

A new, young and critical audience

Young black pupils are a discerning and critical audience who know exactly what they want out of their read, ROSLIN McCOMB discovered during research on a Newspapers in Education project in KwaZulu-Natal.



Newspapers in Education (NIE) refers to the use of the newspaper as a teaching tool. The Americans were the first to formalise the concept in classrooms in the early 1930s, but it was only in the mid-70s that the term NIE was coined as newspapers began to be used in prisons and other centres where learning took place.

Started in response to a lack of textbooks during the Depression, NIE really took off in the US in the 1950s when studies indicated that fewer and fewer young people were reading newspapers and that circulation figures were taking a dive. Using the newspaper in innovative ways to teach young people in school was seen as one way of marketing newspapers to these young people.

Today, NIE programmes are widely spread across the globe and assume a variety of forms, depending upon their function.

The most common forms consist of:

- Using the entire newspaper to teach the formal subjects as well as more social science/humanistic issues;
- Getting young people to create their own newspapers;
- Using the newspaper, as is, to teach about newspapers (i.e. media literacy and philosophy); and
- Producing special youth-focus material to cater for young people.

It is not uncommon for a NIE programme to consist of a combination of these four forms. All four were present in Esikhawini, although the first form was used more frequently than the others.

In South Africa, NIE was seen as a possible answer to teachers' pleas for more substantial teaching material in black schools in the 1980s. Recently, however, these programmes have come under fire from newspaper managements as the increasing costs of their NIE programmes, and the lack of evidence to support claims that they benefit the industry, take their toll.

It is not uncommon to see circulation managers, journalists and other newspaper people huddled around coffee machines, lamenting the future of the newspaper industry. Worldwide the industry faces not only declining circulation but declining readership, especially among the youth. Furthermore, cynics (and journalists head the list) paint a bleak picture of today's young people as being listless, lacking motivation and largely discontented with their lives. The claim is that today's youth are just not interested in reading newspapers.

I've always been opposed to these kinds of large scale generalisations. Instead, we need to dig deep to find the underlying reasons for people's attitudes and behaviour.

My study indicated that the future of the newspaper industry in South Africa does not have to look bleak. Young black teenagers do read newspapers – and the articles or items

which interest them indicate that these youngsters have a strong sense of community, are concerned yet positive about their future, and are willing to be part of the nation-building team.

And, not surprisingly, these youngsters go for coverage of their sports teams and heroes.

Of course television is still a big drawcard, but these teenagers are aware of its shortcomings, especially when it comes to providing news.

Critical of the often fast pace of the television news reader, they prefer to read the newspaper because it can be re-read as often as is necessary. With the newspaper lying around at home, they can also ask parents for help if they have difficulty understanding something. This is much more convenient for them than the transient nature of television.

With very specific interests, they also prefer to select the stories or items they wish to read rather than sit through an entire news broadcast. Further, newspapers can be read in between chores and hanging out with friends, which suits their lifestyle much better than the rigid news times of television broadcasts.

As most of these teenagers read the weekly or bi-weekly newspaper bought by their parents, they require background information to a news story to understand it. While they understand that time constraints don't permit this kind of in-depth detail on television news, it is important to their understanding of a news item. Newspapers are thus the appropriate choice.

Their choices indicate that news has real value to them in terms of its ability to affect their lives. Thus local news features are high on their list. The distinction between local and regional is blurred, covering a range of items from provincial government plans to an outbreak of an epidemic in the area.

At the same time, young people are also highly critical of the fact that few of the small provincial papers carry much news about township life.

Sometimes blending with their interest in local news, they are interested in anything which may impact on their lives or that of their community. Their interest in articles on vehicle accidents initially struck me as rather macabre. Closer analysis indicated, however, that these articles are quickly scanned to ensure that a member of the family or community has not been involved.

Other information which generates interest includes articles about criminals who have been brought to justice, AIDS, and efforts to improve working and living conditions. Older teenagers are interested in information about careers and opportunities for further education.

It makes sense that they are also interested in news about other young people. Here again, small provincial papers were criticised for favouring news about the town schools in favour of the township schools. These teenagers' excitement upon seeing someone they know in the newspaper has teachers trying to constrain a rowdy bunch.

Sport logs and fixtures are prime motivators for opening the newspaper – whether for the local team or national, doesn't matter. They want to know who's playing and when. And if there's a report or an action photo on the same page, all the better. And from their own account, the language of the article is of little significance if the article interests them.

What emerged strongly in my study is that young people are discerning readers. They are concerned about issues of social relevance and they expect to be kept informed. They are not an amorphous glob passively waiting to receive news.

These youngsters are thinking beings with their own particular interests and ambitions and they value the newspaper for catering to some of these.

But this kind of information is limited if the industry is not committed to acting on this knowledge. What comes across clearly is that newspapers do not need to try and attract young readers: they are already there.

The industry needs to continue to sustain and develop this sound readership base. In the US, newspapers are increasingly focusing on youth with specialised supplements created by adult journalists or young people themselves who select, write and design their own pages. While a number of South African newspapers are catering to the young via matric supplements and some teen-oriented material, I would argue that the newspaper industry in South Africa has only begun to explore the youth market.

Whatever it takes, continue to explore what turns them on and why. Think of it as an extension of an already loyal base of adult, black readers.

Roslin McComb spent six months in two classrooms in Esikhawini near Richard's Bay. She observed and questioned 80 young, black people aged 11 to 16 about their knowledge, behaviour and attitudes towards newspapers. Teachers at these schools had been trained to use the newspaper to teach the syllabus as part of a Newspaper in Education (NIE) programme set up by the Media in Education Trust. This Durban-based educational non-governmental organisation, which works in partnership with various national and regional newspapers, ensured a weekly supply of the Daily News, the Zululand Observer and frequently, Ilanga, to these and eight other schools in the area.