

How children understand the programme *Kids of Courage*

A RECEPTION STUDY

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This article summarises the study series, involving educators and primary school children, and the scientific support behind the international co-production *Kids of Courage*.

“There is no German identity without Auschwitz”, declared Joachim Gauck, the former German Federal President, in the German parliament in 2015 in his speech on commemorating the victims of National Socialism and the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp. It is necessary for all children and adolescents growing up in Germany to acquire at least a basic knowledge on the topic of the Holocaust and to develop an age-appropriate understanding of this aspect of German identity. In the context of their history lessons, most children in Germany encounter the topic at around the age of 14 or 15. Up until then, it is often left up to the children themselves to put together a picture of the period of National Socialism in Germany from the traces of history and fragments they pick up from films or literature lessons (Bischoff & Nagel, 2013, p. 5). In this respect, history pedagogy points to the necessity of addressing the topic, in an age-appropriate way, as early as in primary school. There are, however, very few teaching resources available. This is where the project led by SWR and LOOKSfilm comes in, within the framework of which the international co-production *Kids of Courage* (Ger-

man title: *Der Krieg und ich*) was developed.¹ The series consists of 8 self-contained episodes which each tell the story of a child in Europe (see also Neckel in this issue), with the aim of bringing children between the ages of 8 and 12 closer to the period of the Second World War. Thus far, this is a unique project in which the production team and the scientific advisors at the IZI worked closely together to enable appropriate access to one of the most difficult subjects in German history.

A SUITABLE, AGE-APPROPRIATE APPROACH TO THE INCOMPREHENSIBLE HORROR (STUDY 1)

The task of conveying knowledge on the topic of “Second World War, National Socialism and Holocaust” brings teachers up against a range of challenges which are multiplied again when it comes to developing a television programme.

Adults are already barely able to endure authentic images of, and narratives about, the war and the Holocaust in their brutality and inhumanity, let alone comprehend the atrocities. This can emotionally overwhelm growing children, impairing their development and preventing a constructive engagement with this part of German history. Accordingly, in terms of youth media protection, it is important to prevent

the onset of traumatic experiences by e.g. visual depictions. At the same time, we must not euphemise the Holocaust and negate the reality of gas chambers and mass graves (Becher, 2009). In order to explore the limits of visual representation, we first of all showed educators (n=24), inter alia, various photos and visual depictions of the Holocaust, and we asked them to what extent they thought it would be reasonable to show these to children. The educators agreed that this was an important topic that should be addressed as early as in primary school. They said they would show the children visual depictions of children wearing the Star of David or children in the Warsaw Ghetto being led away with their hands raised, because they saw these images as important for picturing the period in their minds. By contrast, most believed that images of dead people, piles of corpses, or extremely emaciated concentration camp inmates (Ill. 1) were overwhelming. All of them believed that images of killings – even if illustrated contemporary documents – were unsuitable and emotionally overwhelming, and in this they were in line with the criteria of the German Commission for the Protection of Minors in the Media (KJM, 2016).

As well as questions of youth media protection, conveying the topic of “Second World War, National Socialism and Holocaust” harbours further, deeper challenges.

Enabling multiperspectivity

As a basic skill in approaching the topic of the Second World War and the Holocaust, it is first of all necessary to help children form an initial idea of the developmental processes, to pave the way to a basic realisation that Germany was war-mongering, operating a politics within and beyond Germany that was racist, inhuman and murderous (Hanfland, 2008). Children growing up in Germany therefore face a particular challenge, for as the “country of the perpetrators” they must learn to deal with these fractures and barbaric aspects of Germany identity.

However, it is not possible to acquire this deep and uncomfortable knowledge on the basis of a linear narrative from the victims’ perspective (Deckert-Peaceman, 2002, p. 317). An appropriate approach must enable multiperspectivity, which takes into account the victims’ perspective as well as that of the perpetrators, the bystanders and the followers (Flügel, 2009). “Education after Auschwitz” means facing up to the horrors of Auschwitz and trying to comprehend the social conditions which made these possible (Adorno, 1971). At the same time, it is more broadly about promoting fundamental values such as the recognition and acceptance of another human being in his/her particularity, as well as about the courage to not participate. The pedagogical objective must therefore also be to facilitate empathy with victims, bystanders and even perpetrators in order to then enable a morally informed position that opposes intolerance and destruction (Pech, 2004).

