Abstract

In the field of speech pathology, professionals use tools such as comic books to help teach children in therapy. Professionals also act as advocates for people with communication disorders, as liaisons between those directly affected by these disorders and those that are not. My thesis aims to serve as both a tool for professionals to use in therapy as well as one to raise awareness of communication disorders. Following is the comic I have written and illustrated along with my meta-analysis rationalizing creative decisions and character design in relation to each character's communication disorders or lack thereof.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Teresa McClain for not only sharing her professional experience and wisdom with me, but also for supporting me throughout this endeavor. I have called her a professor, clinic advisor, and thesis advisor, but I am most proud to call her my mentor. I would like to dedicate this comic to my mother. Her belief in me was unshaking, giving me the faith to tackle the challenge that was this comic.
Process Analysis

My Honors thesis, a graphic novel titled *The Lessons of Mix*, was a challenging endeavor. Writing and illustrating a graphic novel involves different storytelling strategies and nuances not found in film or literature. Rather, the medium of graphic novels, or comic books, combines elements of both film and literature to create a unique experience. Graphic novels have shown promise in helping children with communication disorders enhance their reading and language skills (Brenna, 2013). I chose the medium of graphic novels to both serve as a creative outlet as well as to craft a tool to entertain and teach children with or without communication disorders, as well as young adults, about communication disorders. In this meta-analysis, I will discuss my creative approach as well as challenges I faced as an amateur writer and illustrator. I will also discuss how I showcased certain elements of disorders such as specific language impairment (SLI) and Autism spectrum disorder. Though there is still much debate in the industry as to the difference between “graphic novel” and “comic books” or “comics.” Throughout this essay I will use all those terms interchangeably. Though my thesis is mostly creative in nature, I did work with a professional speech-language pathologist, Teresa McClain, to learn about communication disorders and their presentations. Consequently, I do not have references for my understanding of these disorders as this knowledge comes from a combination of past research, SPAA classes, and consultation with Professor McClain. I recommend reading the comic before reading this meta-analysis, as major plot spoilers are present within.

When discussing my creative process, I must first mention that I am not a trained artist. I have made a short comic as a part of a study abroad class I took while in Paris. As a part of the class, we visited many of Paris’s art museums and read a multitude of comics in French. Additionally, I love comics and read them regularly. My style, consequently, is a mash-up of many different sources and styles. My character designs were mostly the result of doodles in the margins of my class notes, with minimal inspiration taken from comics like *Naruto* and *Scott Pilgrim*. *Naruto* is a Japanese manga with a more
realistic art style; however, character proportions will drastically change for comedic effect or to showcase a character’s strong emotions. *Scott Pilgrim*, by contrast, is a very stylized comic from North America, with characters having simplified and exaggerated proportions that generally remain consistent. Consequently, my characters are very stylized with exaggerated proportions, which is why their heads are much bigger than their bodies. Additionally, characters will sometimes change proportions for comedic effect or to exemplify their emotions.

Regarding storytelling, again, I do not have any formal training. I have read many comics, and I feel most of my pacing and humor in my story is taken from *Scott Pilgrim*. *Scott Pilgrim* is a series that is meant to be funny and entertaining, but simultaneously presents characters that feel human and have real emotional issues they must tackle. In *Scott Pilgrim*, there is a strong underlying theme of growing up; Scott, the main character, starts the series as a young 21-year-old just enjoying life. Throughout the series, Scott is forced to mature by communicating his emotions instead of ignoring them, by learning to be independent rather than relying on others, and by learning to pick his battles. Though these emotional events are different for everyone, the author, Bryan Lee O’Malley, presents them in a way that allows readers to connect with the characters and feel what they are feeling. The tone in *Scott Pilgrim* fluctuates between lighthearted humor and somber emotional events naturally, and I tried to capture the same ‘flow’ in my own comic. *The Lessons of Mix* is mostly meant to be humorous and entertaining, but it simultaneously presents an emotional issue that many people with communication disorders face: accepting their disorder. Many people with communication disorders feel unintelligent because they struggle to communicate. My comic takes from the storytelling style of O’Malley, presenting and recognizing real emotional issues without feeling completely somber. I cannot say I have mastered storytelling as O’Malley has, but much of my artistic inspiration, predominantly in storytelling, came from O’Malley and *Scott Pilgrim*. 
To discuss how I addressed communication disorders in my comic, I must discuss the characters. First, I will discuss Mix, the main character. Mix has SLI. The cause of SLI is unknown and it can present differently in every case. In Mix’s case, the presentation involves severe decoding issues. Basically, Mix has trouble deciphering words when reading, as the letters jumble together, making “for” look like “from,” for example. When reading, Mix uses his energy to decode but does not comprehend what he reads because his focus was on decoding the words. In the story, reading is equated to magic; this is why everyone can cast magic except Mix. Mix also has some minor issues with expressive language, or the language we produce to communicate. This is different than receptive language, which is the language we take in from outside sources. Mix has great receptive language, excluding reading, and is a very bright child. However, his expressive language, specifically his morphology (using correct endings on words, such as past tense and plural) and syntax (order of words in sentences), leads to misunderstandings. However, none of this is revealed until the end of the story in the final chapter, where the setting shifts from a magical kingdom to reality. It is also revealed that Mix is the author of the preceding story, and he explains that the story was about him accepting his disorder.

