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Promoting the Children Rights in the media: the important contribution of school newspapers

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Abstract

This paper deals with the difficulties globalization brought in terms of two fundamental rights foreseen in the Convention on the Rights of the Child: freedom of expression and image protection in the media. It tries to answer these difficulties and to explain that media have a fundamental role to perform. School can also contribute to overcome these difficulties, promoting those rights through Media Education and newspaper production either printed or online. This proposal is within the scope of a research conducted in Portugal since 2005 and that is nowadays within a research project 'Media Education in Castelo Branco' (2007-2010).

Children rights in the global media world

The Convention on the Rights of the Child was approved in 1989, but this implementation has not been easy. Although some progress has been felt at economical, political and social level in some countries, in some other countries it has worsened in the last decades within the global context (Rizzini, 2004). Also the implementation of the rights related with the information has been restricted by the dominant process of media globalization, (Hamelink, 2002).

The plural relationship of children with the news is part of their social rights, underlined clearly by the Convention in the articles 13 and 17. Article 13 presents the right of freedom of speech/expression that includes the freedom to search, retrieve and expand all kind of information and ideas, no matter frontiers and means being restricted only by the respect, the rights and reputation of others and the duty of protection of national security, order, health and public morality. Article 17 points out that States encourage production and diffusion of information and materials that promote physical, psychic and social wellbeing of children, taking into account their cultural characteristics, namely the linguistic and those that encourage means of communication in order to develop children protection related to information and material harmful to their well being.

However the concretization of those rights failed at two levels (Hamelink 2002), because of media globalization that affects cultural products and the information aimed at children and young people. Moreover, there is disincentive for the national production of media content designed especially for children in favour of international large scale content produced at low cost. So, minorities and concern about cultural diversity are put aside with public audiovisual resources reduced, and most of all, the independence of those who want to promote human rights thus limited. On the other hand advertising has a bigger role in the media. Markets are more and more segmented and target groups are identified such as children and young people. Advertising is most of the time conveyed by programmes or "product placement". Children and youngsters are forced to become compulsive consumers. They come closer together or further apart on the basis of the things they own, and this militates against a culture of tolerance and equality of opportunities.

These problems were already identified in relation to traditional media, as newspapers and radio, but mainly television, which is the most dominant as far as consumption is concerned (Ponte e Malho, 2008). But today, in our digital world the power of the media has become stronger because of the growing importance of Internet.

In 2007-2008, a research on media audiences in Portugal included information on the relationship between children and media. In the national poll 436 parents of children aged 0-14 answered four questions about that relationship and another questionnaire was answered by 510 children aged 9-14 and their parents from Lisbon region (Ponte e Malho, 2008). Results point out that in relation to media at home, TV has a hegemonic and outstanding place in the parents' lives (about 90% as frequent use) no matter what schooling level, age or gender. However, newspapers are only present in one third of Portuguese homes. Internet, an ascending media, is present in young families with a higher schooling level.

The hegemony of television outcomes showed a strong presence in the children's bedrooms. The national poll pointed out that the TV set is the most present appliance in the children's bedroom that starts to accompany children from early ages: it is already present in more than 50% of children's bedrooms aged 0-5, in 68% of the bedrooms of children aged 6 to 9 and in 78% of bedrooms of children aged 10 to 14.

Among parents that say they do not have a television set in their children's bedroom, half of them disapprove of the idea to allow television in the bedroom when the children are older or when they can afford it, and the other half accepts the idea to install one.

Internet comes in second place and stresses a huge generational gap. It is more frequently used by youngsters whose parents have higher qualifications (12 or more schooling years). At home children use it for communication (MSN, 66%; e-mail, 60%), and recreational (games, 68%; laughing sites, 58%; sites for spare time, 43%).

Therefore it is a screen environment we find technologically equipped in bedrooms (many times with more resources than in the rest of the house) the place where the great majority of children spend time and grow in Portugal! There is clearly an overlap between audio visual means, with radio in a secondary place and press far away.

