I write about schools. There are 25 000 of them in South Africa and about 12 million pupils. When I go to these schools I try to imagine what it would be like to learn there, with their filthy toilets, leaking roofs and not nearly enough teachers or textbooks to go around.

Giving young people a voice

Yes. But do they read what we write about their schools?

When I write about my experience I do it in a way that I hope will make people think: ‘This is so bad that I cannot not do anything’. It’s the dream of any journalist to invoke a reaction like this – one that sparks people’s civic responsibility and actually causes change. Sometimes that dream comes true and you see action being taken by corporations and individuals.

But where are the schoolchildren – the actual subjects whose education I spend my days writing about – in this picture? Are they taking action? Yes, some of them are, with the help of rights organisations. Is it as a direct result of my stories as is the case with many adults? No. Do my stories influence children’s civic identities? Not that I can see, or at least not directly. Why? Because many of them are not consuming news in the first place on the digital and print platforms on which I work.

As an education reporter for theMail & Guardian (M&G)newspaper and website I have received numerous heartening emails from the private sector saying something along the lines of: “We’re angry about what is going on in those schools you wrote about. We want to do something to help. Tell us how.”

I was moved when I got a call a few weeks ago from a young professional who said she and her friends wanted to help the Eastern Cape schools I had recently written about that didn’t have school furniture. She emailed me a few weeks later to say she had raised R50 000 and had chosen which school she would be donating it too. I was thrilled when a hygiene company emailed me to ask for the details of the Limpopo schools I had written about that did not have enough toilets, wanting to donate portable toilets and toilet paper to it and provide hygiene education. I am working towards the day when I see government acting on the desperate problems I’ve reported on. It has not happened yet, from what I’ve seen, but you could argue that the reporting I do intensifies the public pressure that eventually forces government to act.

Besides that, my stories trigger rage in our readers.

By Victoria John
The media has the power to go where organisations can’t, but even it is not reaching children.
On Twitter they lambaste government for forcing 120 pupils to squash into a classroom meant for about 30. On Facebook they tell me to keep up the good work in exposing the infringement of pupils’ rights.

These messages are encouraging. The examples of some of the action taken, as described above, is inspiring. It changes lives. A sense of responsibility in the private sector bodes well for the future of education in South Africa.

The media is also crucial in highlighting the work of rights organisations that stoke the fires of civic responsibility in our youth everyday. Much of my reporting includes the perspectives of an organisation called Equal Education which campaigns for quality education in South Africa through analysis and activism. A membership-based organisation like this is useful for a reporter as it is a valuable link with pupils, teachers and experts. The organisers are also the ones doing the tough job of going out onto the streets, speaking to young people, educating them about their rights and encouraging them to join their campaigns for an improved education system. Through marches, sleep-ins, solidarity tours, and social media campaigns Equal Education makes it known very clearly what problems, like poor school infrastructure and non-delivery of textbooks, look like through pupils’ eyes. They teach pupils how to organise themselves so decision makers hear them. They open the public's eyes. They raise the government's hackles. They make sure that they will not be ignored.

Sustained media attention helps them do this..

The organisation’s spokesperson, Kate Wilkinson, said young people are often not seen as active citizens and are viewed as dependent on their parents.

“Because learners are often treated as 'children' they are unaware that they have power to change the circumstances they live in. Equal Education empowers them by educating them about their rights and the options they have available to them. This allows them to make an informed decision about how to resolve their own problems and who to ask for help.”

The organisation uses media coverage in its weekly youth groups as examples of victories and progress. “Often an article will be photocopied and used as primary material in a youth group. It will be the basis of discussions about campaigns and the way forward. Sharing media coverage with learners allows them to grasp the wider implications of their hard work.”

Equal Education also needs media coverage for the funding that is crucial to keeping its cogs turning. “Often past media coverage is referenced in funding applications as evidence of our work and efficacy. It also encourages private individuals to donate small amounts. It creates context for members of the public and gives us credibility.”

But not every South African child has the means to access and participate in the work of organisations like Equal Education.

The media has the power to go where organisations can’t, but even it is not reaching children.

I, personally, do not hear from them. These children, who are part of the generation that is almost inextricable from technology, do not phone me. I don’t get Facebook messages from them. I rarely get emails from them. But they constitute 39% of our population. So how much more influential would reactions to my stories be if children read the news and were as affected by what they saw as adults were? How much more formidable would Equal Education's campaigns be if more
Children read news looking for practical solutions to problems.