Much of the dialogue between characters was chosen to foreshadow the twist. For example, whenever Icky says he cannot understand Mix, it is because Mix thinks he is communicating effectively but is not. Generally, children with SLI communicate in shorter sentences in order to be understood more easily. Whenever Mix is not understood, he is usually speaking in longer monologues. Mix’s dad, on the other hand, can understand Mix relatively well because he has lived with the disorder. He has grown accustomed to the way Mix speaks, whereas Icky recently met Mix and is not used to his way of speaking.

Throughout the story, Mix is hounded by his shadow. Mix’s shadow is a representation of his unwillingness to accept his disorder. Mix is a very head-strong person. He is confident and bold, sometimes to a fault. He knows he is intelligent, yet decides to use his intelligence and boldness to help
others, which is why he comes to Icky’s aid early in the story. He refuses to accept his disorder because he feels that by accepting it, he’s accepting that he’s dumb, and therefore giving up. Many people, both young and old, do not want to accept that they have a communication disorder. Many people also feel that having a communication disorder means they are unintelligent. I tried to exemplify this aspect of Mix’s character to show that his feelings are real but not entirely well-founded. Mix eventually accepts his SLI. He has a yearning to be perfect, but he realizes that perfection is just an ideal. He still likes who he is, however, flaws and all. At the climax, just before he is crushed by his shadow, he accepts himself, along with his disorder, and feels happier because of it. Through Mix’s acceptance of himself, I wanted to show children who have communication disorders that they are not stupid or worthless, as they may lead themselves to believe. Rather, they are who they are, and that is a wonderful person to be!

Along with confronting what each person with a communication disorder may be feeling, I wanted to address what the families of people with communication disorders may be feeling. I kept this idea in mind when crafting Mix’s dad, simply named Dad. Dad embodies many of the emotions parents usually feel when learning their child has a communication disorder: disbelief, anger, guilt, confusion, and so on. Again, I carefully chose Dad’s dialogue to parallel real conversations parents may have about communication disorders. For example, when Dad is meeting with the Dark Master, later revealed as the speech-language pathologist (SLP), their conversation can easily be shifted in context to a conversation between a parent and an SLP. Parents understandably think that communication disorders can be “cured.” It is never that simple, however. Dad is angry at the Dark Master for refusing to get rid of the shadow, or Mix’s SLI. However, the Dark Master says the SLI is a part of Mix that can’t just be wiped away, paralleling what many SLPs are forced to explain to the parents of children with communication disorders.

Later in the story, Dad expresses that he should’ve done more to help Mix, but Mix explains that his disorder is not anyone’s fault. Again, I crafted the dialogue to parallel what parents usually feel – that
their child's communication disorder is somehow their fault and they should have done more to prevent it. In actuality, SLI usually has nothing to do with the parents. As previously mentioned, the cause of SLI is unknown, but Dad still feels he could have prevented it.

With the character of Dad, I am speaking directly to the parents of children with communication disorders. My hope is this story can be used as a therapy tool. As such, many parents would read it with their children. As they read, I wanted to make it clear that their emotions are normal and okay. However, they need to understand that they are not to blame. As long as they are supportive and loving toward their child, they are succeeding as parents. Therefore, I crafted Dad as being sometimes doubtful in himself but always loving towards Mix.

