and moral lessons contained in the story, it helps to understand the social and political environment in which the story was written late 19th-century. For example Italy was a rapidly developing, unified country facing industrialization and social change. Pinocchio is deeply embedded Italian folklore and reflects cultural attitudes toward childhood, education, and morality. The cultural assumptions of the time regarding these aspects explain why the story emphasizes certain values and behaviours more than others.



Structural elements, such as Pinocchio’s episodic adventures, can be compared to other works with similar structures. Finally, placing Pinocchio in its cultural and historical context can help determine the relevant texts, especially those released in the same time period or from the same cultural background. Seeing Geppetto he might have made wooden dolls to keep him from being lonely. This reaction of Geppetto is because he is so excited about having a new child that he completely lets the child do whatever he wants. Somehow, Pinocchio just gets further away from a parent’s supervision. Surely the colors Geppetto used to create dolls are bright. During the 1940s, bright colors were used to promote hygiene and its artistic expressions.

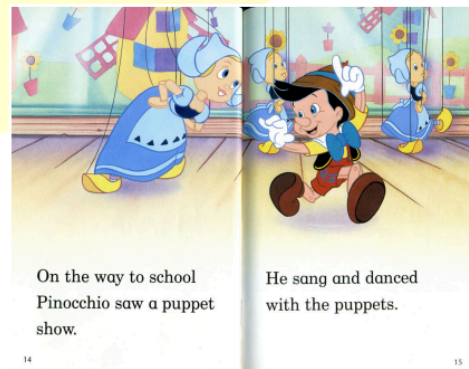
The story begins with Geppetto crafting a wooden puppet that he cherished so deeply that he uttered the phrase, “*I wish Pinocchio were a real boy.*” This moment reflects not only his longing for

companionship but also his profound psychological desire to experience fatherhood. His yearning resonates with Erikson’s view that *“a child seeks someone to trust, while a parent seeks someone in whom to invest his trust”* (Erikson, 1963, p. 247). Looking out of the window at night, Geppetto mumbles to himself, an act that suggests loneliness and desperation, for individuals in such states often externalize their thoughts as if speaking to another. In this way, Geppetto’s private wish embodies a deep psychosocial need for generativity and care, not merely as a craftsman creating an object, but as a man longing for relational fulfillment and paternal identity.



Geppetto, a lonely woodcarver, sees the potential in Pinocchio to be a living, breathing boy. This sets the stage for the story’s magical transformation, in which Pinocchio is given life by a kind fairy. Pinocchio’s background was based on the town of Collodi, in Italy, where his caretaker Geppetto, an Italian craftsman, raised him with fatherly devotion. In Italian culture, woodworking has a long history, and as an average woodcarver, Geppetto crafted the puppet not merely as an object of art, but as a companion to alleviate his solitude. When Pinocchio comes to life, Geppetto gives him the name “Pinocchio” and begins treating him as a son, providing love, care, and paternal guidance. This relationship echoes Erikson’s insight that *“a child is not only shaped by his environment but also reshapes it, as each generation is committed to the next”* (Erikson, 1963, p. 247). The celebratory scene of Geppetto and Pinocchio dancing happily together embodies this mutual shaping of identity: for Geppetto, it signifies the joy of fatherhood and connection, while for Pinocchio, it marks an early stage of trust-building and bonding.

Yet, Pinocchio’s disobedient acts, such as neglecting Geppetto’s instructions or following temptations that lead him astray, reflect the developmental struggles central to Erikson’s stage of *Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt*. At this stage, children begin to assert independence and test boundaries, seeking to develop personal control and a sense of will. Pinocchio’s tendency to rebel or disobey illustrates



his attempt to establish *autonomy*, though often without the maturity to foresee consequences. When his choices result in trouble, he experiences shame and guilt, highlighting the fragile balance Erikson described between fostering independence and maintaining guidance. As Erikson (1963) emphasized, “*to let the child do what he can and should do for himself, and to help him only when it is necessary, is the essential task of the parent*” (p. 253). Geppetto’s role, therefore, is not only to provide affection but also to guide Pinocchio through these psychosocial conflicts, shaping his moral growth while allowing space for autonomy.

