

Children encountering values: Lessons in the home, the school and the media

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How do children experience the different values taught at home and in school and those they encounter in mass media presentations? The following article presents some key findings from four years of research among children aged 11-12 and 15-16 in seven municipalities in Western Norway. The study was endorsed and financed by the Research Council of Norway

Some years ago we published a book entitled *Growing Up in a Media-dominated Society* (Oslo, 1997). Upon completing the book we asked the question whether we, as two adult men, really understood what it is like to grow up in the media-saturated society of today? The sources for our book were documents prepared by other adults based on various types of research. We found very little about children's views on value related issues. For this reason we started to prepare a research proposal attempting to elicit children's own views on growing up with a dual set of values, those of home and school and those encountered in media products. We further wanted to find out if children themselves considered the respective value universes to be different.

A complete research design was submitted to the Research Council of Norway which endorsed it in May 1999. The endorsement included funding for a duration of four years. The authors of this article, in close contact with an established Steering Committee and a Reference Group, were responsible for the preparation and submission of the research design. Later the sociologist Tore Hagen at Volda University College joined the research team. When he was killed in a tragic accident, associate professor Thor Arnfinn Kleven at the University of Oslo, agreed to replace Hagen as a member of the research team.

Two institutions have supported this research project, Volda University College, Volda, which has been administratively responsible, and NLA College of Teacher Education, Bergen.

Methodological considerations

Doing research on children one faces a number of delicate methodological issues. The children may pay polite lip service to us as researchers, and give us the answers they think we would like to get from them. The opposite might also be the case. They may like to provoke and confuse through answers which reflect the factual situation in a very distorted and inaccurate way. The third possibility is that they want to be honest and cooperative, but they misunderstand some of the questions presented to them. Finally, we know that at least the younger children of the two

age groups participating in our study are not very advanced in reflecting theoretically. All these and other factors were carefully considered when we worked out our methodology.

We decided to use both quantitative and qualitative approaches. These included questionnaires to all, in depth interviews with a certain number, media literacy analysis of the most popular TV programmes in the respective age groups, and a brief informal 'field trip' in the classroom to find out reactions immediately after the showing of an episode of the most popular TV series in the group. There were, of course, many individual preferences that did not get a top score in the total group as such.

We also felt that it would be useful for the final analysis of our data to provide an adult perspective on the issues being considered. Those adults were persons very close to the children participating in the research: parents, classroom teachers, and pedagogical personnel in the administration of the local school. From the start this was considered to give extra dimensions to our research, the basic aim all the time being to elicit views on these issues from the children.

No parents prevented their children being part of the group to be researched. This implied that, apart from normal absence due to sickness, participation of the pupils in the 27 classes studied in 7 municipalities was in reality 100%. 541 pupils filled in the questionnaires, 308 6th graders and 233 10th graders. Many pupils expressed their willingness to be interviewed and 47 pupils were selected for interview.

More than 50% of the parents filled in the questionnaires sent to them by mail, and 31 parents were interviewed. 111 teachers and pedagogical administrative personnel filled in the questionnaires and 42 teachers were interviewed. The interview with the children lasted up to 30 minutes, with teachers and parents up to 60 minutes, in some cases even longer. Two of the researchers, the authors of this article, visited the schools twice during the research period.

This investigation was done within the county of Møre and Romsdal in Western Norway. The municipalities were not randomly selected within this county, since we aimed at selecting municipalities with different characteristics. As a consequence, our results do not allow statistical generalization, a problem our investigation shares with most social research. However, there is no reason to consider the investigation just as a narrative about some pupils on some places at a given point of time. In social research most of the issues regarding generalization have to be discussed on a rational basis, considering different factors weighing for or against the transferring of results to other contexts.