Closely connected to Dad is the SLP, first introduced as the Dark Master. In many cases, SLPs are seen as the "bad guys." Parents usually have some anger and confusion when first learning their child has a communication disorder, anger which is usually directed at the SLP. Children with communication disorders are usually aware of their disorder, and when SLPs try to force them to do things they know they are bad at, they usually have negative emotions tied to the SLP. Of course, these emotions are not always present and if they are, they are usually only at the beginning. In most dialogues the Dark Master is involved in, his dialogue is basically what an SLP would say regarding a child and their communication disorder. Contextually, though, his dialogue sounds sinister, as the story is told through Mix's point of view and he mistakenly believes the SLP is evil. In actuality, he only wants to help Mix accept his disorder.

With the SLP, I wanted to express that we, as professionals, are dedicated to helping people with communication disorders, but the motivation must come from the individual. SLPs need the client to understand and accept their disorder so that everyone can move forward in treating the disorder. However, if either the client or their family is unwilling to accept the disorder, the SLP cannot do their
job. With the SLP, or the Dark Master, I wanted to acknowledge that many people see SLPs as the "enemy" but we want to help those who want to be helped.

Regarding Mix's friends, I tried to choose their disorders (or lack thereof) carefully. Percy, for example, has mild Autism because many students have peers with Autism spectrum disorders. Autism is a common communication disorder that many children will see; however, it does not affect communication in an easily quantifiable manner as most disorders do. For example, Mix's reading deficits associated with his SLI can be measured by his comprehension of a passage or the speed at which he reads a given passage. Percy, on the other hand, has pragmatic deficits (issues understanding social cues and reacting appropriately), which are harder to recognize and quantify. Percy can learn efficiently and is very bright, but he does not read social cues or facial expressions very well. This is why Percy cannot understand why Mix is upset after Percy says, "What DUNCE can't use magic?" Percy was not able to read Mix's emotions through his facial expressions, and therefore did not understand that Mix was angry about Percy's comments. This is also why Percy is offended by Icky calling him insensitive; many people with mild Autism are aware of their deficits. Many believe people with Autism don't understand emotion, which is untrue. People with mild Autism can understand other people's emotions, they just have trouble reading others' emotions. I tried to make this distinction clear; Percy usually understands why people are upset once he's told but cannot usually figure it out on his own.

Percy also struggles with turn-taking during conversations. In normal conversation between two people, each person takes a chance to reflect on what the other participant said and add their own input, which is followed by the other participant doing the same. This volley of conversation continues until the conversation switches topics or naturally ends, at which point the individuals part ways. Percy does not understand this concept so he will usually continue talking as much as he wants about whatever he wants to, a characteristic which is common among people with Autism.
Finally, Percy has a fixation on flowers. Admittedly, this is not a common fixation among people with Autism and was mostly chosen to fit the narrative. However, the fact that Percy has a fixation stems from the fact that many people with Autism fixate on specific areas of interest, such as locomotives or marine animals. I chose to have Percy fixate on flowers to both exemplify his deficits in turn-taking as well as showcase another common characteristic of people with Autism.

Percy is purposefully presented as slightly smug at first. Percy's cockiness partially comes from the fact that many times, people perceive individuals with Autism as stuck-up because of their impaired pragmatic abilities. In Percy's case, he knew that people saw him this way, so he embraced it as a defense mechanism. A flashback in the middle of the story alludes to the fact that Percy is jealous of Mix's ability to be social, a skill which he lacks. At the end of the story, it is revealed that Percy struggles to make friends because of his disorder. Percy felt very isolated and sad because he could not make friends as easily as other kids. I exemplified his emotional reaction to his situation because it is a common misconception that people with Autism do not or rarely feel emotions. This is untrue; people with Autism can feel emotions, but as previously mentioned, they struggled to pick up on others' emotions.

With Percy's character, I wanted to call attention to a common disorder found in children. I tried to showcase Percy's deficits while explaining that he is not dumb or mean; he is a very smart, confident, and caring friend. He simply struggles to understand others' feelings, but it does not mean he does not care about others. Mix and Icky accept Percy, and after learning about his Autism, they try to help him compensate for his deficits. Percy is worthy of having friends, just like anyone else with Autism.

The last character to discuss is Icky. Again, I chose his disorder carefully, in that I chose to not give him a disorder. Though Icky is a normal kid with no disorders, he is arguably the least confident character in my story. He has some self-doubt even though he is intelligent and can cast magic. I designed Icky this way so that, even though he does not have deficits, he sees Percy and Mix as role
models. Arguably, most would think that Percy and Mix would look up to Icky because he is pragmatically normal and can read normally. However, I wanted to have a role-reversal to show that even though these characters have disorders, they still have much to teach others. From adventuring with Mix, Icky learns how to be brave and to tackle his fears. Icky is constantly afraid of what is to come, but he never thinks of quitting. Though not explicitly stated in the story, Icky perseveres because he is inspired by Mix’s confidence despite his own shortcomings.

