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Article type:
Original Research

Article history:
Received 02 October 2025
Revised 15 January 2026
Accepted 23 January 2026
Initial Publish 09 April 2026
Final Publish 01 October 2026

How to cite this article:

Gourkani, F., Ghaedi, Y., & Hoseini, A. (2026). Identification of Children's Reactions to G-Rated Animations in Relation to Moral Exploration. *Assessment and Practice in Educational Sciences*, 4(4), 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.61838/japes.211>

Identification of Children's Reactions to G-Rated Animations in Relation to Moral Exploration

ABSTRACT

The present study was conducted with the aim of identifying children's reactions to G-rated animations in relation to moral exploration. In terms of purpose, the study was developmental-applied; in terms of research nature, it was an interpretive study with an inductive approach; in terms of data type, it was qualitative; and in terms of time dimension, it was a cross-sectional study. The statistical population consisted of children aged 6 to 9 years, from whom 10 children were selected as the sample through purposive sampling. The research instruments included observation and semi-structured interviews. The data obtained from the interviews and the textual materials derived from the researcher's observations were analyzed using two techniques: phenomenological analysis based on Colaizzi's seven-step method and thematic analysis conducted with MAXQDA software. In the phenomenological analysis of children's reactions, diverse observations were obtained regarding how children perceive and experience this content. These reactions indicate the development of identity, moral growth, and emotional processing in children, which contribute to their holistic development in emotional, moral, and cognitive dimensions.

Keywords: children's reactions; G-rated animations; moral exploration

Introduction

Over the past three decades, animation has evolved from a primarily entertainment-oriented medium into a powerful educational and cultural instrument that significantly influences children's cognitive, emotional, social, and moral development. With the rapid expansion of digital technologies and the ubiquity of visual media in children's daily lives, animated content has become one of the most dominant forms of informal learning environments for young audiences (1-3). Children today are exposed to a continuous stream of animated narratives through television, online platforms, and digital

learning environments, making it essential for educational researchers and curriculum designers to systematically examine the nature of this exposure and its developmental consequences (4, 5). The pedagogical potential of animation lies not only in its capacity to attract attention and enhance motivation but also in its ability to convey complex cognitive, social, and ethical concepts in accessible and emotionally engaging ways (6, 7).

Educational psychology and learning sciences increasingly recognize animation as a multi-dimensional learning tool capable of facilitating deep cognitive processing, conceptual understanding, and critical thinking. Research indicates that well-designed animations improve comprehension of abstract scientific concepts, enhance depth of learning, and support meaningful knowledge construction among elementary students (6, 7). Furthermore, animation serves as an effective medium for developing language skills, communication competence, and symbolic thinking in early childhood (8). These cognitive benefits are reinforced when animation is integrated into inquiry-based pedagogical frameworks that emphasize exploration, reflection, and learner-centered meaning making (9, 10).

Beyond cognitive outcomes, animation exerts profound influence on children's identity formation, emotional regulation, socialization patterns, and moral reasoning. Contemporary animated films increasingly address issues of identity, diversity, cultural belonging, social justice, and ethical dilemmas, providing children with narrative contexts through which they explore values and construct personal meaning (1, 11). Characters, storylines, and symbolic representations embedded within animated narratives function as powerful social models that children observe, imitate, and internalize (12, 13). Through identification with animated characters, children experiment with possible selves, explore emotional responses, and develop social understanding in ways that traditional instructional approaches cannot easily replicate (1, 14).

The role of animation in shaping children's moral development has become an increasingly significant research domain. Moral values, social norms, and behavioral standards are frequently communicated implicitly through story structures, character motivations, conflicts, and resolutions. Studies demonstrate that children actively engage with these narratives, using them to interpret right and wrong, fairness, responsibility, empathy, and justice (15, 16). In this sense, animation functions as a form of moral pedagogy, transmitting ethical frameworks that interact with family, school, and cultural contexts to shape children's evolving moral identities (17, 18). However, not all animated content promotes positive moral development; exposure to aggressive behaviors, distorted social representations, or culturally incongruent values may produce adverse effects on children's behavior and emotional well-being (16, 17).

Recent scholarship emphasizes the necessity of analyzing children's lived experiences with animation rather than merely evaluating content features or behavioral outcomes. Phenomenological and qualitative approaches allow researchers to access how children interpret, emotionally experience, and integrate animated narratives into their cognitive and moral worlds (13, 19). Such approaches recognize children as active meaning-makers who do not passively consume media but construct interpretations based on their developmental stage, personal experiences, and sociocultural background (9, 10). Understanding these subjective experiences is essential for developing educational interventions and media literacy programs that support healthy cognitive, emotional, and moral growth.

Within contemporary educational theory, inquiry-based learning frameworks provide a particularly relevant lens for examining children's engagement with animation. Inquiry-based pedagogy emphasizes curiosity, exploration, questioning, and reflective thinking, enabling learners to actively construct knowledge rather than simply receiving information (9, 10). When animation is embedded within such frameworks, it becomes a catalyst for inquiry processes, stimulating children's questions about social relationships, ethical dilemmas, identity conflicts, and cultural differences (19, 20). Empirical evidence suggests that animation-based learning environments significantly enhance computational thinking, problem-solving skills, and conceptual reasoning among young learners when accompanied by guided inquiry and reflective dialogue (5, 20).

The sociocultural dimension of animation further underscores its educational significance. Animated narratives reflect cultural ideologies, social expectations, and normative values that shape children's worldview. Research on culturally grounded animation demonstrates its potential for transmitting social norms, reinforcing collective identity, and fostering intercultural understanding (11, 14). At the same time, the globalization of animated media introduces children to diverse cultural representations that may conflict with local value systems, highlighting the importance of critically examining cultural compatibility and ethical coherence in children's media consumption (12, 17). The interplay between global media narratives and local cultural contexts creates a complex learning environment in which children continuously negotiate meaning, values, and identity.