In primary school pedagogy, the use of biographies of historical figures

has proved to be an empirically effective and appropriate approach. It is important, however, to present the complexity of the personality in the selection of biographies: “It is just as important to address how much room for manoeuvre people had within their resistance to the political system, or in terms of the help they could give to those under persecution, as it is to address the justifiable fear people had of being found out or punished. Multiperspectivity as well as discussions about moral dilemmas should be regarded as essential principles and elements in teaching.” (Hanfland, 2008, p. 218)² The series *Kids of Courage* tries to implement this through the selection of stories arising from different life situations. The IZI explored, in 4 studies, the extent to which children are then also able to comprehend this, and whether the objective of multiperspectivity is achieved.

THE TREATMENTS IN THE TEST (STUDY 2)

Kids of Courage consists of 8 self-contained episodes which each tell the story of a child in Europe. The first



Ill. 1: The educators who were interviewed judged depictions of emaciated inmates in concentration camps (here, Buchenwald) to be unsuitable and emotionally overwhelming for primary school children

episode, for example, focuses on the German boy Anton, who – against the will of his father – wants to join the Hitler Youth at all costs.

Anton feels scorned and excluded. Everyone except him seems to be in the Hitler Youth, but his father will not allow it. He therefore secretly joins the Hitler Youth. He steals money from his father so he can buy the uniform, and he forges his father’s signature. He passes the “Pimpfenprobe” (“little rascals’ challenge”)³ and swears his allegiance. When his companions

insult his best friend Greta, he begins to have doubts. Greta is Jewish, and on the Night of Broken Glass she and her family have to flee their home. At first, Anton is against the idea of harbouring them, but his father is absolutely convinced they must help them. When Anton, with good intentions, tells his squad leader about this, he puts his father and Greta in danger. He flees with Greta to the attic, but has to watch his father being led away. Anton begins to understand what he has got himself into, and the potentially disastrous consequences of anti-Semitism.

In an early phase of the development of the screenplay, a study was carried out to analyse the extent to which children are able to comprehend this story and engage with the different perspectives. The story (treatment) was read to 86 German primary school children in years 3 and 4 (aged about 8 to 10); the reading included holding up individual photos and illustrations. In the before-and-after questionnaire the children were asked questions about their prior knowledge, understanding and opinions, and the details were discussed in class.

How children deal with the stories that are read to them

During the readings, it quickly became clear that the children were extremely

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interested in the topic. They listened very attentively and, the stories in their pure narrative form were already enough to emotionally engage them. They understood that they were about real stories and experiences of people in Germany who had really lived. Some children found it difficult to separate past and present and fit the stories into a chronology. Typical questions were, for example, whether those things still happen today, or whether the protagonists were still alive today.

The children clearly recognised Anton's development and learning journey:

"I thought the story was very gripping, but in some places also very sad, because at first Anton really wanted to join Adolf Hitler's group but then he realised that Adolf Hitler was not a good man at all." (Hannes, age 8)

Most of the children were able to understand the moral dilemmas set up in the stories and the intentions behind the actions of individual people. The primary school children could not understand the motives and intentions of the National Socialists and the reasons why they treated Jewish people in such inhumane ways. This set of problems should be regarded as a morally important reaction. It also became clear, however, how emotionally the children engaged with the historical events in their reception. For example, the mention of a wound on the father's face that had been inflicted on him in prison caused feelings of stress in all the groups. This injury could easily be disregarded, considering the atrocities of this period, yet even just picturing it in their minds pushed the children to their emotional limits.

The narrative became unintentionally comical when the words "Pimpfenprobe" and "Nazi" were read out. The children repeated the words with a certain relish in the pronunciation and called each other "You Nazi", without having even a rudimentary understanding of what they were saying. This was a clear indication that, when it came to the later filming, the word "Nazi" would have to be given explicitly

negative connotations early on in the plot, and to consider the necessity of using the word "Pimpfenprobe".