Icky is aware Mix’s deficits throughout the story, though this is only alluded to and not stated. When Icky eyes Mix after Mix fails to cast magic (i.e. read), Icky understands that Mix has some sort of disorder. However, Icky simply accepts the fact and moves on. Icky never sees Mix as lower than him and he never pities Mix. Icky is not friends with Mix because he feels bad for him, but rather because he looks up to Mix. Icky is still understanding of Mix’s emotions, though, as he tried to comfort Mix before the shadow arrives for the final battle. Icky understands that Mix does not want to accept his disorder, but he does not want to force him to accept it.

Icky being accepting of Mix’s disorder is showing that kids with and without disorders really are not that different and can still be friends with one another. I wanted to show that, disorder or not, everyone can learn something from everyone else, but you can only learn from each other by acknowledging and accepting each other’s differences.

My Honors thesis proved to be much more work than I initially thought. I was forced to cut down the story, which resulted in the exclusion of another location (a village) and two characters, one which would have an articulation issue and another that had an undetermined communication disorder. However, I feel these cuts ultimately resulted in a story that is tighter in focus while still being accessible to my target audience. I hope one day, after I earn my Master’s degree and possibly a PhD, I will be able to revisit this project. I feel my comic has potential, but requires refinement, preferably by those trained in illustration and storytelling. In revisiting this project, I hope to create a proven therapy tool to help
children with communication disorders. As of now, though, I am proud of my comic and I hope it inspires professionals in the field of speech-pathology to create works that entertain audiences, help children enhance their language skills, and raises awareness and acceptance of communication disorders.
Works Cited

THE LESSONS OF MIX
Long ago, in a far-off kingdom, legends told of a hero unlike any other. A hero who is bold, brave, caring, and will never give up!

A dark force terrorizes the kingdom, and only our young hero can stop it!

Luckily, our hero is ready...
Er... or at least he will be, right after his mid-day nap.

Ugh. Fine. I'll get up.

Thank you.
Right! So! As I was saying! Our young hero here is named Mlx and-

Sorry, narrator-guy, but this will have to wait!

Someone needs help!

And it's coming from the forest!

I'm comin' for ya, bud!

But, then, what should I do?
Don't know, kinda busy.

I'll need this!

Hmm...

Oh! I know!

I can do the chapter titles!

As long as I look cool!

CHAPTER 1: ENTER MIX
Cool enough for you?

Yes sir!

Hey! You! What's your name?

Huh? My... my name?

That's what I said!

Oh! Um. I must not have heard you...

Icaron!
My name is Icaron.

Okay!
Ica...
Ica...
Ica...
Ica...

Icky...

Icky! Stand up! Don't be afraid! I'm Mix, and I'm a hero!

Mix? Hero?

Yeah, man! What, can't ya hear?

Yes, of course. But... Mix?

The one and only! Here to save you!
Now, Icky...

I think it's time to...

TAKE THAT!

WHAP

BRRRT!

BRRRRT

YEAH!

BAM

SUPER SLAM
All done! WOW!

That was amazing!

Thanks for your help! You really are a hero!

No problem. Are you hurt, Icky?

Oh! Uh, no, but that's not my... Good!

So why were these jumpers messing with you?

Huh? Heck, if I know!

As far as I'm concerned, they're just a bunch of senseless brutes! Why don't you ask those bullies?

I can't.

You can't?

That's what I said!

I know. But why not?

They're gone?

Oh my. That can't be any good...

T-the forest?

What if we get lost?

What if the king doesn't believe us?

But what if those "jumpers" get us again?

We need to tell the king.

T-the king?

Yeah, we need to get out of this forest.
Icky!

You are okay!

I never let my friends get hurt!

Okay!

Uh.

Heh.

Okay!

Good!

So, um...

Oh! Uh...

Which way do we go?

This way!

Then let's go!

Then let's go!
**Chapter 2: Followed?**

Why did you come to save me? Why?

Well, yeah, but you don't know...

Because you needed help.

You ran towards danger, I mean, weren't you scared?!

No.

No?

Nah.

Just...no?