Preparing media consumption to guarantee the right to information

According to this scenery, with children's bedrooms full of media, one of the possibilities is to try and encourage young people to reduce media consumption in order to protect them from negative its effects (Buckingham, 2003). It is the protectionist logic of "vaccination", as Mastermann (1985) named it. Another possibility is to prepare children and youngsters at school (also everyone for lifelong learning), to negotiate consuming media messages. This orientation is based in the passage from quarantine to immunization (Galician, 2004) and it is associated with cultural studies. This orientation is the one that has developed more (Buckingham, 2007) in terms of Media Education. Media Education assumes not only a technical dimension (to handle technological equipments to guarantee access), but also – and mainly – the dimension of critical analysis and reflexive production of media messages and their broadcasting in different supports. This will be the way children and youngsters may intervene socially through media. Media Education must start as early as possible, *i. e.* from the crib (Gonnet, 1999), going on at school (Hobbs, 2007) as well as lifelong (Rivoltella, 2007).

It is not an easy process, because there are many obstacles in its implementation as pointed out by Tomé (2008) with respect to: *i*) the "digital gap"; *ii*) the indefiniteness in relation to the way of implementing the subject in the curricula (transversally or as a subject matter); *iii*) the fact that media is not interested in the youngsters' productions; *iv*) lack of teacher training (technically and scientifically); *v*) lack of educational resources; *vi*) inexistence of networks among politicians, schools, researchers and enterprises.

Even though some support from policy makers exists. The European Parliament (2008) defends the urgent integration of Media Education in every school curricula of all grades, including initial and in-service teacher training. In Portugal, the new contents of the subject matter – Portuguese – in Basic Education, approved this year in April, states that students "should listen and interpret media messages" (Reis *et al*, 2009, p. 23), as well as "interpret information critically" (*idem*, p.28). Also the Forum for Citizenship Education (2009), created by the Ministry of Education, published a document that defends fundamental issues:

- a) It is urgent to create conditions in Basic and Secondary Education so that students can use knowledge and skills to understand, analyze reality autonomously, creatively and innovatively with responsibility;
- b) It is necessary to promote political, economical, cultural, intercultural, digital and law literacy as far as human rights at national and international level, with methodologies and appropriate resources different audiences;

- c) Conditions must be created in order to develop questioning models, conceptions and social representations – including those driven by the family and mass media – that are funded in stereotypes, promote discrimination either by gender, age, culture, social origin, class, minority group, sexual orientation...
- d) The list of rights and duties of citizens must be broadcasted;
- e) It matters to “encourage mass media to divulgate the opinion of those who are not heard in them” (*idem*, p. 24).

These objectives, even defined within the scope of Citizenship Education coincide with those in Media Education. This can be easily understood because the result of Media Education – Media Literacy – is fundamental to a democratic citizenship (Dumont, 2007). The problem is that it can not only be a task for schools. Other social forces and enterprises should have a fundamental role in the process.

School, Media and Children’s Rights to information and free of expression

Nowadays the process through which citizens become literate is more contextual and social than individual, because many factors influence what is learned and how it is learned. Among them are school, technology, media as well as the political, economical, social and cultural context (Kellner and Share, 2007).

If school loses monopoly of teaching and learning the school will not be over, however a profound renovation is foreseen to provide a fundamental role in training citizens of the third millennium (Yuste, 2007).

Integrated in the deep school renovation, the integration of subject matters such as Media Education is fundamental. The school can prepare children and youngsters for critical and reflexive interaction with media. Taking profit of this empowerment, children and youngsters are better prepared to analyse information and to produce and publish information. They benefit, therefore, by being better placed to exert their right to accede information and to freedom of expression.

