

Theoretical Foundations

A briefing for clinicians · Companion to the Clinical Justification document · Children aged 6-12

Power Phrase Universe does not introduce a new theory of child development. It operationalises several long-established frameworks into a single, repeatable card-based resource that a clinician integrates into their own evidence-based practice. This briefing names those frameworks and the literature behind them so you can judge the system on its grounding. The references establish the theory PPU draws on — they are not outcome evidence for PPU itself, which is being gathered through structured pilot pre/post data.

THE CORE IDEA

Narrative identity

People make sense of who they are by turning their lives into a story — the self as narrator. The fullest account is Dan McAdams' *life story model of identity* (McAdams, 1993; McAdams & McLean, 2013), which describes how an internalised, evolving life story develops on top of traits and goals, organised around themes of *agency* (acting on one's world) and *communion* (belonging with others). The idea has deeper roots in narrative psychology and philosophy (Bruner, 1986; Ricoeur, 1992; Sarbin, 1986). Its clinical home is *narrative therapy* (White & Epston, 1990) — an approach developed in Australia, built on *externalising* the problem and helping a person *re-author* their story toward a preferred identity. PPU's "I'm someone who..." identity move sits directly in this tradition.

One precise point of scope: a fully integrated life story consolidates in adolescence and adulthood. For ages 6-12, PPU works with the *developmental precursors* of narrative identity, not the finished construct.

WHAT DEVELOPS AT 6-12

The precursors PPU works with

Autobiographical memory & reminiscing

Children build a personal past largely through conversation with adults. Elaborative, open-ended reminiscing supports richer, more coherent self-narratives (Fivush, 2011; Nelson & Fivush, 2004). The adult scaffolds the story before the child can tell it alone — the mechanism the cards make repeatable.

Self-concept becoming trait-based

Across this window, self-description shifts from the concrete toward stable traits and social comparison (Harter, 2012) — the

Affect labeling

Putting a feeling into words measurably dampens the brain's threat response (Lieberman et al., 2007). This is the closest mechanistic anchor for what the cards do: they support *naming*, not any neural claim beyond it.

Scaffolding (ZPD)

An adult supplies the support a learner cannot yet generate, then withdraws it (Vygotsky, 1978; Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976). This is the single best academic

capacity behind “I’m someone who is kind / brave / curious.”

description of the cards’ function — supply the language, then fade.

APPLIED FRAMEWORKS

What PPU maps onto

Character strengths (VIA)

The identity words draw on the VIA classification of character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), widely applied with children.

Social-emotional learning (CASEL)

The decks are designed to map onto CASEL’s five SEL competency domains (CASEL, 2020), the structure most school programs are built around.

Emotion coaching

Notice, label and validate a feeling before problem-solving (Gottman, Katz & Hooven, 1996) — mainstream in classroom and family practice.

CBT & ACT adjacency

Modal sentences can mirror the structure of a thought record, and the identity focus aligns with values-based work in ACT — so the resource sits alongside frameworks clinicians already use, rather than replacing them.

POSITION

Where PPU sits — and what is distinctive

PPU is best understood as a *recombination*: affect labeling (name the feeling) + scaffolding (supply the words) + character strengths + narrative re-authoring (the identity move) + SEL structure — delivered as a fixed card sequence. It sits in an established category alongside structured emotional-language tools such as the Zones of Regulation (Kuypers, 2011) and the Australian therapy-card tradition (for example, St Luke’s Innovative Resources’ strengths and feelings decks).

Its least-precedented element is the *modal-verb dial* — “will / might / can’t yet.” Most existing tools name feelings or strengths; far fewer give a child a clean way to express *how ready or able* they are. Honesty about the in-between, rather than a forced yes/no, is the part of the design with the clearest claim to originality.

SCOPE OF CLAIMS

What this briefing does and does not assert

- PPU is a practitioner-led resource integrated into evidence-based practice — not a stand-alone intervention, and not self-acting.
- It is for children aged 6–12, working with the developmental precursors of narrative identity, pitched by the clinician to each child’s stage.
- It is grounded in the established frameworks cited here; it is not yet independently validated. Structured pilot pre/post data is being gathered.
- It is not a substitute for professional psychological assessment, diagnosis or treatment.

REFERENCES

Sources

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