You needed help. I heard you yell, so I came. If I was scared, you wouldn't be here, don't you get it? If I'm scared, I lose.

And I will never lose.

But there must be something you're afraid of. No one is totally fearless.

Get what? You'd have to be a robot to be totally fearless, and...

You're... not a robot, right?

No!

I just—look, it's easy to be afraid. But fear is only as powerful as you let it be, right? That's what my dad tells me. So I just don't give fear any power. I choose not to be afraid.
Heh heh... Yeah, I didn't understand any of that!

Well, either way, I wanted you to have this...

You got MAGIC Item: BOOK!

Stats:
+2 Smarts
+1 Cleverness
+1 Weight
-1 Charm

SWEET!
Thanks!
I'm going to try out a fire spell first!

Ah, okay

HA!

Wait! Let me try again!

HO!

No, that's not it...

HA!

What's with this thing?!
Here!

Dumb thing don't work!

Yeah, I guess my hand waving is pretty bad.

Besides, what do you need magic for? You're not-

rumble rustle

RUMBLE

RUMBLE

Flop

What is it?

MIX!

ABOVE YOU!

SLAM
PERCY! How many times do I have to tell you?!

It's MIX!!!

And how many times do I have to tell you?! It's Percival! Get it right, you DOUNCE!

Uh, guys... Could you, maybe, y'know... take care of this first?

BOOM

BRRRT

(UFF)

(W-WOATH)

Boss (Jumper) (kinda ticked)
Don't worry, Icky!
I'll handle this.
You stay here.
You don't want to make your dad mad, right?
The King wants you to stay out of trouble.

Wait...
Your dad is the king?
Ha! Figures he never told you! You're looking at the Prince!
In all of his trouble-making glory.

Mix?
A Prince?
Small, a crown, family jewels, fancy staff, furry robe?

Now, if you'll excuse me...
The only one making trouble here is YOU!

CLAP
DOUBLE-FIST
MEGA
SMASH
CRACK
(pummel)
BAM
Crunch
MOUL
Wow... You sure are powerful, huh?
I didn't know you could use magic, too!

Of course I can use magic! I mean, what DUNCE can't?

Oh! Well... Sometimes magic can be hard!

Really? But it's so simple and easy!
W-well not everyone is like you, can you? Huh?
Can you use magic?

Y-yes... But not like-

See? Everyone can do it!
Let's go.

We need to get to the castle.

Oh no, you don't!

I have direct orders from the King to bring you back.

I don't care.

Tell Dad I'll be at the castle.

Without you.

And stop following us.
PFFT
Who sneezed in his cereal this morning?

Y-know...

You're pretty insensitive.

I'll see you dorks at the castle!

W-Whatever.

Hey Mix!
Wait for me!
Well...

Looks like we made it out of the forest!

(SILENT)

C'mon, Mix. I don't care that you can't use magic. And who cares what Porcy says? He's just kidding... He didn't know what he was saying.

(HALT)

We must be getting closer to the castle, right?

(Mix)

Are you listening to-

(Hey)

Mix.
TO
THE
CASTLE!!!

Let's go!

EXACTLY!

Woah!

Icky! What does that say?!

Unh...

You mean the castle?
Meanwhile, at the castle...

I thought we had an arrangement...

You said you'd get rid of his "problem."

*Hmph!*

I thought the King would be wiser than this.

You said you'd get rid of that...
that thing.

Why is it still following him around?

*Ha! Fool.*

You can't get rid of his shadow.
What are you saying? He must live his whole life with this...shadow? This curse?!

Oh, I wouldn't call it a curse! No, no! His shadow is a part of him. Without his shadow... Well, then there's no Mix! His only chance is to embrace his shadow... and become one with it!

And I'll make sure he does.
I wonder what Mix and Icky are up to now?

Finally!

Is there someone up there?

Yo! Open up!

Maybe he didn't...

(Does nothing) Hop!
Woah!

Mix, it's...

YOU?!
Mix!

You didn't tell me you had...

A TWIN BROTHER!

Wait, Icky!

Let me guess. Mark? Mike?

Wait, Icky! Don't.

OH! I know! Stir!

Ha ha, I'm hilarious...

It's nice to meet-

You...

Oof...

What the-?

I think.
Huh?!

BONG

Hey!

Grr~
HA!

SSSSSSSSSS1D

Woah!

SWEET

POUNCE

Ugh...
Mix! I'll save you!

