
Giving young people a voice

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

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.

By Victoria John

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 the *Mail & 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.

young and
MEDIATED

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Sydelle Willow Smith

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.

children knew about their work?

A lot more.

My guess is that if they did, there might not be pupils sitting under umbrellas in their classrooms while the rain pours through the holes in the roof. But children are not a popular target market for mainstream media. Of the *M&G*'s print readers only 17% are between 15 and 24 years old. Of our Online readers only 0.23% are between 15 and 17 years old and 0.47% are between 18 and 19 years old.

It is no wonder that although I try to speak to schoolchildren and put their comments in my stories, when my stories are published these schoolchildren don't speak back to me.

The civic identities of South African children are treasures that should be nurtured and protected. They should be given the information they need so that they know their rights and know how to fight for them when they are infringed. Later, when they reach voting age, they will need this information to make informed decisions about who governs them and who dictates the conditions they continue to learn in and later work in.

The media plays a vital role in this. It gets all sides to the story, puts the information on the table and says 'now you decide'.

Building the civic identity of youth is arguably a more lasting and sustainable solution to addressing the problems we see in education than donating funds is. We can do this through the media by creating a product that educates children about their rights and what they can do to protect them. But this is not happening because reporting like mine is not written or formatted in a way that speaks to children.

I was surprised when I received an email earlier this year from media watchdog Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) congratulating me and two other journalists at other newspapers for our representation of children in recent articles. The commendation came as a surprise. 'Is it so rare to quote children in articles that a media watchdog feels the need to congratulate reporters when they do?' I thought. Yes it is.

According to a survey done of all news stories in about 18 South African daily and weekly newspapers over three months, only nine percent of stories were about children. Children were actually quoted in even fewer of them. MMA's director, William Bird, said the fact that the *M&G* has a three-person team dedicated to covering education is progressive. "It shows that the *M&G* sees value in education and is saying 'this is a fundamentally important part of our society and we're going to commit a big chunk of our budget to covering it'." Our reporting thus far is read by policy-makers and

decision-makers in the education sector which "has a significant impact on education", Bird says. "As far as the man on the street is concerned, if you can get him to realise the importance of education, then that has a huge impact too."

Again, where are the children's voices in all of this?

"If you include children in your reporting, get them interested in your stories and grow their civic identities then that will have a far greater impact than anything else," he says. "That is not going to happen if the media marginalises children, scares children and ignores children." The media first has to find out how children consume news differently to adults to be able to write in a way that includes them, he explained.

Adults read the news to acquire information so that they feel on top of the latest news story. Children read news looking for practical solutions to problems.

"They will read a story and think 'imagine if that happened to me or my sibling... what can I do to prevent it?'" he says.

But the media is not meeting this need.

The media should also take into consideration children's practical lack of independence, which sets them apart from other readership groups, and how they react to news because of it. "Adults can easily access media that makes them feel happy, or at least positive, but what do children have? Children are dependent on adults, so many decisions about their lives are made by adults, and they don't feel like they can do something about what they read."

The MMA conducted a project earlier this year in which they gave children a selection of positive and negative news stories and told them to put together a newspaper. The children always used a mixture of the stories, Bird says, and weighted stories very differently to how most newspapers do. They applied a six:four ratio of negative stories to positive stories and about the same ratio to stories about adults and stories about children. The ratio for negative to positive stories in actual mainstream news media is more around nine:one. In creating news for children, the media would need to ask itself: "Why would children want to read stories that make them scared and sad and don't show them what to do about it?"

Put simply: Make children know that their voices are heard and give them news that offers practical advice and not just negative stories, but inspiring ones too. With information like this children are more likely to develop valuable civic identities.

And why wouldn't the media want to be part of developing identities that result in the kind of change that holds government to account and revolutionises the socio-economic experiences of millions of people?

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