Another important dimension concerns children's emotional development and regulation. Animated films often evoke strong emotional responses, providing children with opportunities to experience, interpret, and manage a wide range of emotions including fear, joy, sadness, empathy, anger, and hope (2, 15). Through emotional engagement with characters and narratives, children develop emotional literacy and social understanding that are foundational for mental health and interpersonal competence (8, 16). At the same time, inappropriate or excessive exposure to violent or distressing animated content may disrupt emotional stability and contribute to behavioral difficulties, reinforcing the need for systematic educational evaluation of animated media (3, 16).

Within this complex educational landscape, the concept of moral exploration emerges as a central theoretical construct. Moral exploration refers to the dynamic process through which children actively engage with ethical questions, reflect on moral dilemmas, evaluate social norms, and construct personal value systems through lived experience. Animated narratives provide uniquely rich contexts for such exploration, presenting children with symbolic scenarios that mirror real-life moral challenges while offering safe spaces for reflection and experimentation (13, 15). Understanding how children respond to these narratives at the phenomenological level is therefore essential for designing effective educational strategies that integrate media, inquiry, and moral education.

Despite the growing body of research on animation and child development, significant gaps remain in understanding how children subjectively experience and interpret animated narratives from a moral-exploratory perspective. Much existing research emphasizes cognitive outcomes, language development, or behavioral effects, while fewer studies focus on children's lived moral experiences during and after engagement with animation (13, 19). Moreover, many quantitative studies fail to capture the nuanced emotional, ethical, and identity-related processes that unfold as children interact with animated content (1, 12). Addressing this gap requires qualitative methodologies that prioritize children's voices, perceptions, and experiential meanings.

The present study is situated at the intersection of educational psychology, moral development, media studies, and inquiry-based learning. Drawing on phenomenological analysis, it seeks to illuminate how children experience and respond to G-rated animated films in relation to moral exploration. By focusing on children's emotional reactions, ethical judgments, identity reflections, and social interpretations, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of animation as a powerful educational and developmental medium. This research also responds to contemporary educational challenges related to media literacy, value education, and the integration of digital narratives into formal and informal learning contexts (10, 14, 21).

In light of the theoretical, empirical, and educational considerations discussed above, the present study aims to systematically examine children's reactions to selected G-rated animations from the perspective of moral exploration in order to identify the experiential, emotional, and ethical dimensions of their engagement with animated narratives.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

The present study, in terms of purpose, falls within the category of developmental–applied research. With respect to its nature, the study is interpretive, and the dominant overall approach is inductive; therefore, research questions were employed to achieve the research objectives. From the perspective of data characteristics, the collected and analyzed data in this study are classified as qualitative. In this research, data were gathered through interviews with children and observation of their behavior during the process of watching animation, and they possessed a textual and qualitative nature. In terms of time dimension, this study is cross-sectional, and with respect to the method of data collection, the data were obtained through interviews and observation.

The research process was conducted as follows: in order to identify children’s reactions to cartoons, after consultation with experts, a G-rated animation containing concepts and categories related to moral exploration was purposively and judgmentally selected. The letter G stands for *General Audience*, meaning that all age groups are permitted to view the content. After selecting the animation, 15 children aged 6 to 9 who met the inclusion criteria were chosen and invited to watch the film. Children’s reactions were carefully examined, recorded, and documented by the researcher for subsequent analysis. The results of this stage were then analyzed using a phenomenological approach. Given that phenomenology includes various methodological approaches, as described later, this study specifically employed Colaizzi’s seven-step method to analyze the data obtained from: (1) the recorded observations of children’s reactions to the themes of the selected animations, and (2) the interviews conducted with children regarding the themes of the selected animations.

The research population consisted of children aged 6 to 9 years. A purposive sampling method was used, and the final sample size comprised 10 children. The selection of the 6–9 age group for this study was based on psychological and developmental considerations. According to Piaget’s theory, children in this age range are in the *concrete operational stage*, meaning they acquire the ability to understand and process simple rules, empathize with characters, and reason about cause-and-effect relationships, while still being strongly and directly influenced by media messages (22).

The inclusion criteria for children’s participation in the study were as follows: willingness to participate in the study; attendance in animation viewing sessions; and participation in interview sessions.

Data Collection Instruments

In phenomenological research, data collection instruments typically consist of semi-structured interviews. In this approach, based on the data derived from the research questions presented in interview form, significant statements, sentences, and expressions reflecting how the experience of the phenomenon under study is formed are identified. Subsequently, statements with equal value are determined, and the main themes are extracted. In the present study, two principal questions were addressed: (1) What experiences do children have regarding the phenomenon under investigation? and (2) What contexts or categories influence their experience of the phenomenon? Accordingly, both direct observation of children’s reactions and interviews with them concerning their responses to cartoons were used as data sources. The research instruments therefore included observation and interviews focused on children’s reactions to animations.

Data Analysis

In the present study, both the interview data and the observational data were analyzed using the phenomenological approach and procedures. The purpose of qualitative phenomenological research is to discover the meaning of a particular experience

for a group of individuals and how that experience is perceived and lived. The textual data obtained from interviews and the texts derived from the researcher's observations of children's behavior and perceptions were analyzed and reported using two techniques: (1) phenomenological analysis and (2) thematic analysis. In the phenomenological analysis section, Colaizzi's seven-step method was applied. In this study, after importing the data into the MAXQDA software environment, the data were analyzed using the phenomenological analysis procedure. First, all participants' descriptions were read in order to achieve empathetic understanding. In the second step, each protocol was reviewed and key statements were extracted. In the third step, the meaning of each key statement, formulated as a concept, was developed by the researchers. In the fourth step, these formulated concepts were organized into thematic categories. In the fifth step, the findings were integrated into a comprehensive description of the phenomenon under study, which was articulated as a clear and concise statement. In the final step, the results were returned to the participants, and they were asked to provide feedback on the findings.