Our empirical research is mainly descriptive. The design does not allow conclusions about causality. Nevertheless, our interest, and probably that of readers, lies in the inferences which may be drawn from the research, rather than in the figures themselves. Our challenge is to be

aware of and to discuss alternative interpretations, and on a rational basis give the premises for our conclusions. Our methods also included literary analysis of 'The Curriculum for the 10-Year Compulsory School in Norway' (English version, Oslo 1999), general section, focusing on what is said about values and value competencies. This document is both a handbook for teachers as well as giving legal directives for what is to be taught on the various subjects at the different levels. The directives also outline the ethical values that are to be taught in the public schools of Norway.

Pupils, as well as researchers, undertook a literacy analysis of two episodes of the TV series which turned out to gain the highest popularity scores of the 6th graders and 10th graders respectively. The pupils were asked to fill in a pre-prepared literacy analysis form immediately after the showings without any comments on the part of the researchers. The most popular TV programmes were two soap operas, the Norwegian 'Hotel Caesar' was selected by the 6th graders and the American series 'Friends' by the 10th graders.

We shall now take a look at some of our key findings and discuss how these may be interpreted.

Differences between the media and home/school

The children found the value profile in the media different from the values taught at home and school. This conclusion did not come in the form of a sweeping generalization. They pointed out that there certainly are many media productions that in their presentation portray values very close to, or even similar to, the values of home and school. Nevertheless, they maintained, that they very often observe obvious differences between the values taught at home and school and values found in media presentations. A 6th grade boy comments in the following way:

'The difference is clear. For many years we have been taught that certain things are right and other things are wrong. Then we get confused seeing programs where adult persons are doing the opposite of what we have been taught to be right.'

The older children seem to maintain that they are able to distinguish between values in media products and in the real world. A 10th grader says:

'Yes, there exists a tension between the values in the school and the values in the media. But I believe young people are able to discover the difference between these two sets of values.'

As researchers we are not so sure that the picture is this simple. There is a wide agreement that in media products the values often run counter to the values taught at school. Other pupils express some concern with this situation. A 10th grade boy comments:

'I look at film as a film. If someone is killed it does not affect me so much, it is just a film. However, it depends on how it is done. If it is a horror film where a person's body is cut into small pieces, that I do not enjoy. From time to time it is fun to watch a quiet film with a happy end. I really enjoy watching comedies.'

There is often a duality in the children's reactions to the values they encounter in the media, which to us reveals a certain uneasiness in their reflections and emotions. Are they basically more insecure in their encounter with values in the media than they would like to admit? Other findings seem to support such an assumption. When we asked them to indicate which persons were their main source for teaching them about what was right and wrong in attitudes and behaviour, parents got the top score. Next on the list was the school. A 10th grade pupil gives this statement:

'If I should listen to wisdom, I do not want to listen to the media. Then I should listen to those who have taken care of me, and who have taught me things about the world.'

Why are parents so popular as a point of reference at a time in a child's development when strong opposition to parents' authority is a normal trend? Might it be that they do not trust the adult behaviour they see on the screen, and what they say? Despite all the criticism they might voice about their parents, children seem to have discovered that parents generally are trustworthy. Parents do not just talk, but they try in practice to do their best for their children. Parents may be old-fashioned and irritating, but they are among the adults that can be trusted.

When going through this part of the material, one is reminded of the two step hypothesis. This maintains that when you get information in the media and you do not know if it can be trusted, you seek the advice of knowledgeable persons you trust, before you accept or reject the given information. The main sources for teaching about right and wrong, parents, and next to them, teachers, indicate the role of intentional teaching in the development of the ethical and moral formation of children. Is this something that is unique in seven municipalities in Western Norway, or might it indicate a tendency that can be found in other contexts as well? This is a challenge for further research.

Television and Internet

The research findings show that children use television mainly for entertainment and relaxation. PC with Internet, on the other hand, is said to be more systematically used for getting new

knowledge and specific information when preparing reports etc. Maybe the entertainment aspect in the use of PC with Internet is toned down because of cost considerations, and because the computer is a commodity shared by the various members of the family, and each member's share of time is limited. We therefore consider the lack of entertainment use of computers by the children may have more practical reasons than a principal difference when compared with TV-viewing.