GIGA-GUST!

SSSLURR

rumble

rumble

PTOOO!
Fwoosh!
Uh, Mix...

What now?

SON! Is that you?

DAD!

Mr. King, sir! You have to help! There's this thing that looks like MIX but it can cast magic and it's up-

... there?

Are you boys alright?!

We are now...
Sigh

Good.

So. "Mix", huh? Guess the name your mom and I gave you just wasn't good enough!

Heh heh...

And who might you be?

Oh! Uh, my name's I-Icaron.

But Mix calls me "Icky."

Ah, yes... You're new to the kingdom, correct? I believe I know all of Mix's other friends, like Percival...

He is NOT my friend...

Sir, if you don't mind me saying...

Besides the crown, you don't look anything like a king!

Oh.

I suppose you're right.

Well. Um...
We're a casual kingdom.

Mix... that thing could cost the fire magic that you couldn't... Did it... steal your powers?

You mean his Shadow.

We don't know where his shadow came from. We may never know. But it follows him and impairs his abilities. Magic is just one way. Mix is very powerful. But with this shadow... I tried to have the Dark Master help, but... Giah! It's all my fault. If I could've just...

Dad! Stop blaming yourself!

You didn't do this. It just... happened. You know I hate when you blame yourself! All you've ever done is love me.
It's not very fun... Sometimes I get really embarrassed. And I feel... I don't know. Dumb? But I'm not! And... I just remember what you told me.

"Fear is only as big as you let it become."

And I am NOT afraid of my OWN Shadow!

I'll find a way to defeat my shadow...

And make you proud!
Ha ha!
of course you will!

I see you get your hard head from me!

I didn't understand most of that.

But it was beautiful.

Mr. King, sir! I found Mix! He should be coming with-

Hey, wait. I asked Percival to fetch you. Where is that boy?

I hope he didn't

(Cheesier than some nachos)
Percival! What happened?
I was beginning to worry!
Yeah Percy, what took ya?
I had...
I had an urgent matter...
†-to attend to...

Earlier...

Fwip
Gotta get to the king...
Let him know I saved Mix...
Then he'll really be impressed!

Yeah! That's bound to make everyone like me! Like Mix...
Ugh! Why does everyone just like him? He's not OH MY GOSH!!!

It's the incredibly rare CALYPSO ORCHID.
Also known as the "calypso bulbosa"! I've only read about these!

I have to document this!
Back to the present.

'Snicker."

Well, all that matters is you're back now! And that means you can help Mix and Icky get up Death Mountain to the Dark Master.

WHAT?! No! I can defeat the Dark Master on my own! He's only going to slow me down!

No I won't!

Yes you will!

BOYS!

Quit your squabbling!

I don't know, it was kind of impressive.

Quiet, T Icky.

It will take all three of you to stop the Dark Master.
Yes, Mix, this is your fight. Only you can defeat the Dark Master and get rid of your shadow. No one else can do that.

HOWERVER. Percy and Icky can easily use strong magic, which you can't. You need both of them to help you get to the Dark Master.

Only by working together can the three of you stop the Dark Master from tormenting our kingdom and free Mix from his shadow.
Mr. King, sir... Why can't you come with us? You must be stronger than all of us!

Besides, a kingdom won't run itself.

I can teleport you to Death Mountain, but the rest is up to you three. This is a big mission. If you're not ready, let me know now. So... Are you ready?

Piff!

I was born ready.

PUNCH of CONFIDENCE!

I'm ready, Dad.
I love you.

Love you too, Dad.

Okay! Let's get this show on the road!
Show? Road? I thought we were going to fight!

I'll explain later.

BWEEM

CHAPTER 4: AN ENDING

BWEEM
HEY GUYS! This way!

You okay, M'kay?

Yeah, let's do this.

I'll make you proud, Dad!

Will you two hurry?!

The Dark Master could sneak up -

SNATCH

WHAP!
We must be inside the cave...

You mean his... L-LAIR?!

It's okay, Icky. Don't be afraid!

I suppose you boys are here to "get rid of" Mix's shadow. I already told the king, what you ask is impossible. The only way to "get rid of it" is...

...to EMBRACE yours.

I don't believe you! All I need to do is get rid of you! THEN my shadow will go away!
Foolish boy! It doesn't work like—

THWAK

HEY!

Enough talk. Let's do this, boys!

Hmph!

Yeah!

VS

Very well.