Findings and Results

Data analysis was conducted at two levels. At the first level, the selected sample was analyzed using a phenomenological approach from the perspective of moral exploration, and the results were reported. At the second level of analysis, children's reactions to the selected sample were examined, and the manner in which they responded to viewing the selected animation was analyzed from the perspective of moral exploration.

A) Phenomenological Analysis of the Selected Samples from the Perspective of Moral Exploration

In this section, the selected works were analyzed from the perspective of moral exploration for children using a phenomenological approach. In total, 31 concepts were identified across the three selected samples, with some concepts appearing in more than one animation. The identified concepts are presented and described separately for each sample below.

1. Phenomenological Analysis of the Animation *Luca*

Film Introduction

The animation *Luca* is a computer-animated adventure comedy–drama film released in 2021, produced by Pixar Animation Studios and Walt Disney Pictures. The film was directed by Enrico Casarosa, and its story is set in a fictional coastal town in Italy called Portorosso. Luca, a young sea monster who is capable of transforming into a human, becomes involved in a summer adventure with his new friend Alberto.

Luca is a young boy who lives in the depths of the sea. He disregards his parents' warnings to stay away from humans and is curious to discover the world beyond the ocean. One day, Luca meets Alberto, another sea monster of his age. Alberto shows Luca that sea monsters can transform into human form on land. The two friends decide to travel to the town of Portorosso, where they meet a girl named Giulia. Together, they participate in competitions and attempt to save money to buy a Vespa motorcycle so they can travel the world.

The main characters include Luca Paguro, a young sea monster who can transform into a human; Alberto Scorfano, Luca's close friend and another sea monster who helps him become familiar with the human world; and Giulia Marcovaldo, a bright young girl who becomes friends with Luca and Alberto.

Luca (2021) is a highly engaging film that addresses ethical and psychological themes for children in depth. The film teaches children how to accept their identity, preserve friendship and companionship, confront fears and failures, avoid prejudice, help and care for others, and cultivate love and affection in their lives. This film is particularly beneficial for children who are in the process of discovering themselves and the world.

Phenomenological Analysis

The animation *Luca* explores themes such as identity, fear of the unknown, friendship, and acceptance of differences, thereby helping children develop a deeper understanding of human relationships and social values. This animation is not only entertaining but also conveys profound messages regarding the importance of self-awareness, cooperation with others, and acceptance of diversity. The identified concepts are presented in Figure 1.

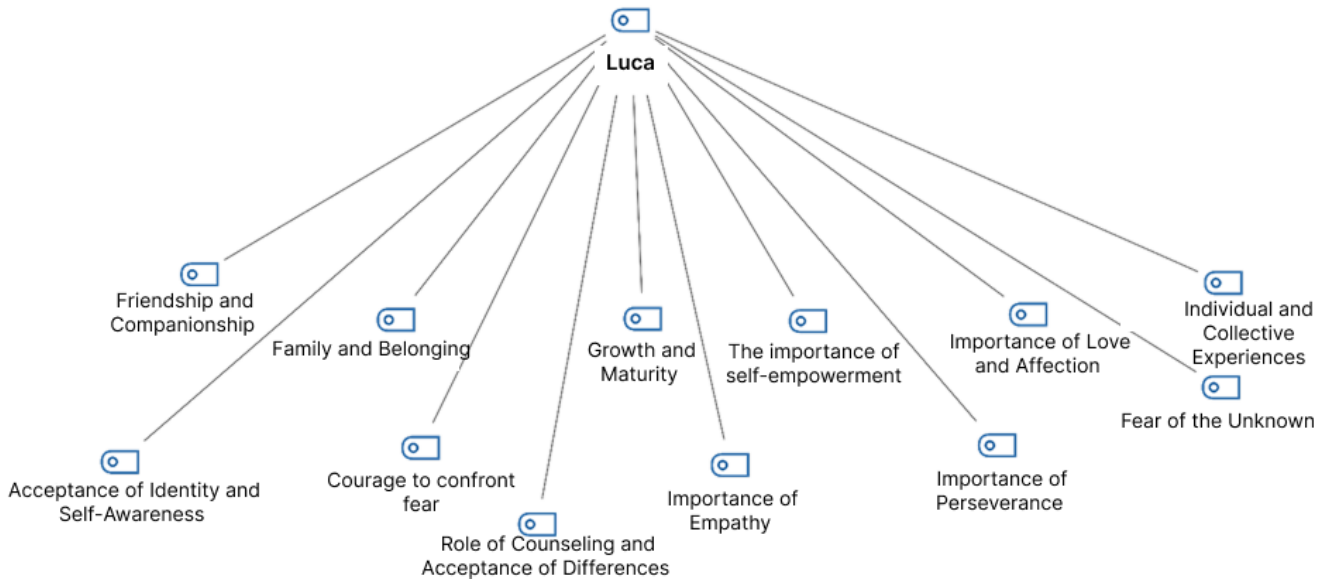


Figure 1. Identified Concepts in the Phenomenological Analysis of the Animation *Luca*

Acceptance of Identity and Self-Awareness

Luca is a film about discovering and accepting one's identity. Luca, the main character, is in search of his identity. He is a sea creature who is eager to explore the human world. This quest for identity represents the human effort to understand oneself and one's place in the broader world. Through new experiences and encounters with life beyond the sea, Luca gradually develops a deeper understanding of himself.

