

# Primary Children's Understanding and Relationship with Cartoon Characters: A Multimodal Praxis-based Research Experience

Robert Attard, George Cremona

robert.ypsilon@gmail.com, george.cremona@um.edu.mt

## Abstract

This paper presents the research outcomes of a two-year research venture conducted by Attard (2019) which links theory to classroom-based praxis. In brief, the first part of the paper presents a sound theoretical grounding based on international literature about primary school children's understanding and relationship with cartoon characters. Later, based on the critical theoretical literature review presented in the first part, the paper links the outcomes to two levels of praxis. Initially, it presents how nine / ten-year-old children attending Maltese primary schools understand and relate to cartoon characters based on their everyday cartoon watching experiences. Then, based on an original multimodal framework (Cremona, 2017), as a main conclusion, a set of practical multimodal suggestions are proposed. These suggestions are intended to be used by educators, parents or guardians with primary school children.

**Keywords:** *primary education, cartoon characters, children's expressions, pedagogical praxis.*

## Introduction: A comprehensive definition of cartoons

Cartoons can be defined as works of art produced in the form of drawings, illustrations or animated films which give colour, form and character to the most varied and imaginative sense of fable or reality itself (Jensen, 1997). This paper focuses on animated cartoons which are distinguished from other cartoons by the use of animation to give life to cartoon characters (Dobson, 2009). According to Wells (2008), cartoon characters are phenomena, because they are able to represent diverse beings, personalities, entities and identities. These characters have been featured on animated cartoon channels such as Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon, Boing and in commercialised animated films, such as Disney films, Warner Brothers films, Dream Works films, and Fox films (Ahmed & Wahab, 2014).

Animated cartoon characters allow animators to depict performances of gender, sexuality, racial and national traits which challenge how we think about

ourselves (Wells, 2008). Yet, several publications have criticised the portrayals of these animated characters as depicting both positive and negative stereotypes (Harriger et al., 2018). Lacroix (2004) and Giroux (1999) also add that animated cartoons influence children's values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour. This is especially important considering that the extent to which children consume media has increased over time (Marsh, 2014). Research indicates that animated cartoon watching influences children's diet and snack preferences (Naderer et al., 2018) and that exposure to violent and aggressive cartoons has a negative influence on children's behaviour (Wiedeman et al., 2015). Despite these negative influences, de Leeuw & van der Laan (2018) suggest that Disney animated films motivate children to help their friends when they watch such portrayals and that children can learn morality from animated cartoons. In fact, when children observe a cartoon character to be prosocial i.e. doing actions which benefit another character (Padilla-Walker et al., 2013), they want to behave or be like their favourite cartoon character, a process which is known as wishful identification (Hoffner, 1996). As children watch animated cartoons, they also develop other emotional connections or imaginary relationships with animated cartoon characters which can be both positive and negative and which are known as parasocial relationships or interactions (Jennings & Alper, 2016). Hoffner (1996) indicates that children's wishful identification and parasocial interaction with cartoon characters are dependent on the animated cartoon characters'; attractiveness, humour, intelligence, strength, and social behaviour. Furthermore, children's parasocial interaction with cartoon characters is positively associated with the extent to which a character is likely to occur in the real world (Rosaen & Dibble, 2008).

During cartoon watching, apart from developing parasocial relationships with cartoon characters, children also acquire values, images, signs and symbols of culture (Andrienko & Kulikovskaya, 2017). The knowledge which children acquire from watching animated cartoons shapes their ideas of the world outlook, which continues to evolve later throughout their educational experiences (Veresov & Kulikovskaya, 2015). As children watch animated cartoons, they acquire morality through the moral messages represented in cartoons, which can be strengthened by parents and guardians (de Leeuw & van der Laan, 2018). While children make meaning of animated cartoons, they learn how to use multiple channels of communication (e.g. *images, speech, gestures*, etc.) which are referred to as modes (Kress, 2010). As children communicate distinctive types of meanings through different modes, it helps them to develop their critical literacy (Lenters, 2018). In fact, animated cartoons significantly increase primary students' knowledge and understanding of specific concepts, their motivation, as well as their analytical and literacy skills (Dalacosta et al., 2009). Furthermore, the educational values, applications, and uses associated with cartoons highlight the importance and relevance that this art form has in the educational context, especially in improving primary children's learning experience and educational praxis (Ajayi, 2011).

In light of the critical literature review presented, this paper addresses the questions:

1. How do primary children understand and relate to animated cartoon characters?
2. What are the practical classroom-based multimodal suggestions that can be derived from the outcomes of the former research question?

