

Unsettling the status quo: Children's challenges to adult perceptions and practices

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“You may give a voice to the children, even give them a very big platform, but if adults don't stop to listen to what the children are saying it is as good as no voice”, began 14-year-old Nonjabulo when she introduced a live radio broadcast one Saturday morning in March 2009.

Nonjabulo summed up one of the central challenges of the children's radio project of which she is part, and of child participatory work in general.¹ Children's status in society and adults' failure to recognise the value and relevance of children's perspectives are fundamental barriers to young people's meaningful participation. In general, adults need to change the ways they think about, listen to, and engage children if children's rights to participation are to be fulfilled.

This essay reflects on a single initiative that aims to give children voice: The *Abaqophi BakwaZisize Abakhanyayo* children's radio project.² It documents how the production and broadcast of radio programmes by children have enabled and made public unusual forms of inter-generational dialogue, and it considers how this may lead to shifts in adults' understanding of children and their childhoods.

In reflecting on the project, this essay examines the following:

- What is the *Abaqophi BakwaZisize Abakhanyayo* children's radio project?
- How do children use their opportunity to speak out?
- How do children's actions affect adults' perceptions and practices?
- What limits the reach of the children's views?

ⁱ This essay is based on relationships developed and material generated during after-school and holiday workshops over the course of six years. While I have authored the piece, it benefits from workshop facilitation, documentation and reflections by all the members of the *Abaqophi* project team: Bridget Walters, Bongekile Mngomezulu, Sue Valentine, Gabriel Urgoiti, Andrew Sitima, Xolisile Mnyandu, and Fana Matonsi.

What is the *Abaqophi BakwaZisize Abakhanyayo* children's radio project?

The *Abaqophi BakwaZisize Abakhanyayo*ⁱⁱ children's radio project is based in Ingwavuma, a remote rural area in northern KwaZulu-Natal.

Growing up in Ingwavuma

Children in Ingwavuma grow up amidst extensive poverty,ⁱⁱⁱ with limited access to services, and a burgeoning HIV epidemic. Forty percent of pregnant women in the district are infected with HIV,³ a statistic which places the area firmly at the epicentre of the pandemic in South Africa. Despite high HIV prevalence and the constant and visible presence of illness and death, there remain extraordinary silences around AIDS.

The adage that “children should be seen and not heard” is widely practiced in households across South Africa, including those in Ingwavuma. Here children are afforded few opportunities to make themselves heard, ask questions, or articulate their needs and struggles – both in and outside the home.

Rules of respectful engagement require children to avoid eye contact with unrelated adults, and in general not to approach adults unless spoken to first. There is very little inter-generational dialogue about important issues in the home or community. Despite the substantial contribution they make to sustaining family and community life, children are rarely invited to participate in decision-making processes, including those which have important implications for their own lives. As a result, their experiences, perspectives and needs are often unnoticed, assumed, or misunderstood.

It is against this backdrop that Zisize Educational Trust (a local non-government organisation) and the Children's Institute initiated the children's radio project in 2005 in collaboration with the local Okhayeni primary school.

Children's radio

The project provides children with the skills and support they need to depict their lives, experiences and perspectives for radio. The children produce broadcast-quality radio programmes in a variety of formats including personal audio diaries, commentaries, and features. In addition to distributing their programmes via the web,^{iv} they host a regular show on the local community radio station, where they air their pre-recorded and edited programmes, facilitate live discussions in studio and with listeners, and report on news collected from schools in the area. The vast majority of programmes are produced in isiZulu, the

children's first language and the primary language spoken in the area. Selected programmes are also used to facilitate discussion in meetings and workshops locally and further afield. To date these have included children's peer-support groups; parent-teacher meetings; community and non-governmental organisation (NGO) workshops; training for foster carers, health workers and teachers; and parliamentary hearings.

Through these processes, the project aims to:

- improve local and global understanding of issues that concern children growing up in a context of poverty and the AIDS pandemic; and
- encourage adults to consider and appropriately address children's needs and experiences.

The production process

Children between nine and 18 years are grouped by age and location into four groups that meet for weekly after-school sessions and intensive holiday workshops. Each group is at a different level of technical skill, depending on the length of their involvement in the project. Children are supported through a series of ongoing processes. Initial training focuses on how to record personal radio diaries. Over time the children progress to other formats, and to presenting the live show. Each year the facilitators attempt to expand and consolidate the children's radio skills.

The children identify the topics for their programmes. They plan who they would like to interview, what questions they will ask and the locations for recordings. Wielding mini-disc recorders and microphones, they record interviews, *vox pops*,^v narratives, and soundscapes. Once recordings are complete, the children script and narrate their programmes, and finally agree on edits to complete the programmes.

How do children use their opportunity to speak out?