So that this freedom may become effective it is important that media give room to children and youngsters, in their media messages and opinions. There are examples all over the world as in the programme Newspaper in Education (NIE), from World Association of Newspapers. This programme started from the 1930s in the United States of America and today it is supported by the Newspaper Association of America Foundation (NAAF) that allows: *i*) resources and training to newspaper companies and teachers on how to use school newspapers; *ii*) support in the development of strategic plans to promote each NIE programme. In the United States alone, NAAF supports 950 NIE projects, some of them developed by most read newspapers. These newspapers create a space within their ordinary editions or complementary editions aimed at newspaper productions for youngsters, in order to increase newspaper reading and, at the same time, to allow the possibility of expressing opinions. However, they have commercial goals and they try to keep their readers and to catch new ones, as such, as some experts as Buckingham (2007) defend, they should not be considered as Media Education projects.

The NIE initiative came to Europe to countries like Finland and Sweden in the 1960s. It was then embraced in countries like Norway (1970), Netherlands (1975) and Germany (1979). In 1991, the World Association of Newspapers decided to create a permanent support committee to NIE initiatives all over the world. At that time there were 27 projects in 10 countries, mostly European ones (McMane, 2005:4-7). Today there are about 70 projects in Europe (WAN, s. d., 2) and more than 700 NIE projects in 60 countries all over the world. Some examples are *El País* (Spain), o *Göteborgs-Posten* (Sweden), *The West Australian* (Australia), *The Times of India* (India) and the British magazine *Marmalade* (England).

There is no record of any project or initiative within this scope in Portugal but there is the project “Público na Escola”, linked to the daily newspaper “Público”. Since 1990, "it has decidedly contributed to the reflection in educational ground on the relation between children and media ". It supports schools through an Internet site and bulletin publication. It organizes a National Newspapers Contest also supported by the Ministry of Education. Every year about 200 contestants participate with newspapers either printed or online (Público, 2005).

Media, protection and children wellbeing

The report of United Nations Organization [ONU] (2005) on youth shows that youngsters like to feel a connection between their lives and the news they read in newspapers. Also a report by Gigli (2004), prepared to UNICEF, refers that the youngsters of developing countries prefer reading news about daily matters. They also read credible information about matters which they feel difficulty discussing with grown-ups as, for instance, sex, AIDS, drugs and self-esteem.

ONU (2005), analysing a bunch of research data made in several countries concluded that children and youngsters feel apart and not supported by media because the news presents them in a simple, superficial, apathetic way and mainly depicts them as delinquents. That is also referred by McNamara (2004), in a follow-up study that involved 13 Irish newspapers, and that concluded that “youngsters are regularly seen but rarely listened to in these publications” (p.5). Also in the United States of America, De Abreu (2007) underlined that “most often the news is not about them – the teens – and when it is, the news is rarely good. They are definitely one of the audiences omitted from the news” (p. 41).

In Portugal, in 2005, the year we analysed four daily Portuguese newspapers, *Público*, *Diário de Notícias*, *Jornal de Notícias* e *Correio da Manhã* (Ponte, 2007; Ponte e Afonso, 2008; Carvalho, 2008), the news on social risk was about 40% of all the news that involved children. The three topics, most present in this category were Negligence; drop-outs and physical abuse; Sexual violence and delinquency; while Poverty and infant work were almost not present in the news. Education (24%) was the second most covered topic of the newspapers. Behaviours, cultures, consumers and health, welfare and security came side by side with 11%, followed by prevention and security (8,4%) and Unusual news and Fait-divers (5,5%). An analyses of a sample of 72 TV news (RTP, SIC and TVI) in the first semester of that year (Ponte, Pacheco e Afonso, 2007) showed also that social risk news were on the top (44%).

According to these data, we can conclude that media have not contributed so that article 17 in the Convention on the Rights of the Child may become a reality. There are however some other media next to children and youngster that may have an important role in this area, namely school newspapers.

Children Rights through school newspapers

Around 40,000 school newspapers are published every year around the world (Lyman e Varian, 2003). In Portugal there is not an official statistic but hundreds of school newspapers are published because there are around 2000 schools from Kindergarten to Secondary. Nowadays school councils are in charge of school newspaper publication and most of them publishes one (Gonçalves, 2007).