## **Methodology**

In order to answer these research questions, the concurrent nested approach (Creswell, 2003), a mixed-methods approach that gives prevalence to the qualitative method, was adopted. This model was chosen in order to obtain an in-depth insight of primary children's understanding and relationship with cartoon characters based on ethnographic principles (Creswell, 2013). For this reason, triangulation of data was achieved through different praxis-based activities which were carried out with nine / ten-year-old children attending Maltese primary state schools. These activities included questionnaires, drawings and writings, semi-structured interviews and cartoon watching. The students' expressions and interpretations provided during these praxis-based activities were important in order to derive pedagogical suggestions, which can then be applied in educational praxis.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) at the University of Malta and permissions were granted by the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability and the Foundation for Educational Services (FES) to carry out the study in different primary state schools. Then, the activities were carried out with ten Year 5 students who had previously developed positive and negative parasocial relationships with animated cartoon characters and who were selected through a multi-stage sampling strategy (Newby, 2014).

The ten students selected through multi-stage sampling participated individually in the data collection activities, which occurred in the students' natural setting so that they feel comfortable and at ease. The students were provided with a blank A4 paper and a set of pencil colours to draw a cartoon character of their choice. Then the students were provided with a foolscap paper on which they needed to describe the character of their choice and how they feel towards it through writing. The students spent around 30 minutes on the drawing and writing activities. During these activities, field notes were taken in order to note any ideas or descriptions which the students shared about the character that they chose. Following these activities, the children who assented participated in a short semi-structured interview in which they described their drawings and elaborated their interpretation of the cartoon character which they chose and how they feel towards it. The semi-structured interviews took around 10 minutes, during which time the students had complete control of the audio recorder which was used to record the interviews. Finally, the

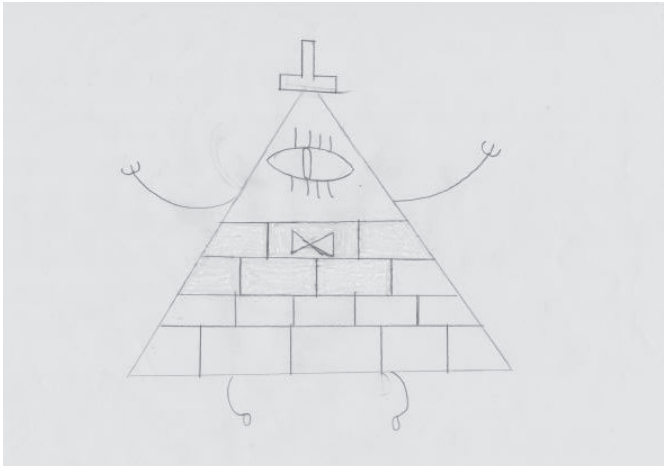
students were offered the opportunity to watch 5 minutes of an animated cartoon of their choice, in which the character that they described is featured. During this time, the students further elaborated their interpretations about the cartoon character and the students' verbal expressions were recorded as field notes (Flick, 2018).

The students' verbal expressions recorded as field notes and audio recordings were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis following the generic process described in Creswell (2003). Transcripts of interviews, which were conducted in Maltese, were translated using the backward translation technique (Nurjannah et al., 2014) for comparability purposes. In order to critically analyse and compare the students' interpretations, the MIRROR multimodal framework (Cremona, 2017) was used. The first four steps of this framework include monitoring and providing an in-depth multimodal social semiotic interpretation of the texts and drawings which the students did during the praxis-based activities. The other two steps of the framework involve the organisation, comparison of interpretations and the representation of outcomes derived from the framework. Although this framework was developed for critically analysing text for foreign language teaching and learning, it can be easily adapted for the critical analysis of other texts, including those relating to cartoon characters. Furthermore, as indicated in Cremona (2017), it has associated pedagogical applications and takes into consideration both multimodal and social semiotic perspectives which rarely feature in other frameworks. The data analysis outcomes were then used to propose multimodal suggestions, which consist of pedagogical activities related to cartoon characters based on the students' interests, to be used by educators in their pedagogical praxis or by parents or guardians with their children at home.