What does our research tell about children's views on advertising and idols in visual media? The children often very strongly declare that they are certainly not influenced by media exposure. Others admit quite openly to be influenced. One girl who strongly persisted in not being influenced by advertising, came for an interview. She was very neatly dressed. We asked her if she had bought her clothes in low price shops. That was not the case: she saved money to buy clothes of a particular brand, she told us. We went on asking her why she did not buy cheap and still beautiful clothes? Than she smiled and said thoughtfully: 'I guess I have been a little influenced by advertising after all.'

What struck us was the sincerity of the young girl in persisting that she was not being influenced by advertising. This statement was her true conviction. Our question made her aware of a connection in her behaviour and attitude which up to that point seemed to have been a 'blind spot' in her reflection. This made us wonder what made a thoughtful and honest appearing young person misjudge her situation. Was her influence of a subconscious and hidden type? How representative is she of young people today?

Here are comments on advertising by 10th grade girl admitting being influenced by commercials:

'It certainly affects my everyday life. Because when you see advertising for soft drinks on TV, you get desire to buy a bottle. If you see biscuits, you would like to find out how they taste. Yes, I am truly affected by advertising.'

When asked about brands the same pupil continues:

'Up to now I have not been so much concerned about having clothes of a special label. I dress in the way I want to, but I have been influenced by others. Some friends in a direct way ask me if I really do not use clothes of a particular label. They make me aware of the fact that when I start at junior high school, I have to use clothes of that particular label if I want to be accepted by my classmates. I am basically against being dressed like all others and I never bully anyone who chooses other types of clothes. I feel it is a positive thing to be self-conscious, and it would be quite boring if all used the same types of trousers and sweaters.'

In these quotations we again find this subtle duality in the way things are being said. We sense a struggle for the young person to be independent and individualistic, who, nevertheless decides to adjust to her peer group. This is said reluctantly and indirectly. Her friends may be themselves influenced by media commercials and media idols to become opinion leaders for a particular youth culture.

We also find in our data indications of clear negative reactions to media exposure. About 10 % of the 10th graders say that the media have a negative influence on their self-esteem. At least some of them connect this negative influence to the feeling that the media show an abundance of perfect bodies while they consider their own bodies to be not so perfect. If this percentage indicates the number of pupils who are in danger of becoming socially maladjusted even to the degree of experiencing social exclusion, then this is a serious issue both for the media and for teaching.

Violence in the media

Violence and problem-solving were also key issues in our research. Here again we get a duality of reaction to violent programmes. A 6th grade girl says: 'If there is too much killing, I might get nightmares, but as a rule movies do not have any impact on me.' A young child is analyzing her reactions to viewing movies that usually have no impact, but sometimes causing nightmares. Here we sense quite a span of reactions between these two extremes. To what degree is this issue discussed in classrooms? Violence in the media has been a hotly debated issue by researchers for more than 50 years. Why are so few conflicts in the media solved through negotiations and peaceful solutions?

A 10th grader comments:

'I react when I see serious conflicts leading to killing. I do not like it and I think there are too many programmes with a violent content. In most series there are killings. It might have been possible to produce series without such incidents.'

What should be reaction of the media to such a reflection from a young teenager? What reaction should this get from pedagogy?

The children's overt answers to what it is like to live in a situation where they are exposed to two sets of values while growing up, is that it is ok. They know the situation and they can handle it. This is naturally most strongly stressed by the 10th graders. The covert replies have come to us in many and subtle ways during our research. These answers can be summed up in one short phrase: a feeling of insecurity on the part of the children. This article has presented some glimpses of the overt as well as the covert answers given us by the children.

The teachers and parents who participated as close adults of those children involved in the research project have voiced deep concern about many aspects of the media, yet they still consider the media as a basically positive resource in the upbringing of children today. As adults trying to teach and guide the children in their daily life, they find the children to be really in a crossfire of value impulses. There seems to be a certain convergence of the covert answers of the children and the overt answers of parents and teachers. This seemingly observed convergence is an issue for further research.

References

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