The main character, Luca, is a sea creature discovering a new world that does not belong to him, yet he must conceal his true identity from humans. Humans symbolically represent the adult world—a world governed by rules beyond those that shape children's lives. This theme is particularly relevant for children who are discovering themselves and their place in the world. The film teaches them to accept their identity without fear, even if they are different, and how to step into unfamiliar worlds with confidence.

Friendship and Companionship

Friendship and companionship constitute one of the central themes of the film. Despite their differences and conflicts, Luca and Alberto remain loyal to one another. This theme teaches children how to be honest and faithful in their relationships and how to care for their friends. The friendship between Luca and Alberto forms the core of the narrative. These characters cooperate, share experiences, and demonstrate the importance of friendship in shaping individual and social identity. Their friendship enables them to overcome their fears and develop trust in one another.

Courage and Confronting Fear

Throughout the film, Luca must confront his fears and uncertainties. He learns to move forward rather than retreat from fear. This theme is highly beneficial for children who may struggle with their own anxieties and concerns. The film teaches that courage does not mean the absence of fear, but rather the ability to face it.

Rejection of Prejudice and Acceptance of Differences

The film also addresses prejudice and the acceptance of differences. The residents of Portorosso view sea creatures such as Luca and Alberto with suspicion because they perceive them as different. This theme teaches children to avoid prejudice and to treat others with respect and mutual understanding. The animation *Luca* reminds viewers that embracing diversity and respecting others are essential for building positive relationships. Initially, the human characters fear the sea creatures, but over time, through familiarity and understanding, this fear transforms into friendship and empathy. This reflects the importance of recognizing and accepting cultural and individual differences within society.

Family and Belonging

Luca also explores the concepts of belonging and family. Luca is in the process of discovering his true family while also confronting his biological family. This theme teaches children that family can take many forms and that belonging to a group or family signifies acceptance and love.

Growth and Maturity

Throughout the film, Luca grows from a child into a more mature individual. He must make decisions and accept responsibility. This theme is valuable for children who are undergoing personal development. The film teaches them how to accept responsibility and make meaningful decisions in their lives.

The Importance of Empathy

The film emphasizes empathy and understanding of others. Luca and Alberto support and care for one another. This theme teaches children how to help others and show compassion, even when differences exist.

The Importance of Self-Expression

Luca highlights the importance of self-expression. Luca must express who he truly is. This theme teaches children how to articulate their identity and communicate who they are, even when they are different.

The Importance of Perseverance

Luca encounters bullying and must maintain perseverance. This theme teaches children how to stand up for themselves and persist in the face of adversity.

The Importance of Love and Affection

The film emphasizes love and affection. Luca and Alberto care deeply for one another. This theme teaches children how to integrate love and kindness into their lives.

Fear of the Unknown

A key theme of the animation is fear of the unknown and of difference. Initially, Luca and his friends are afraid of the human world. This fear arises not only from lack of knowledge but also from negative past experiences. However, through exploration and interaction with new environments, they learn to overcome this fear.

Individual and Collective Experiences

Each character in *Luca* undergoes unique personal experiences that shape the group's collective identity. Through acquiring new skills and confronting challenges, Luca gradually becomes an independent individual. These experiences influence not only his personal development but also his relationships with others.

2. Phenomenological Analysis of the Animation *Encanto*

Film Introduction

The animation *Encanto* is an adventure-comedy film co-directed by Jared Bush and Byron Howard, released in 2021, produced in the United States and Colombia, and created by Walt Disney Pictures and Walt Disney Animation Studios. The voice cast includes Stephanie Beatriz, Diane Guerrero, Rhenzy Feliz, Wilmer Valderrama, and Angie Cepeda.

Phenomenological Analysis

The animation *Encanto* serves as an effective medium for teaching moral and ethical concepts to children. Through its engaging storyline and diverse characters, the film introduces essential concepts such as family, identity, morality, empathy, and achievement. This can support children's moral and ethical development and enable them to function as responsible and ethical individuals in society. By addressing themes such as identity, social pressures, individual and collective experiences, and self-acceptance, *Encanto* promotes a deeper understanding of human relationships and their challenges. The animation is not only entertaining but also conveys profound messages about love, family, and self-acceptance. The identified concepts are presented in Figure 2.