“*The next day Pinocchio went to school.*” On his way, he encountered Honest John and Gideon, who persuaded him to pursue acting instead of attending school. Tempted by the promise of fun and admiration, Pinocchio abandoned his father’s instructions and joined a puppet show, where he danced and sang, earning applause from the children. This moment highlights a critical stage in his psychosocial journey: Erikson’s Initiative vs. Guilt.

At this stage, children begin to assert themselves through play, imagination, and exploration, testing their capacity to initiate activities and make decisions. Pinocchio’s decision to follow Honest John and join the puppet show reflects his eagerness to exercise initiative. However, his choices are easily swayed by external influences, demonstrating the vulnerability of children who lack moral guidance or self-regulation. The audience’s applause reinforces his sense of initiative; he feels empowered by recognition and validation. Yet, the deeper conflict arises because his initiative is misplaced; instead of pursuing growth through schooling, he succumbs to temptation. Erikson (1963) notes that “*initiative adds to autonomy the quality of undertaking, planning, and attacking a task for the sake of being active and on the move*” (p. 259). Pinocchio’s actions reflect this issue, but because his initiative diverges from moral direction, it risks leading to guilt when he later realizes he has disobeyed Geppetto.

Thus, this episode illustrates not only Pinocchio’s natural drive to explore and express himself, but also the psychosocial challenge of balancing initiative with responsibility. His susceptibility to Honest John’s persuasion shows how children’s social environments can either nurture their sense of purpose or misguide them into behaviors that later produce guilt.

“*I will never tell a lie again,*” declared Pinocchio after experiencing the humiliation of his nose growing longer with every falsehood. The physical consequence of lying made dishonesty impossible to ignore, pushing him toward the realization that truthfulness is essential in social relationships. In Erikson’s framework, this episode aligns with the stage of *Industry vs. Inferiority*, where the child begins to develop competence through learning societal rules and applying them in practice. Pinocchio’s encounter with the Blue Fairy illustrates an external authority guiding him

toward self-discipline, while his own resolution to be truthful represents a step toward industry, a sense of responsibility and self-regulation.

Kohlberg (1981) reinforces this dynamic by asserting that “*moral development involves recognizing the importance of honesty and the implications of dishonesty in social relationships*” (p. 23). Pinocchio’s growing nose serves as a vivid metaphor for the social consequences of dishonesty, highlighting the way moral lessons become internalized through visible, unavoidable feedback. The external figures, the Blue Fairy, Honest John, and the Fox, illustrate competing power dynamics that initially dominate Pinocchio’s decisions. However, as the narrative unfolds, the center of power shifts inward. The fairy provides guidance, but Pinocchio’s promise “*never to lie again*” signals his movement toward internalizing moral standards.



Pinocchio told the fairy a lie.

This shift reflects Erikson’s notion that the development of competence requires children not only to absorb lessons from authority but also to translate them into personal mastery. Pinocchio’s growth is not merely about obedience but about cultivating self-control and responsibility. By confronting the consequences of dishonesty, he transforms from a passive puppet, subject to external forces, into a boy beginning to recognize his inner agency. In this way, his development reflects both Erikson’s psychosocial emphasis on industry and Kohlberg’s moral reasoning framework, culminating in the realization that true power resides within the individual’s ability to choose integrity over deception.

When Pinocchio encounters Honest John and Gideon again, he is persuaded to join other boys on their way to Pleasure Island. This episode highlights Erikson’s first stage, Trust vs. Mistrust, which Pinocchio never truly developed because he came to life without an infancy stage or maternal care. His easy gullibility toward strangers reflects a lack of foundational trust and a fragile perception of reality. Erikson (1950) noted, “*The sense of*



On the way home Pinocchio met some boys.

He went to play with them.

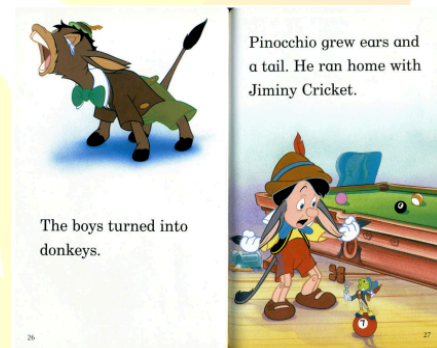
trust implies not only that one has learned to rely on the veracity of others, but also on the veracity of one’s own perception of reality” (p. 244). Pinocchio’s inability to distinguish between trustworthy and harmful figures mirrors how children today are influenced by external forces, whether through peers or, in contemporary times, the internet.