In Portugal, School newspapers are usually coordinated by teachers who have a fundamental role in the planning and in the page lay out. About 80% of the articles are written by students belonging to classes of the teachers in charge by the school newspaper. So, the great majority of students are not involved in the school newspaper. As far as contents school newspapers are centred school routine, referring exceptionally matters associated to the educational community. Work made by students for the subject matters is also published even if it was not made for the newspaper specifically.

Although there are a great number of school newspapers their production faces many difficulties namely: *i*) lack of pedagogical resources in the area; *ii*) lack of teacher and students training; *iii*) uncharacteristic journalism different from Professional journalism; *iv*) non-participation of students in all the phases of newspaper production; *v*) inexistence of a deontological code of young journalism; *vi*) topics of the texts produced for the school newspapers are imposed by the teachers.

Within this scenery, we decided to produce the DVD “Vamos fazer jornais escolares” (Let’s produce school newspapers) that aims to support teachers and students in the school newspaper production either printed or online. The DVD was validated by experts from multimedia and journalism fields. It was then used along a school year by 104 students from Basic Education aged 11-16 in the production of newspaper articles.

These classes were audio and video taped and field notes were taken. The research was made in two schools in Castelo Branco (Portugal).

After the data analyses we concluded that: *i*) 102 out of 104 students mentioned that they liked working with the DVD; *ii*) 99 out of 104 students noted that the DVD helped them in the production of content for the school newspaper; *iii*) according to the teachers involved the texts written by the students came close to journalistic texts; *iv*) the number of collaborators in the production of the school newspaper overcome, for the first time, 50 people in each school; *v*) Students wrote texts specifically aimed to be published in the school newspaper; *vi*) texts that motivated the students more were those whose topics were chosen by

them or negotiated with the teachers; *vii*) teachers referred that the DVD was innovative, underlined more motivation, autonomy and responsibility by the students.

Before using the DVD students wrote mainly about: *i*) major issues; *ii*) other school issues (i.e. study visits); *iii*) important dates like the Father's Day, Mother's Day, St. Valentine's Day, and so on. When the DVD was used, students wrote about: *i*) animal protection; *ii*) sports (i.e. World Cup); *iii*) history of the ice-cream; *iv*) music (the hip-hop culture; MTV Music Awards); *v*) the replacement classes (in Portugal, until 2005, when the teacher did not come to classes, the students had a free time, this meant, not to have the class. In 2005 this changed, when a teacher did not come to classes, another teacher came to work with the students during the time of the class. The teachers, but mostly the students, hated those classes, which they called replacement classes); *vi*) the school bar schedule; *vii*) the bad quality of the food of the school bar.

The students also interviewed ex-school colleagues that were already working, the Spanish teacher and the new school Headteacher. One of the issues that seemed important was the fact that students worried about writing articles about topics that interest them but in their opinion also interested their school mates. They were worried about writing for an audience which at the same time they were part, because they were also readers of the school newspaper.

Conclusion

According to our opinion school newspapers either printed or online can have an important role in concretising the social rights of the children, namely in what concerns freedom of speech, expression and the publication of news that interest them.

School newspapers differ from the other newspapers published for an adult public that normally do not share space for children news and that do not listen to them neither pay attention to their perspectives in subjects they are experienced in as, for instance, the use of technology. These newspapers deal with children in news according to a negative perspective, such as children at risk or children as delinquents.

According to another perspective the production of news for the school newspaper is a means to concretise Media Education activities in schools, a fundamental training so that children and youngsters may be progressively prepared to analyse critically, from apart and autonomously the reality in the society of the XXI Century, where every piece of information comes through media and obviously does not show reality but constructions of reality.

The DVD "Vamos fazer jornais escolares", produced and validated by experts, students and teachers in Portugal had a positive impact in the production of news for the school newspaper by students in Basic schools. At the moment improvements were made and it was the starting point of the project "Media Education in Castelo Branco Region" (2007-2010), that integrates 623 students in 25 schools. Work in schools started in the beginning of 2009 and we are looking forward to having the first results in November.

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