Fwoosh

Fwoosh
Percy! Quick! Grab him!

On it!

Hah!

Gotcha.

Huh?!
Oh, COME ON! He can TELEPORT?!

He's above us... I don't think he can hear us. Icky, get Percy and come back! I have a plan!

Okay! Fine! You're way too strong for us, Dark Master!

You win.

Please just allow us to leave in peace.

I must say...

I'm glad you've come to your senses, but I was not expecting -

Swoop
PERCY!
NOW!

What?!

You're not getting away this time!

Nice job, Percy!

Icky! Are you ready?

Almost...

Wrrrrrrr

There! One Giga-Gust, ready to go!

Perfect.

Hey, Dork Master!
Dork Master?!

rude

I think it's time to...

Mix It Up!
Please tell me he didn't change his name just for that stupid joke.
I got him!

Flop

moph

Ugh...

No one wins with a head butt...
MIX! That was SO COOL!
Heh... Thanks!
Pfft. That was EASY.

That was quite the hit! Are you okay-

Why...

Why must you act like this...?
Why must you be so...

MEAN
Who...?  
How are we the bad guys here?

-Us!!  
But you...

Um, what?

I just wanted to help...  
But you and the King just won't listen!  
And I don't know why!

Because you're lying! Now that I've defeated you, my shadow will leave me alone!

I told you, it doesn't work like that! You need to deal with your shadow, not me!

Grr! Your shadow is not something you DEFEAT! You need to absorb it! ACCEPT IT! I don't know how else to explain! You can't get rid of it because it's WHO YOU ARE!

FINE!  
Then I'll just DEFEAT my shadow!
No! I am NOT my shadow! I am much more than just my shadow!

Yes! You ARE more! But that doesn't mean your shadow isn't a part of that!

It's okay, Mix! I can help you CONTROL your shadow! But I can't do anything until you become one with it! Fighting your shadow won't help anyone!

Hey, Mix... C'mon buddy, it's okay...
W-Woah! What is this?! Dark Master!

I'm not doing that!

But if I had to guess...

Sssss

Sssss

Sssssssssss
Mix! I know you have no reason to trust me... But I'm telling the truth! Fighting won't help. You need to find a way to deal with your shadow!
Mix! I don't think he's lying! You need to be careful!

I never lose! I'm not afraid! I can beat you!
I can't take this anymore!

MIX! You can't keep fighting! You won't win like that!

I'm the brute here, remember?! Don't handle it like boring ol' Percy! Handle this in the super-cool and clever MIX WAY!
Mix! Get up!

C’mon, you can do this! You never lose, remember?!

Your fear is as big as you let it become!

Just look at me! I’m always scared! But you showed me how to be brave. Even when I am scared! So... so... it’s okay, Mix! It’s okay to be scared!
But that doesn't mean you stop trying!

Find a way to deal with this thing!

When I got scared, YOU pushed me to keep going! So now... now I'M pushing YOU!

You can't accept it. DEAL WITH THIS.

A part of you can't lose. Can't defeat it.

It's OK.
Sometimes you do need to push yourself. But in times like these...

And that's okay! It's impossible to be perfect... but losing doesn't mean I'm any less!

In fact...

I feel better now... I ACCEPT who I am. I'm not perfect, I've messed up. I've lost.

Well, I can't win. Fighting is no use. So I have to lose...
But...

I'm me.

And that's a pretty cool person to be.
Thank god. Mix is okay.

Are you okay? You were about to be crushed! I can't believe...

Ha ha! I'm fine, Percy. What's it to you?

Me?

Well, I...

I mean...

The King would be upset if anything happened to you!

Yeah, that's it...

Oh, of course!

Heh.

Thanks, pal.

Mix, that was so incredible! You won by losing. He didn't win by losing. He won by accepting that his shadow is a part of him. Instead of being afraid of it, he understood that he doesn't have to be perfect to be great.

Right, Mix?

Uh...

Totally!

There's just one thing left to do...
Alright, pal...

Let's fuse.
Chapter 5

Reality

I guess it's time to come clean. This isn't really a kingdom. I'm not really an adventurer. I'm actually just a kid in school. So what were you reading? My comics, of course!

Me

My comics

My dad? Well, he's not a king. He's actually the school principal!

Percy and Icky? They are really my friends! They can't use real magic... but let's hold off on that.

And the Dark Master? He's actually a Speech Language Pathologist!
I don't really know what that is... We call him "Speech Teacher."

