

South Africa

Hey mum, that's me on the radio!

Based on an interview with Adele Mostert, Manager of Productions and Marketing, ABC Ulwazi

Community radio is big in South Africa, with over 100 stations across the country reaching different interest groups, language groups and so on. Using radio to communicate educational and developmental messages, ABC Ulwazi also produces educational programmes for and by children and young people, and distributes them to community radio stations.

ABC Ulwazi believes that community radio has a unique role in allowing children to express themselves and to show that they can be active participants in their own communities. It is working to get more children's programmes on air, and to encourage communities to give children a space too. Apart from addressing children, its programmes are also designed to talk to caregivers about children's rights and to motivate them in their work with children.

ABC Ulwazi is doing pioneering work especially for very young children (under 9 years), who are seldom heard on radio anywhere in the world. It produces programmes at its studios in Johannesburg, and it develops projects to involve children and young people at the stations that it works with in various provinces across the country.

Through the Khuluma uKhululeke – Speak Free project, ABC Ulwazi helps teenagers in local communities to develop the skills necessary to speak to and interview children under 9 about their views on early childhood development and on children's rights issues. Much of this is through working with stories upon which young children comment. Comments are edited into short pieces for broadcasting. Comments are used by writers for ideas and case studies, or to illustrate an issue.

The materials gathered from young children contribute to a 30-minute weekly radio programme which is scheduled to run for six months – a total of 24 programmes. To add to the local materials, ABC Ulwazi contributes a maximum of 10 minutes per programme. This draws heavily on oral tradition and – given that it is broadcast in KwaZulu Natal – on Zulu folklore to present the sometimes abstract topics in accessible ways. The idea is to help the local presenters of the radio shows to stimulate debate and discussion with listeners on specific early childhood development topics.

The first phase of the project – essentially a pilot project – focussed on the development of a methodology for involving under-9s and culminated in the production of the first Khuluma uKhululeke – Speak Free programmes to test the techniques. This was a series of ten radio programmes that included the voices of children recorded at ABC Ulwazi's workshops, a three-minute children's radio drama, and a social worker giving expert advice on topics raised in the episode.

The realities

ABC Ulwazi's original brief sounded simple: to produce children's rights radio programmes for young children. The challenge came in how it was to achieve this. Not only did it need to produce programmes for children, but it also needed to engage children in the production process so that the programmes were made *by* children.

Early childhood development centres were the starting points for developing a workshop methodology. Here, the children were all in one place and workshop facilities were easily organised.



Photo: Courtesy ABC Ulwazi
Radio drama is an effective medium where children respond best to hearing other children's voices

The children were comfortable with their familiar surroundings and with one another, and the principal helped organise the children in the right place and the right time.

To make the recordings, members of the ABC Ulwazi team or the mentors at the local radio stations go to an early childhood development centre. There they do a session with the children to get them used to the recording equipment: they invite the young children to come up and speak into the microphone to tell something about themselves, for example. Actual discussions with the young children follow, and these are based on stories that touch on children's rights, prepared in advance to stimulate their ideas. From these, children often improvise their own stories and dramas, and these are fed into the programme as it is developed.

Centres are selected on the basis of their enthusiasm, organisational skills, punctuality, reliability and the friendliness of the children. Also, a mix of different environments and community issues is sought. One

clue to a centre fitting these criteria was observing whether the children introduced themselves. This showed that the children felt open to communicate and that their views and opinions were respected within the centre's environment. Children who made their way to the front row, who were eager to communicate with the microphone and who expressed their opinions were sought out. But some of the quieter children were also included in smaller groups, in which they had space to express themselves.

Completed programmes are played back to participating groups. This serves a research purpose: to gauge the children's responses to the programmes. The aim being to observe their reactions – what do they laugh at, listen to, enjoy, ignore? Afterwards, the teacher/facilitator engages with the children, asking questions to see if the messages were received.

Conclusions

It is difficult to judge the listenership among children – at present it may be quite small. But by having more and better-quality children's programming, ABC Ulwazi is encouraging both a culture of children listening to the radio and a culture of children's radio programming. It feels reinforced in this by knowing that radio drama is an effective medium in educating children on particular points, and that children respond best to hearing other children's voices. The hope is that children can grow up hearing themselves and their issues on radio, given the growth of the community radio sector in South Africa and the significance of radio as a developmental and educational tool.

One question that ABC Ulwazi cannot answer at this point in time though is how viable it really is to work with such young children. At the moment the work is experimental. Even though most children today grow up media savvy, ABC Ulwazi feels that, as media have less of an impact in rural areas, children there will continue to live in more traditional situations, where the belief still is that 'children should be seen but not heard'. It is therefore in the rural areas that initiatives such as the Khuluma uKhululeke – Speak Free project are needed most.