## Data analysis and findings

Analysis of the students' interpretations suggests that children understand cartoon characters in terms of the characters' identity and portrayal, attitudes and behaviour, nature and character, features and attributes, living environments, and social relationships. The analysis also suggests that the students relate to cartoon characters in different ways depending on these cartoon characters' features and characteristics. In agreement with Jennings and Alper (2016), the students in this study described both positive and negative parasocial relationships which they had formed with animated cartoon characters. Four students in this study, three who had formed a positive parasocial relationship and one who had formed a negative parasocial relationship with cartoon characters suggested that according to them these characters exist in reality. In fact, a student who drew and described the animated cartoon character *Bill Cipher* (Figure 1) from the animated cartoon *Gravity Falls* (Hirsch, 2012) stated:

*"I believe that Bill Cipher is real, because I saw a lot of people who took photos with him and uploaded them... on the internet... This means, he is real."*



**Figure 1. Drawing of Bill Cipher produced by a student in this study.**

Another student who drew and described *Mickey Mouse* (Figure 2) from the animated cartoon *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* (Parkins et al., 2006-2016) stated that *Mickey Mouse*

*"does things which I cannot do, so... like, like... instead of me doing them (the), he does them... and... he shows them in cartoons".*



**Figure 2. Drawing of Mickey Mouse produced by a student in this study.**

The students' statements also indicate that the students wishfully identify themselves with the animated cartoon characters which they described. For example, during the interview a student stated:

"...I would do as they do",

while referring to *Ladybug and Cat Noir* (Figure 3) from the animated cartoon *Miraculous: Tales of Ladybug & Cat Noir* (Astruc et al., 2015).



Figure 3. Drawing of *Ladybug and Cat Noir* produced by a student in this study.

Another student stated that he would like to live in a tree house as *Finn and Jake* (Figure 4) from the animated cartoon *Adventure Time* (Leichtner, 2010).

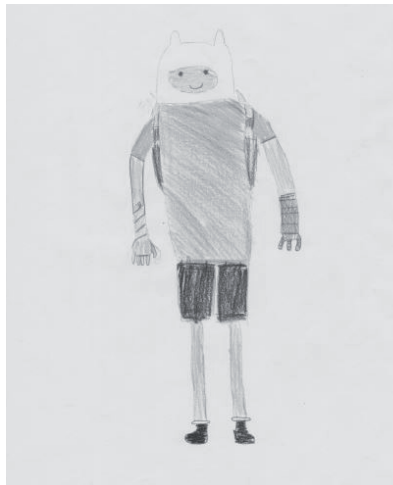


Figure 4. Drawing of *Finn* produced by a student in this study.

Apart from children's wishful identification with cartoon characters, the results indicate that children may become addicted to cartoons and cartoon character merchandise. For instance, a student described her addiction to watching unicorn cartoons stating:

"When I started watching it for the first time, I got addicted and I still watch it to this day." The student also added, "*I have a soft toy which is a unicorn. Its name is Emma, and I have had it for 7 weeks... My mum noticed me drawing them a lot, and she bought it for me, and I became fixated about unicorns.*"

This student's interpretation provides an indication of the important role that parents, guardians and other adults responsible for children have in monitoring the content of animated cartoons that their children watch.

The findings also seem to suggest that children's exposure to violent or aggressive cartoons can negatively impact children's values, attitudes, and behaviour (Wiedeman et al., 2015). The student who described *Bill Cipher* (Figure 1) from the animated cartoon *Gravity Falls* (Hirsch, 2012), produced for Disney Channel and Disney XD, explained that this animated cartoon character is

"really really really evil".

She also added that *Bill Cipher* is referred to as a

"one-eye demon"

because it possesses several powers. For example, the student explained that

"It can instantly burn whatever it wants"

and

"it can kill instantly, in a second, it kills".

During the interview, the student also described a story which suggests the demonic power of *Bill Cipher* in possessing humans, including children. The student explained:

"The children had puppets and *Bill Cipher* came for a boy. The boy was entering a password. *Bill Cipher* told him that he can tell him the password but he had to give him a puppet. He was referring to the boy's soul. Then they made a deal, and he removed all of the boy's soul and entered his body, but the boy was still alive but he was a ghost."

Despite the child's understanding about this cartoon character and his demonic powers to make deals involving the soul, during the informal interview she stated:

"...my dream is to go to America, search for it and have an adventure. Adventure, even if it's dangerous I don't care". "I'm not afraid of it... It will be my pleasure because he will be real and he will enter my mind and sees everything... Because it would have entered my mind, I will know that it is inside my mind, and... sort of because I really love it, and I want him to enter in my mind."

This case demonstrates the complexity of children's understanding and relationship with cartoon characters as the child loves this cartoon character but does not care about the dangers which such an adventure of making a deal involving the soul might have on her. Furthermore, this case also suggests that educators

and parents need to consider how animated cartoons, including those produced by Disney, influence children's culture, attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviour, as indicated by Giroux (1999).