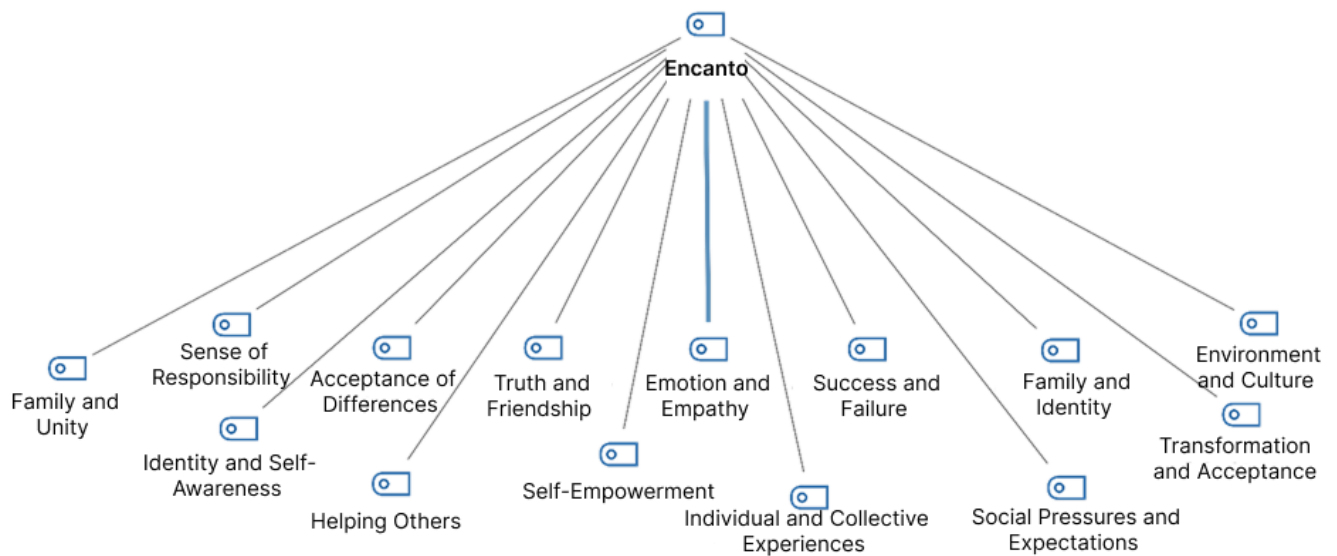


Figure 2. Identified Concepts in the Phenomenological Analysis of the Animation *Encanto*

Family and Unity

In this animation, the Madrigal family occupies the center of the narrative. This family represents not only biological relationships but also mutual support and unity. For children, this concept is essential because it helps them understand that the family is an institution in which all members are interdependent and care for one another.

Sense of Responsibility

Each member of the Madrigal family holds a specific responsibility toward the family and their community. This theme teaches children that by fulfilling their roles within the family and society, they can contribute meaningfully to others' well-being.

Identity and Self-Understanding

The main character, Mirabel, strives to find her place within the family and the community. This theme is particularly important for children, as they are continuously engaged in the process of identity formation. The animation demonstrates that every individual can discover a unique identity through their life journey.

Acceptance of Differences

Within the Madrigal family, each member possesses distinctive abilities, whereas Mirabel lacks supernatural powers. This contrast teaches children that differences are natural and that every person can be valuable in their own way.

Helping Others

Members of the Madrigal family use their abilities to help others. This theme teaches children that using personal talents to assist others is not only virtuous but also beneficial to the community.

Truthfulness and Integrity

Throughout the story, Mirabel seeks to uncover the truth about her family's past. This theme teaches children that truth and integrity are more important than anything else.

Self-Expression

In the animation, the emotions of the characters are clearly portrayed. This helps children understand their own emotions and learn how to express their feelings to others.

Affection and Empathy

The narrative teaches children how to understand others emotionally and provide support, thereby strengthening empathy.

Success and Failure

The characters encounter various failures and challenges. This teaches children that failure is an integral part of life and can be a source of learning. In *Encanto*, success does not signify the acquisition of power or wealth but rather discovering one's identity and helping others. This teaches children that genuine success arises from self-discovery and service to others.

Family and Identity

In *Encanto*, the Madrigal family symbolizes identity and belonging. Each family member's special abilities reflect their characteristics and roles within the family and society. These abilities can be interpreted as symbols of social expectations and familial pressures.

Social Pressures and Expectations

Mirabel, who possesses no supernatural powers, represents individuals who may feel undervalued within their families. She attempts to establish her place and demonstrate that her worth does not depend on others' magical abilities.

Individual and Collective Experiences

Each character undergoes personal experiences that influence the family's collective identity. These experiences include joys, sorrows, and challenges that the family encounters, illustrating the complexity of human relationships and their reciprocal influences.

Transformation and Acceptance

Throughout the story, Mirabel realizes that her value as an individual transcends magical powers. This transformation reflects self-acceptance and acceptance of others. Ultimately, the family learns that love and mutual support are more important than individual abilities.

Environment and Culture

The story's setting in Colombia, with its rich and vibrant culture, enhances the sense of belonging and identity. Cultural elements such as music, dance, and traditions play a crucial role in shaping the characters' experiences.

3. Phenomenological Analysis of the Animation *Trolls World Tour*

Film Introduction

The animation *Trolls World Tour* is a musical comedy animated film released in 2020, produced by DreamWorks Animation and distributed by Universal Pictures. This film is the sequel to *Trolls* (2016). In this animation, Queen Poppy and Branch discover that they are only one of six Troll tribes, each belonging to a distinct musical genre: Pop, Funk, Classical, Techno, Country, and Rock. Queen Barb, the leader of the Rock Trolls, intends to destroy all other styles of music and make Rock the only music of the Trolls. Poppy and Branch, together with their friends, must travel to the lands of the other Trolls and unite them in order to prevent Barb's destructive plan.

Phenomenological Analysis

The animation *Trolls World Tour*, as a colorful and music-filled production, is not merely designed to entertain children, but also contains valuable moral and educational messages. By exploring themes such as cultural diversity, identity exploration,

social pressures, and the importance of unity, this animation promotes a deeper understanding of human relationships and social values. The film is not only entertaining, but also delivers profound messages about accepting differences and cooperating with one another. The identified concepts are presented in Figure 3.