We have "communication disorders." So, you know how most people can listen, read, or talk normally? Well, it's a little harder for people like us.

Okay, kids! First, we're going to work on facial expressions!

It doesn't mean we can't do those things. We just need people like our Speech Teacher to help us do them better. Look at Percy! He has mild autism. Sometimes, he can't tell how someone is feeling by looking at their facial expressions.

Okay, tell me what you think I'm feeling!

Grr!

Uh... angry?

Good job.

Now let's try...

RAR!

Grr!

Oh! I know that one! SCARED.

Percy really loves flowers, but because of his autism, he sometimes doesn't know when to stop talking about his favorite flowers!

Percy, we all know you love flowers, so why don't you ask Mix what he likes?

Oh... yeah! Mix, what do you like to do for fun?

I found the rare orchid.

Z

Hey, thanks for asking!
Percy used to feel bad about his autism. He had trouble making friends because people thought he was being mean. But he's really nice! We used to fight, but since he's working with our speech teacher, he's gotten better at understanding how I feel. And I'm learning more about Percy's Autism!

Icky? Well there's actually nothing wrong with Icky. He just saw past our disorders and really wanted to be friends with us!

He just moved here recently, and he was pretty scared. But we became fast friends! He helps out our speech teacher.

What are we doing next?

Oh, yes!

I know what you're thinking: "What about the shadow?" Well, that's me! Sort of... I have this thing called "specific language impairment," or "SLI" for short. My speech teacher says no one really knows what causes SLI, and that it's different for everyone that has it.
My SLI is my shadow.

Me (normal)  

My shadow (bad feelings about having SLI)  

Well, actually, my shadow was me ignoring my SLI.

Next, we're going to work on our reading.

I know, it's a little confusing. I tried to ignore and get rid of my SLI, but it's not something you get rid of. That's why I had to accept my shadow - I was really accepting my SLI! My Speech Teacher wasn't the bad guy, he was trying to help me understand that it's okay to have disorders like SLI. I just need a little extra help sometimes!

Like I said, SLI looks different for everyone. For me, reading is really hard. Most people read fine, though. So, in my story, magic was reading. That's why everyone else could use magic, but I couldn't.

Yeah!

Don't worry, Mix! We'll help you out!

Ugh!
In real life, it means I have "decoding" issues. Basically, when I try to read, everything just looks jumbled! "For" becomes "From" and "people" becomes "purple." It's so much work on jumbling the words that I totally forget what I read!

"The duck... went to the... s-store... and bought... the" "no-THREE tasty apples."

Very good, Mix! Now, tell me, what did the duck buy from the store?

SLAM

ugh

Okay, let's read it again, and let's pay attention to what the duck buys!

I also have some issues when speaking. I don't actually sound like my writing - my Speech Teacher and Dad helped me write all of this! When I speak, I have trouble with "morphology" and "syntax."

My Speech Teacher said "morphology" is using the right endings on words, like in the top picture. "Syntax" means putting words in the right order in sentences, like in the bottom picture. In my story, Dad understood me because he's used to my speech, but Icky wasn't - that's why he was confused!

We walk the dog yesterday.

I think you mean, We WALKED the dog yesterday!

Oh... yeah!

My Family has a car green. Remember our last lesson! Is that the right order of words?

Oh! Uh... No, it should be green car. Exactly!
Speaking of Dad... I used to feel bad about my SLI. I felt dumb because everyone else could read really well, like Percy and Icky, but I just couldn't. When I spoke, no one besides my family understood me. I'm really smart! But since I couldn't speak normally, everyone just thought I was stupid. It made me so mad! I thought Dad could never be proud of me. But then he said...

Dad... I sorry I can't get rid of my SLI... I didn't make you proud... Oh Mix... That's not true! You make me proud every day! Even with your disorder, you are so incredibly smart. And you always push yourself! I'm proud of you because you've accepted this, but you don't let it stop ya!

Okay, boys! Let's take a picture! 3... 2... 1!!

FLASH!
Paid all this money for this stupid camera? I'm going to use it all! OKAY!

Hey, watch it! Quit changin' Me in front!

Having a Communication disorder is hard. But it's a lot easier when you have support! Dad, Icky, Percy, and even my Speech Teacher help me everyday. They help me remember that my SLI does not mean I'm stupid. It means I learn a little differently from everyone else! I've just started on my journey to handle my SLI, but with friends like mine...
I think it'll be a good one.

THE END