## Conclusions

In light of the outcomes from the data analysis and the theoretical critical literature presented, multimodal pedagogical suggestions that can be held in educational praxis with primary children are proposed. The portrayal of the animated cartoon characters which the students drew and described can be used during a Mathematics lesson when teaching 2D shapes. For example, by providing students with pictures of *Bill Cipher* and *Mickey Mouse* or letting the students draw these characters, educators can enable students to deduce the shapes which these cartoon characters are made of. For instance, the general shape of *Bill Cipher* (Figure 1) is a triangle, however, it is composed of several internal rectangles as well. Likewise, *Mickey Mouse's* (Figure 2) ears are circular whilst his eyes and nose are oval-shaped. For students who do not like animated cartoons, educators can show pictures of fictitious castles or playgrounds or let the children draw patterns out of different shapes. The educator can then ask the students to find objects in the classroom which have these shapes, so that the students can find these shapes in praxis within the classroom. Since the findings indicate that children understand cartoon characters in terms of their identity and portrayal, it can be concluded that this resource is suitable for teaching the topic of 2D shapes.

When teaching languages, educators can make use of children's understanding of the cartoon characters' identity and portrayal, attitudes and behaviour, nature and character, features and attributes, living environments and social relationships. The students can form mind maps using a picture of the character of their choice and write what they know about the character, as shown in the example in Figure 5. In this way, students will be making use of the modes of *image*, *writing*, and *layout*.

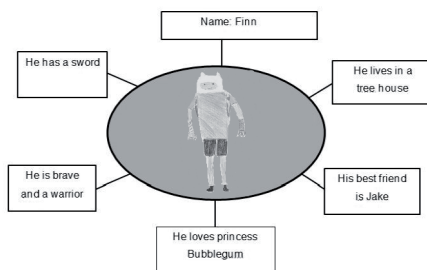


Figure 5. An example of a mind map with information which a student provided in this study about the animated cartoon character Finn (Attard, 2019).



From the mind maps which the students create, they can learn to write interviews by asking questions about cartoon characters, football players or any other characters of their choice, and provide answers through *writing*. This is because the findings suggest that not all students form positive parasocial relationships with cartoon characters, yet the students understand cartoon characters in terms of their features and characteristics.

Since the findings indicate that children may become addicted to cartoons and cartoon character merchandise, educators and parents may choose to motivate children to use such merchandise for educational purposes, as part of imaginative play or to create an animation video. The children need to set up the characters, take a picture with a still camera, move the characters slightly and take another picture. The process is repeated until there are enough pictures to create short animation videos which give the impression that the characters are moving. Since not every student might have access to such technology, students can produce drawings of their cartoon character merchandise, design new cartoon characters or participate in story-telling activities with their cartoon character merchandise. This way, children will be making use of different modes, including *image*, *colour*, *speech*, and *gesture* as well as improving their creative skills during integrated Art and language lessons.

These pedagogical suggestions may help educators and parents to motivate and engage children by carrying out these educational activities related to the children's interests. Furthermore, since the findings indicate that exposure to violent and aggressive cartoons may influence children's attitudes and behaviour, such activities might help primary students to be critical about the content represented in animated cartoons. In order to account for the students' different interests, experiences and relationships with cartoon characters, some of these activities might need to be adapted accordingly. Therefore, it is encouraged that educators use their creativity to develop lessons which include cartoon characters based on their students' interests and experiences, to enhance the students' learning experience in educational praxis and to help them reach their potential for academic success.

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## Bio-notes

**Robert Attard** is a postgraduate student who obtained his bachelor's degree in Biology and Chemistry (Honours) from the University of Malta. Currently, he is in his final year reading for a Master's degree in Teaching and Learning in Early Childhood and Primary Education. In his Master's dissertation, he conducted research which aimed at understanding how primary children understand and relate to cartoon characters and how such an understanding can contribute to practical educational implications. Recently, he was recruited as a primary teacher in the Education Sector within the Ministry for Education and Employment.

**Dr George Cremona** is the Coordinator for German programmes offered by the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta. He lectures in German language teaching methodology and gives lectures about Multimodality. He also coordinates the Media Literacy VET Programmes of the Faculty of Education which he has been a member of since 2009. He has also been working on a research project series called 'Multimodality in Practice' since January 2012. This project aims to implement Multimodal concepts and theories in practice particularly in schools and through the media (i.e. radio and television programmes as well as the internet). For this, he was awarded the prestigious IGM national award in 2017 and 2019.