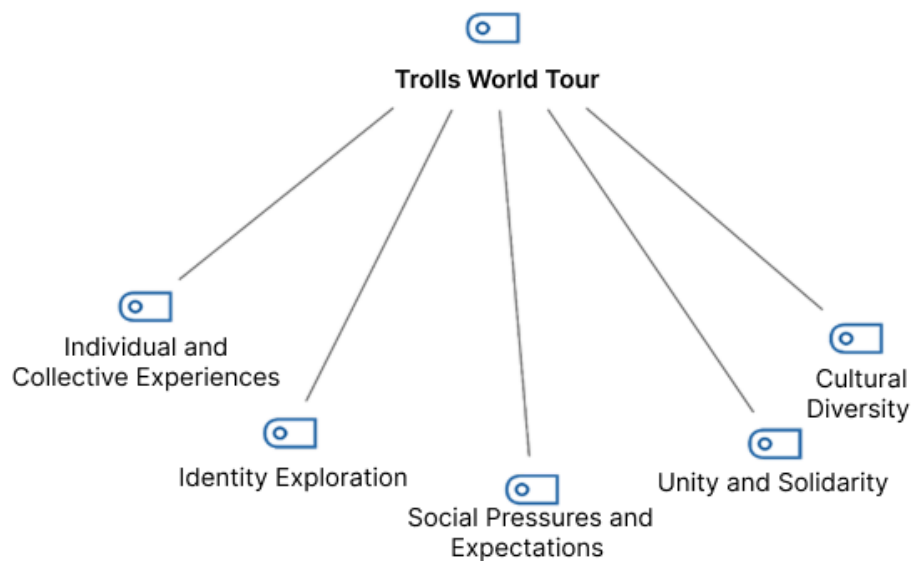


Figure 3. Identified Concepts in the Phenomenological Analysis of *Trolls World Tour*

Cultural Diversity

In *Trolls World Tour*, each group of Trolls represents a specific type of music (e.g., Pop, Rock, Hip-Hop, etc.). This cultural diversity not only enriches the narrative, but also reflects the importance and beauty of differences within society. Each musical genre symbolizes a cultural identity that can help individuals develop a deeper understanding of themselves and others.

Identity Exploration

The main character, Poppy, is in search of her identity and role within the broader world. She realizes that life extends beyond happiness and celebration, and that she must confront new challenges and diverse perspectives. This identity exploration reflects the human effort to find one's place in a complex and diverse world.

Social Pressures and Expectations

The characters in this animation encounter various social pressures. For example, Poppy must face expectations from herself and others regarding what kind of leader she should be. This illustrates the challenges individuals experience when dealing with social expectations.

Unity and Solidarity

One of the key messages of *Trolls World Tour* is the importance of unity and solidarity. Ultimately, the characters realize that despite cultural differences, they can collaborate and learn from one another. This message emphasizes that diversity should be respected and can strengthen human relationships.

Individual and Collective Experiences

Each character undergoes personal experiences that influence the collective identity of the group. These experiences include challenges, successes, and learning processes, demonstrating the complexity of human relationships and the importance of individual experiences in shaping collective identity.

B) Phenomenological Analysis of Children's Reactions to Viewing the Films from the Perspective of Moral Exploration

In this section of the study, the findings derived from observing children’s behaviors and their questions during the viewing of the selected samples, as well as from interviews conducted after viewing, are presented. Children’s reactions to the animations were carefully observed by the researcher, and post-viewing interviews were conducted with the children. A selection of children’s reactions and statements is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Description of Children’s Reactions to Viewing the Selected Animations

No.	Children’s Statements and Observed Reactions
1	“Wow, the cartoon <i>Luca</i> was really great. I fell in love with Luca and his friend Alberto! When they were swimming in the water and playing together, I felt so happy. But when people were afraid of them and chased them, my heart was beating fast. I wished they would escape and everything would turn out well. At the end, when Luca managed to continue his friendship with the girl, I was very happy—just like when I play with my friends. The animation was very colorful and beautiful, and I would love to watch it again.”
2	“The animation was really beautiful. I liked it a lot when I watched it. The characters were very attractive and their clothes were nice. Mirabel was a really cool and brave girl. When she sang, I wanted to sing along with her. And the part where all the family members had special powers was great. I wished I had their powers too—fire, flowers, and flying. But I liked the flower power the most. I felt a little sad in the middle of the movie, but then everything worked out. The green man was scary; I didn’t like him. <i>Encanto</i> was really beautiful.”
3	The child’s reaction to the characters: The child became amazed by the girl in the family who could make flowers grow everywhere and tried to behave like her. The child’s reaction to events: The child was surprised and fascinated by the magic of the candle. Emotional trigger: The child became upset when the children in the animation told Mirabel, “You don’t have any magical powers,” and she wondered why Mirabel had no powers while her sisters did. The child asked questions about the magic of the candle while watching the film.
4	The child laughed at the humorous and funny movements of the characters. The child became angry during violent behaviors and smiled at interesting actions. Strange and new behaviors excited the child. The exaggerated events in the animation appeared extremely unusual to the child. The child stated that the film was very interesting, with exciting and attractive exaggerations. Favorite character: Alberto, because he had a funny face and curly hair; Luca, because he was obedient. Opinion: It would have been better if the sea monster characters stayed on land from beginning to end and if humans were less frightening and stopped hunting sea monsters.
5	“It was a nice cartoon. Favorite character: the pink girl, because she was kind and brave. Least favorite character: the prince’s son, because he was arrogant. Preferred ending: the bad people should die. Suggested action: the characters should shoot the bad people’s guns. Emotional trigger: the scene in which the girl chased the Trolls away. During the chase, the child shouted, ‘Good job, go, go!’”

Analysis of Reactions

Surprise and Imitation

In the animation *Encanto*, the participant’s astonishment at the girl who fills everything with flowers and the participant’s attempt to imitate her reflect feelings of wonder and admiration. This reaction indicates that the participant is attempting to connect with the magical world and to internalize part of that magic. From a phenomenological perspective, this represents an experience of fascination and hope, which stimulates curiosity and the participant’s desire to emulate the surrounding environment and the elements perceived as admirable.