The *Abaqophi* (as the children refer to themselves) have chosen to address a wide range of topics. Many programmes focus on their experiences of illness and death – in their immediate families and in the neighbourhood. Others have explored experiences of poverty, abuse, adult alcoholism and its impact on children, teenage pregnancy, ongoing corporal punishment in schools and difficulties accessing water. (The children also produce more light-hearted programmes such as one in which they set out to discover whether the story about a huge two-headed snake living in a local dam is true.)

ii This name, given by participant children to the project, translates into English as “The Shining Recorders of Zisize”.

iii Umkhanyakude district, into which Ingwavuma falls, is one of the poorest districts in South Africa (see Health Systems Trust (2009) *District Health Barometer* 2007/8. Durban: HST).

iv Audio and transcripts of the children's programmes can be downloaded from the project website: www.childrenradioproject.ci.org.za

v Short for *vox populi*, meaning “voice of the people”: A variety of people are asked the same question to capture different points of view.

Challenging silences, contesting exclusion

The children's programmes repeatedly address silences in their families and in their communities. The children use their role as "reporters" to draw adults' attention to issues and experiences that trouble them, to ask questions they'd like answered, and to approach others for their perspectives. They do this through their choice of topics, through the content of their narratives, through the questions they ask during interviews, and through recording explicit messages to listeners.

Throughout, they urge adults to change the ways they think about and communicate with children. Their topics and questions draw attention to children's awareness of their context from a young age, and they constantly seek more information related to their everyday experiences. Consistently, they point – sometimes subtly, sometimes directly – to their need for information, for inclusion, in order to cope – or cope better – with their circumstances. Through the production, broadcast and distribution of their radio programmes, they publicly tackle conventional adult perceptions and practices towards children.

Opening up conversation with adults

A team of adult facilitators with children's participatory and radio expertise train and support the children to produce and broadcast their radio programmes on an ongoing basis. The children drive planning and production processes: The degree of support provided by facilitators varies according to children's level of experience and technical expertise.

Over and above the facilitators, the formal involvement of adults in the children's radio project is limited: When children join the project, their parents or other caregivers are invited to an introductory meeting at which the project is presented and their consent obtained. Careful consent processes are also followed with caregivers prior to broadcasting the children's personal radio-diary programmes. In addition, an adult "listening committee" – consisting of a teacher representative from each of the participating schools,^{vi} and four parents – meets periodically to listen to the children's non-personal programmes to ensure that, if broadcast, they will not put any children at risk.

While there is little official participation of adults in the project, in creating their programmes, the children continually engage adults in inter-generational dialogue of a kind that rarely occurs in this neighbourhood.

For example, nine-year-old Promise tackled her mother for the first time about her discovery of her father's death on the day of his funeral. At the time she was devastated, and she remains perplexed as to why she and her siblings were not told. She asked:^{vii}

What was your reason for not telling us children that our father was sick, and also that he had died?

Her mother replied:

Because, when your father was sick, I used to tell him to be a man and endure the pain. And that even when he felt pain he should not cry in front of you because he would make you lose hope. That is what I was doing to ensure that you didn't see that he was sick. I am the one who knew that he was sick.

Suggesting some appreciation of her mother's challenges, Promise followed with the question:

How do you feel about raising us alone?

It's very difficult to raise you alone, my child, because there are many things that I think about, like that there is no food, eh, you have to go to school, you have to have clothes. It's very difficult for a mother to also be a father, to hold the father's role at home...

Through the recording of her radio diary, Promise and her mother gained some insight into each other's point of view. And in producing her programme, Promise took the opportunity to communicate her point to parents and caregivers beyond those in her own family:

The message I want to give to the women who have lost their husbands is that they should sit down with their children and tell them that their father has died. They shouldn't hear it in conversation that so-and-so has died.

Khethiwe, at the age of 12, asked her mother about her father. She had never known him, and had never been told anything about him. Slowly during the interview she gathered the courage to question her mother, and to reveal her need for more information, at which point her questions flew out in quick succession:

Mama, I want to know about my father, what was he like? ... Was he dark? How dark? ... Has he never seen me? ... Now would you like him to meet me? ... How can he meet me?

Her mother responded without a blink, with clear and supportive answers.

S'busiso, tormented by nightmares since hearing of his father's death in a neighbouring community, travelled to place a stone on his grave. There he quietly pointed out to his grandmother how he felt about being excluded from his father's funeral:

Gogo [Grandmother], how did you feel about the death of my father? ... How did you feel about my absence at the

vi Since 2005, the project expanded its work to other schools in the area.

vii Direct quotes have been translated from originals in isiZulu.

funeral? ... You did not perhaps have a way of sending a message to me, or contacting my uncle's family?

Over the years there have been numerous other examples in which children initiated powerful out-of-the-ordinary conversations with adults. A doctor was asked to explain how children get infected with HIV, and what treatment options are available. An HIV-positive woman was asked to talk about her experiences of diagnosis, disclosure and raising a child. Grateful that her stepfather took her into his home and loves her as his own child, Nonkululeko (11) reflected in dialogue with her mother why this is frequently not the case for children in her neighbourhood. Nine-year-old Noxolo confronted her father's alcoholism head on in conversation with her mother, and together they detailed the ways in which life at home had improved since he stopped drinking in order to take tuberculosis treatment...