At the same time, this passage foreshadows Pinocchio's struggle with Identity vs. Role Confusion. By desiring to act "adult" and indulge in reckless pleasures, he exposes the risks of premature independence without moral grounding. The fox and cat symbolize the negative influences shaping identity, while Pinocchio embodies the vulnerable child, experimenting with behavior that threatens his moral development. His actions suggest that identity formation requires not just external guidance but also an internalized sense of trust and responsibility.

When Jiminy Cricket urges Pinocchio to return home, he refuses, preferring the company of misbehaving boys. This moment reflects the powerful role of peer influence in shaping children's perceptions of right and wrong. Pinocchio imitates the behaviors of others, believing that if peers endorse a certain action, it must be acceptable. This aligns with Erikson's stage of *Autonomy vs. Shame/Doubt*, where children begin to test independence but remain highly impressionable.

Research on risk perception highlights this vulnerability. Slovic et al. (2004, 2005) distinguished between the *analytic system*, which relies on rational evaluation, and the *experiential system*, which is instinctive and emotion-driven. Pinocchio, still in early development, operates almost entirely within the experiential system. His rejection of Jiminy's logical warning highlights his lack of risk awareness and inability to evaluate danger critically. In this sense, Pinocchio represents children's struggle to balance autonomy with the capacity to make sound judgments, illustrating how premature independence without guidance can foster destructive behavior.

At Pleasure Island, the boys' transformation into donkeys symbolizes the consequences of unchecked disobedience. Pinocchio, who narrowly escapes complete transformation, embodies the stage of *Autonomy vs. Shame/Doubt*. His impulsive decisions, susceptibility to manipulation, and lack of discipline reveal an underdeveloped sense of autonomy. When confronted with the physical signs of his misbehavior, ears and a tail, he experiences shame, a natural reaction akin to children's regret when scolded. Erikson (1950) noted that "if denied the opportunity to act on their environment, children begin to doubt their abilities and feel shame" (p. 257). Pinocchio's shame, however, remains superficial, surfacing only under punishment or exposure, while true autonomy has yet to emerge. This moment highlights the tension between external correction and internal growth: although consequences instill regret, they do not immediately translate into self-regulation. Pinocchio, as a child figure, still mirrors the developmental stage where behavior is largely shaped by external approval and imitation rather than by an established inner will.



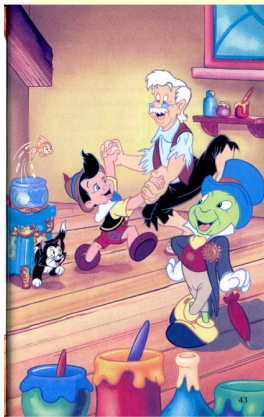
Pinocchio's decision to rescue Geppetto marks a crucial developmental shift, reflecting the emergence of autonomy within Erikson's Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt stage. For the first time, he demonstrates conscious willpower and the capacity to choose a morally responsible course of action. Erikson (1950) observed that "a sense of autonomy grows out of the basic trust that the child develops in the first stage; it is a sense of being able to handle problems on one's own" (p. 259). This moment signifies Pinocchio's movement toward genuine autonomy, as he begins to act not merely out of impulse but from an internalized sense of duty and care.

Although much of his earlier recklessness stemmed from peer influence and the absence of consistent parental guidance, Pinocchio's immediate and instinctive response to Geppetto's peril underscores a deep emotional bond. When he leaps into the sea to save Geppetto from the whale, he reveals affection and loyalty toward his caretaker, despite Geppetto's limited presence and supervision in his life. This illustrates how the parental figure remains central in shaping a child's moral compass: even when external influences lead to misbehavior, the foundational attachment persists. Pinocchio's action thus demonstrates the early signs of autonomy, framed by trust and emotional attachment, which propel him toward responsibility and maturity.



Pinocchio pulled Geppetto out of the sea.

In the previous discussion, Pinocchio's actions began to show deeper affection for Geppetto. While Geppetto may outwardly function as a guardian, Pinocchio's behavior suggests that he perceives him as a true parental figure. This subtle but meaningful shift reveals the development of a stronger emotional bond. According to Erikson (1950), "the child must develop a firm sense of trust in the continuity of external providers" (p. 247). Pinocchio's growing concern for Geppetto illustrates this movement from dependence toward trust, demonstrating that despite earlier misbehavior, he is capable of forming stable attachments.