The participant’s amazement at the magic of the candle likewise indicates the influence of the story’s unknown and powerful elements. This reaction demonstrates how the participant is drawn to the mysterious and powerful components of the narrative, reflecting a natural curiosity about how the real or fantastical world functions.

Empathy and Sadness

The participant’s sadness when Mirabel is told that she has no magical powers reflects empathy and an understanding of the feeling of rejection. This reaction addresses the participant’s sense of identity and self-worth and highlights the capacity to understand the emotions and experiences of others. It also represents a form of perceived isolation, which is a common experience among individuals who view themselves as different from others.

Curiosity and Exploration

The participant’s questions about the magic of the candle indicate an interest in understanding the story’s fantastical elements. This curiosity reflects a broader inclination toward exploration and understanding cause-and-effect relationships within a magical context, demonstrating the development of the participant’s emerging critical thinking skills.

Perception of Reality versus Fantasy

The participant's reaction to exaggerated events as highly stimulating indicates that their understanding of reality and fantasy is in the process of development. These exaggerations challenge the participant's perception of reality and blur the boundaries between reality and fantasy, which constitutes a key aspect of how the subconscious processes and categorizes experiences.

Moral Understanding and Empathy

The participant's opinion about the story, in which they defend the sea creatures and reject the portrayal of humans as hunters, indicates engagement with moral themes. This reflects a deeper level of cognitive processing, in which the participant not only enjoys the animation but also reflects on its moral dimension, demonstrating empathy and a developing sense of justice.

Role Modeling and Identity

The participant refers to the character "Mirabel" as a positive role model, describing her as a "cool and brave" girl. This suggests that the participant is drawn to strong and courageous characters and may be seeking to model their own identity after such figures. The participant also expresses a desire to sing along with Mirabel, reflecting a motivation to engage and interact with the content.

Imagination and Talents

The participant refers to the characters' special powers and expresses a desire to possess similar abilities. This demonstrates an interest in extraordinary and imaginative capacities and suggests that the participant is in the process of exploring personal abilities and talents. The selection of the "flower" power as a favorite may reflect an inclination toward growth, beauty, and creativity.

Resolution of Negative Emotions

The participant reports feeling sad during part of the film but ultimately feeling better when everything is resolved. This indicates that the participant experienced negative emotions but was able to achieve emotional relief through narrative resolution. This reflects an understanding of problem resolution and the importance of hope.

Learning Appropriate versus Inappropriate Behavior / Good versus Bad

The participant becomes angry in response to violent behaviors, indicating disapproval and the experience of negative emotions such as anger. This reaction suggests that the participant is learning to differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. Additionally, the participant describes the "green man" character as frightening and unpleasant, reflecting a negative response to threatening or antagonistic characters, which can support the development of moral discernment.

Exploration of the World

Unusual and novel behaviors in the animation are exciting for the participant. This reaction indicates enjoyment of new and unexpected experiences and suggests that the participant is exploring the world through the animated narrative.

Understanding Exaggeration in Animation

The participant perceives exaggerated events in the animation as excessively strange. This reaction demonstrates an emerging understanding of the distinction between reality and fantasy and reflects the development of the participant's broader understanding of the world.

Narrative Comprehension

The participant recognizes the long-standing conflict in the story between humans, who hunt sea creatures, and sea creatures, who fear humans, as the foundation of the narrative. This reaction indicates comprehension of the storyline and plot structure.

Development of Critical Thinking

The participant believes that it would have been better if the sea monster characters had remained on land throughout the film and if humans had appeared less frightening. This reaction reflects critique of the narrative and suggests specific improvements to the story, indicating the development of critical and analytical thinking skills.

Role Construction

The participant shows interest in the “pink girl” character because of her kindness and bravery. This reaction demonstrates attraction to moral and behavioral traits that align with positive values and role models. In phenomenological terms, this attraction represents a “meaningful experience,” illustrating how the participant understands moral values and characteristics through narrative characters.

Conversely, the participant expresses dislike for the “prince’s son” character, describing him as arrogant. This indicates the participant’s ability to recognize negative and selfish behaviors and to evaluate them unfavorably. In phenomenology, this response is considered a “critical experience,” demonstrating how the participant forms moral judgments through narrative engagement.

The participant also expresses interest in specific characters such as “Alberto” and “Luca,” enjoying traits such as an “interesting face” and “curly hair,” and valuing Luca for being “obedient.” This suggests that the participant appreciates particular moral and behavioral qualities in characters.

Cultivation of Perceptions of Justice and Punishment

The participant believes that the film should conclude with “the bad people dying.” This expectation indicates the development of an initial understanding of justice and punishment through narrative. In phenomenology, this expectation is considered an “anticipatory experience,” illustrating how the participant derives moral and social concepts from the story. The participant also suggests that the characters should “shoot the bad people’s guns,” indicating an inclination toward the use of force as a means of problem-solving. In phenomenological terms, this is regarded as a “practical experience,” reflecting how the participant conceptualizes power and conflict resolution through narrative engagement.

Emotional Reactions

During the scene in which the Trolls escape, the participant shouts, “Good job, go, go!” This reaction indicates that the participant experiences strong positive emotions, such as excitement and support for positive characters, during dynamic and action-filled scenes. In phenomenological analysis, this is considered an “emotional experience,” illustrating how the participant engages affectively with the narrative and experiences a range of emotions.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to examine children’s reactions to selected G-rated animations from the perspective of moral exploration. The findings revealed that children’s engagement with animated narratives is a deeply multifaceted process encompassing emotional resonance, moral judgment, identity construction, social understanding, and critical reflection. These results strongly support contemporary educational theories which conceptualize children as active meaning-makers who interpret and negotiate moral content rather than passively receiving messages (10, 13, 19).