Each instance of interaction, each moment of unusual or improved communication, is striking because of the position children occupy in this environment. As reporters, the children enact the kinds of interactions they desire with adults, and the nature of the information to which they would like to be privy. They lay before adults their capacity and expertise by proficiently wielding microphones and recording equipment, formulating insightful questions, responding adeptly, and asserting considered opinions. They set new agendas for communication. They do so respectfully, without rebellion or accusation, but they nonetheless unsettle conventional practice.

By driving new and more egalitarian kinds of interaction, and requesting information frequently kept from them, the children ask adults to recognise their capacity and their needs for meaningful engagement and inclusion. By including these conversations in their programmes, and often reflecting on them in their recorded narratives, the children speak not only to those in their immediate families, but to adults more widely. In effect, they gently request shifts in social convention.

How do children's actions affect adults' perceptions and practices?

Bright-eyed S'bongukwanda is a devoted son. He sparkles with spirit despite growing up in difficult circumstances. In recording his radio diary at the age of 12, he surprised his mother with his clear memory of hard times when he was a younger child. She reflected spontaneously:

I never realised that my child felt the pain of what we were going through at that time in our lives. I didn't think children were aware of so much that is going on around them.

Four years later, during an interview in which she described her experiences of the project, she commented:

I have learnt that children are also people with minds that are the same as those of adults. Most of the time we as parents regard children as people who don't even notice any of the things that happen at home. So... I have learnt and seen that children are able to notice a particular situation or something that is happening – like death or anything bad. A child needs you to sit down with him and talk about things like this.

A variety of local adults, including school teachers, NGO workers, parents, caregivers, interviewees and other community members have made the same critical – usually surprised – observation: Children are aware and capable of engaging with their circumstances. For example, a school principal spoke of how the programmes shifted her perceptions of children:

After hearing the programmes I've realised that children know about things we think they don't know about. I realised that they know, and if given a chance to speak about those things, they speak. I realised that they think deeply about these things and these issues that they raise ... I no longer look at children as mere children who do not know anything. I look at them as people who know something and who have something to say to me, and who can speak freely and be just as confident as an adult.

A number of the children felt that the messages in their programmes are beginning to be heard by people in their families and community, and confirmed that there have been some shifts in the way adults treat them.

For example, S'bongukwanda noted:

At home they used to treat me as a child, but now they treat me as an adult. My father tries to speak nicely to me: Although it's not that proper – but it's getting there.

Said Zekhethelo:

Some people take our messages to heart – for example [the message] that if they are going to do things that affect us as children, they should ask us how we feel about the things they want to do ... I have seen changes at home. In the past they did not consult us on what was happening: We would just see things happening. But these days they start by asking us what we think.

Since Promise challenged her mother about her father's death, she has observed similar changes in the ways her mother relates to her. Yes, she affirmed in response to Zekhethelo's comment,

My mother is doing it at home: Now when she is sick, she tells us. Before she did not because she thought we would be sad and be affected in our studies at school. Now she does not hide it. She tells us.

In other words, as children and adults gain new understandings of each other through participating in and listening to the radio programmes, small but significant shifts in their relationships and practices have been able to take place.

What limits the reach of the children's views?

While some adults have genuinely heard and respected the children's perspectives, the reach of the children's programmes has been more limited than is ideal. This is in part due to human and financial resource constraints within the project: Since its inception, the project has operated with limited funding and an overstretched facilitation team. There is a need for more collaborative work between the project facilitators and the children to extend the opportunities for adults to hear and engage with the content of the programmes.

More fundamentally, however, many of the adults who could facilitate a wider audience for the programmes assume that children's views are of relevance only to other children. To date, the programmes have only been broadcast during the children's slot at the host radio station, with the exception of special occasions such as World AIDS Day and the International Day of Children's Broadcasting.^{viii} Until recently, there has been little success in convincing journalists at the local radio station or elsewhere of the value of inserting the programmes into broadcasts targeting adults.

In 2011 (after the project won an international award for child-led broadcasting), the community radio station tentatively agreed that there would be value in incorporating the children's programmes into adult programming, but this has yet to happen. Broadening the reach of the programmes remains a crucial challenge for the project if it is to contribute more widely to improving public understanding of children's experiences and concerns.

Conclusion

As reporters, children participating in the *Abaqophi BakwaZisize Abakhanyayo* children's radio project occupy a position of relative power: Over time they develop a set of skills that are not held by most people they encounter, and they set the agenda for communication with adults and children alike. They ask the questions, interviewees must respond. This approach limits opportunities for adults to patronise or dominate children, and extends the possibilities for meaningful inter-generational interaction.

Others have shown how processes which run parallel to those of adults⁴ or which speak at – rather than with – adults⁵ often result in adults' failure to consider or take seriously children's perspectives. Experiences in the children's radio project illustrate the value of sustained children's participation processes which enable children to frame the issues for discussion and to demonstrate to adults their capacity for understanding and engaging the world in which they live. Such processes not only provide adults with the opportunity to learn crucial lessons from and about children, but they can help shift views of children and provoke important changes in practice.

References

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^{viii} Some of the children have been interviewed, and their programmes broadcast, during current affairs slots on SAfm (South Africa's primary national public English radio service) and Ukhozi FM (the Zulu-language equivalent), but these were once-off events focused on featuring the project itself, rather than the children's perspectives.