This moment can also be read within the framework of Initiative vs. Guilt. Pinocchio takes initiative not simply for his own pleasure, as he did when tempted by Honest John or the puppet show, but for the sake of Geppetto's well-being. Erikson (1950) emphasized that initiative "adds to autonomy the quality of undertaking, planning, and attacking a task for the sake of being active and on the move" (p. 262). Pinocchio's willingness to risk himself for Geppetto is thus a sign of moral initiative rooted in affection, rather than reckless curiosity.

Furthermore, Pinocchio's capacity for change illustrates Erikson's idea that identity is not fixed but develops through continuous interaction between impulses and social expectations. As Erikson (1950) noted, "*the integration of identity depends on the successful resolution of earlier crises*" (p. 261). Pinocchio's gradual shift from selfishness to care indicates that he is beginning to integrate his impulses, his conscience, and his emerging sense of self. His eventual transformation into a real boy symbolizes the successful resolution of these psychosocial struggles: the puppet who was once easily deceived grows into a child capable of love, responsibility, and identity formation.

At the end of the day, Pinocchio is still a child navigating his environment, yet his development reflects Erikson's assertion that human growth involves a dynamic process of change and adaptation. His story affirms the possibility of moral growth even in the face of mistakes, embodying Erikson's vision that personality develops through crises that lead to greater maturity.

On his journey, Pinocchio reaches Erikson's stage of Industry vs. Inferiority, where the central task is developing a sense of competence. Through repeated failures and lessons, he comes to understand the true value of integrity, diligence, and responsibility. His decision to save Geppetto is especially significant, as it represents a turning point where he chooses actions that protect rather than harm others. This reflects Erikson's (1950) insight that "*the child now wants to learn how to do and make things with others; he wants to be a worker; to have a meaningful place in society*" (p. 259). Pinocchio's growth demonstrates his movement beyond self-centered desires toward a commitment to meaningful participation in the social world.

At this stage, Pinocchio no longer acts merely on impulse but evaluates his choices with a moral awareness cultivated by experience. In saving Geppetto, he displays industriousness: a readiness to contribute, protect, and uphold values that strengthen relationships. His earlier disobedience and gullibility gave way to self-discipline and responsibility, reflecting Erikson's conviction that "*a sense of industry develops when a child learns to win recognition by producing things*" (1950, p. 260). Pinocchio earns this recognition not through performance in school or work, but through the more profound act of embodying moral responsibility.

Thus, Pinocchio's transformation into a real boy is not only a fantastical reward but a psychosocial resolution. He demonstrates that competence, born from effort, correction, and responsibility is the foundation of belonging in human society. In Eriksonian terms, Pinocchio succeeds in overcoming inferiority, affirming his place in the world as a child who has learned how to "*do and make*" in ways that serve both self and others.

CONCLUSION

Pinocchio's story, when viewed through Erik Erikson's psychosocial framework, reveals not only the whimsical tale of a puppet longing to become real but also a symbolic journey of human development. Beginning with struggles in Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt, Pinocchio's disobedience and naivety demonstrate a child's tension between independence and misjudgment. His experiences in Initiative vs. Guilt further illustrate how peer influence and poor decisions test the balance between imaginative exploration and responsibility. Yet, despite repeated missteps, Pinocchio ultimately reaches Industry vs. Inferiority, where he discovers the value of diligence, integrity, and responsibility.

Erikson (1950) emphasized that each stage of development is marked by a psychosocial crisis whose resolution shapes the individual's capacity for growth. Pinocchio's eventual transformation into a real boy signifies not merely the magical culmination of a fairytale but the successful negotiation of these crises. He learns to integrate impulse, conscience, and social responsibility, embodying Erikson's vision that *"the child now wants to learn how to do and make things with others; he wants to be a worker, to have a meaningful place in society"* (p. 259).

In essence, Pinocchio's narrative resonates with the universal human condition: growth is seldom linear, mistakes are inevitable, yet each challenge offers an opportunity for self-realization. Through Erikson's lens, Pinocchio is more than a puppet who becomes a boy; he is an archetype of the child's journey toward identity, competence, and belonging. His story reminds readers, children and adults alike that the path to becoming *"real"* is grounded not in perfection, but in learning, responsibility, and love.

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