One of the most salient outcomes of the study is the centrality of emotional engagement in children’s moral exploration. Participants exhibited intense emotional responses such as admiration, fear, sadness, excitement, anger, and hope when interacting with the animated content. This aligns with research emphasizing that emotional activation is a primary gateway through which learning, value formation, and moral reasoning occur in childhood (2, 8, 15). Emotional immersion allowed children to internalize narrative conflicts and moral dilemmas, facilitating deeper reflection on fairness, loyalty, kindness,

courage, and justice. Such emotional–moral integration confirms that animated narratives function not merely as entertainment but as emotionally charged educational spaces that foster moral development (16, 18).

The data further indicate that children consistently engaged in identity exploration while interacting with the animations. Participants repeatedly identified with characters who embodied traits such as bravery, kindness, honesty, perseverance, and loyalty, while rejecting characters perceived as arrogant, aggressive, or selfish. This pattern mirrors earlier findings that animated characters serve as powerful symbolic models through which children negotiate self-concept and social identity (1, 11, 12). The children’s tendency to imitate admired characters and articulate personal aspirations connected to them demonstrates how animation contributes directly to the construction of moral identity. This phenomenon reflects social learning mechanisms and narrative identity formation processes widely documented in child development literature (1, 13).

Another significant result concerns children’s spontaneous moral reasoning and ethical evaluation. Participants did not merely enjoy the stories; they actively evaluated actions, judged characters’ behaviors, and expressed normative expectations regarding justice, punishment, compassion, and responsibility. For example, children defended marginalized characters, condemned violent behavior, criticized unjust actions, and proposed alternative moral outcomes. Such findings are consistent with studies highlighting the role of narrative media in facilitating moral cognition and ethical reflection in childhood (15, 17, 18). These results demonstrate that animation provides fertile ground for children’s moral exploration by offering safe symbolic environments in which they rehearse ethical thinking and social values.

The study also underscores the importance of cultural meaning and social values embedded within animated narratives. Children demonstrated awareness of social relationships, community roles, cultural norms, and collective identity as portrayed in the films. This supports earlier research emphasizing that animation is a powerful medium for transmitting cultural and social concepts and shaping children’s worldviews (11, 14, 17). Importantly, children did not accept these representations uncritically; rather, they reflected upon them, questioned injustices, and proposed more equitable alternatives. Such engagement illustrates the interactive nature of cultural learning and supports inquiry-based educational frameworks that emphasize dialogue, reflection, and meaning construction (9, 10).

The findings further reveal children’s developing capacity to distinguish between reality and fantasy while simultaneously using fantasy as a cognitive and moral tool. Participants recognized exaggerated and magical elements as distinct from reality, yet used these fantastical components to explore real moral issues such as fear, loyalty, discrimination, cooperation, and conflict resolution. This supports cognitive development research suggesting that imaginative engagement enhances abstract thinking, moral reasoning, and conceptual understanding (6, 7, 19). The coexistence of fantasy and realism within animated narratives thus appears to strengthen children’s reflective and interpretive abilities.

Notably, the children in this study exhibited emerging critical thinking and analytical skills. They questioned narrative choices, suggested alternative endings, critiqued character behavior, and reflected on social consequences. This aligns with evidence that inquiry-oriented learning environments supported by media-rich instruction promote higher-order thinking and evaluative reasoning in young learners (5, 9, 20). The results indicate that animation can function as a cognitive catalyst, stimulating analytical reflection and moral discourse when integrated into guided educational contexts.

The observed developmental outcomes also resonate with research on the pedagogical value of animation for language development, abstract reasoning, and conceptual learning (6-8). Participants demonstrated sophisticated narrative comprehension, emotional articulation, and moral vocabulary, suggesting that animation contributes holistically to children’s cognitive, linguistic, emotional, and ethical growth.

Furthermore, the study’s findings contribute to the growing body of literature emphasizing the necessity of phenomenological approaches in educational research. By capturing children’s lived experiences, emotional reactions, and

subjective meanings, this study reveals dimensions of learning and moral development that are often overlooked by purely quantitative methodologies (10, 13, 19). The phenomenological perspective allows for a nuanced understanding of how children actually experience and interpret educational media in everyday life.

Overall, the results confirm that animation constitutes a powerful informal learning environment in which moral exploration, identity formation, emotional development, cultural understanding, and critical thinking intersect. These findings are consistent with international research highlighting animation's multidimensional educational impact and underscore the urgent need for educators, parents, and policymakers to engage more deliberately with children's media experiences (1, 2, 14, 16). When strategically integrated into inquiry-based educational practices, animation can significantly enrich moral education and support the holistic development of young learners.

This study was limited by its relatively small sample size and its focus on a specific age group, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. The qualitative nature of the research, while offering depth and richness, does not allow for broad statistical inference. In addition, the study examined a limited selection of animations, and children's reactions may vary when exposed to different genres, cultural contexts, or narrative structures.

Future research should incorporate larger and more diverse samples, include longitudinal designs to examine long-term developmental effects, and compare children's moral exploration across different cultural and media contexts. Mixed-methods approaches could further strengthen understanding by combining phenomenological insights with quantitative measures of moral development, emotional intelligence, and cognitive growth.

Educational practitioners should deliberately incorporate carefully selected animated narratives into curricula as tools for moral education, critical thinking, and emotional development. Structured classroom discussions, reflective activities, and guided inquiry should accompany media exposure to maximize learning outcomes. Parents and educators should also engage children in dialogue about the moral and social themes encountered in animation to foster deeper understanding and ethical awareness.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who helped us carrying out this study.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

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