Children make themselves heard

YUMINA MARTINS and MIKE RAMFALDT

IT'S a crisp, winter afternoon in Leobwakgomo, a township outside of Polokwane. A group of 15 high school pupils sit in a circle, shooting questions at each other. It's just about time to wrap up the final day of a week-long training workshop aimed at giving young people the tools to produce their own radio shows.

At the end of each day, the young reporters-in-training are called upon to reflect on their experiences. The first time, a 15-year-old Thobisa Tshidi said he was asked to speak in front of the group. He was too shy. It was a terrifying and unimaginable act—one that many young people dread. But not for long. After a week of radio training, Thobisa wasn't afraid to talk. In fact, she was eager. She said every opportunity she saw to make herself heard.

She said the radio training built her confidence and encouraged her to express her opinion. "It was really nice that we got to share our ideas with each other and expand our talents."

Thobisa is one of 15 youth radio reporters trained by the Children's Radio Foundation at community radio station Greater Leobwakgomo FM. In partnership with UN Children's Fund South Africa and Limpopo's Department of Education GEM/BEM clubs, the weekly radio shows offer a platform for young people to share their views about what is happening in their communities. During the workshops, they are taught how to research, debate, create and structure stories. They are encouraged to interview and learn how to turn these elements into radio broadcasts.

After a week of training, the young reporters in Leobwakgomo were ready to produce their first show for broadcast on the radio station. They chose to speak about gangsterism in their schools.

In their 30-minute broadcast, the group shared views on how gangs affect young people's chances of getting a good education. They interviewed several members of the community, including Leobwakgomo's police captain and a former young gangster. They asked nuanced questions from their own perspectives as young people, as the primary stakeholders in the matter.

Children account for 59 percent of South Africa's population, yet they seldom make the news. Media Monitoring Africa's research on how children are portrayed in major South African newspapers showed that children's voices were heard in only 9 percent of all news stories monitored last year.

Many journalists argue that children are difficult to access. The practical, ethical, and legal framework in place to protect young people from exploitation, they say, makes it difficult to get children's voices heard.

However, the Leobwakgomo team was determined to make their voices heard. They created a show that would give children a platform to express their views on issues that matter to them. Sustainable long-term youth media projects break the traditional media stereotype of framing young people as victims, and balance out the dominant adult point of view.

They create a space where young people can speak freely and where their peers and the wider community can share, listen, and learn in meaningful ways.

Training young people in media requires more than just teaching technical skills. Before you can teach children to produce their own media content, you need to create a safe space where they feel free to express their thoughts and opinions and where their contributions are seen as relevant and valuable.

Confidence and communication skills are developed at the same time.

A 15-year-old Mawetho Mphahlele said every opportunity he saw to make himself heard.

Diagbobi, a 16-year-old from Leobwakgomo expressed this need: "We want to show our parents how we can do, and to teach us how to improve on what we think we couldn't do. The shows will also show other young people that they can talk about these issues.

Children are not characters to be used to substantiate news. They are able to fill diverse roles and experiences many issues featured in the media, offering valuable perspectives and experiences. It's about time we listened."

Yumina Martins is a trainer and producer for the Children's Radio Foundation, and Mike Ramfaldt is its executive director. The foundation is featured in South African Child Gauge 2017, which was released this week by the Child Rights Institute, UCT.