The second story that was read out to the children was an early version of episode 8, which addresses the theme of the concentration camp.

The story is about a girl called Nadja who is interred in a concentration camp. She has to teach the daughter of the camp commander how to play the accordion. Nadja is indeed an exceptionally gifted pianist, but she cannot play the accordion. She keeps her head above water by telling lies, and then learns – with the help of other inmates – a song which she improvises on a strip of wood. At the critical moment she is able to spontaneously transfer what she had learned to a real accordion, thereby escaping the death penalty. In the end, the concentration camp inmates set off on a death march; Nadja escapes and survives.

The story, which is based on a real experience, presents life inside and outside the camp. It tells of lies that are necessary for survival and dealing with the danger of being discovered. The intention was to present life in the camp, hunger, lives constantly in danger and the murder of camp inmates, so to speak, in passing. This did in fact work very well for most of the older children. With some children, however, there was a serious misunderstanding. They were under the impression that a concentration camp was a kind of friendly work camp, similar to a holiday camp. Some children came to the conclusion that while some people fought on the front, others lived together in the concentration camp, producing weapons and ammunition. An unequivocally false assessment of the historical context.

In response to this result, the whole screenplay was re-written and a story was told which reflected the reality in the concentration camp more unambiguously and did not downplay the reality that people were murdered there.

Episode 8: The story is about Eva, who is deported to Auschwitz concentration camp. The clerk, Tomasz, gives her a well-meaning tip-off, and she goes and stands in the right-hand row – this means she survives. In the camp she meets her friend Renata; they had sung together in the Theresienstadt children's choir, but Renata seems to have lost all her will to live. Eva tries painstakingly to keep her alive, and when the opportunity arises, she talks about their previous performances. The two of them are asked to sing for the camp directors, and this is how they stay alive. Gradually, Eva discovers the terrible story behind Renata's psychological trauma. She had advised the other children in the group to stand in the left-hand row, thereby sending them directly to the gas chambers. As the children are lining up for the death march, Tomasz helps Eva to survive – Renata, however, (presumably) does not survive.

The filmic implementation of this story involved emotionally intense, moving images and filmed scenes that were punctuated by short clips with model figures, contemporary documents, and blocks of information in order to contextualise the footage. The next step was to investigate how children deal with the concrete visual implementation.

HOW CHILDREN DEAL WITH THE SERIES (STUDIES 3 + 4)

As soon as a first version of the series was ready, it was shown to the children in years 3 and 4 (aged 8 to 10) and tested for appeal, comprehensibility and the effectiveness of its content (Ill. 2). Once again, the methods were a before-and-



Ill. 2: The rough cut of the series *Kids of Courage* was tested with children aged 8 to 10

after questionnaire as well as a class discussion with a trained educator. n=180 children watched episode 1 on the theme of the Hitler Youth and n=46 episode 8 on the concentration camp.⁴

Emotional reaction and intuitive appeal

This time, too, the children were wholly attentive throughout the entire episode. The emotional involvement was, however, somewhat higher than it was during the reading; the children sat before the screen “as if captivated”, and often open-mouthed. The children were nervous when it came to the dramatic climaxes; they held their breath and were visibly frightened, for example, when window panes were smashed in the Night of Broken Glass. When the Hitler Youth squad leader insulted Greta, the children were visibly empathetic – one girl cried spontaneously. The children were visibly engaged in the story, and it was only during the blocks of information with the play figures that the physical tension decreased slightly – which points to their function as a source of relief. In the questionnaire after the reception, the children rated the appeal of the episode from good to very good; the boys rated the programme slightly more highly than the girls. The children spontaneously rated episode 1 on the theme of the Hitler Youth as better than episode 8 on the theme of the concentration camp. The children’s criticism was mainly directed at the theme. One girl gave her reason, for example, as: “Because it’s about war, and I hate war! But I think it’s good that you have the chance to see what war is like.” (Rosi⁵, age 9) A 9-year-old with a migration background explicitly linked his disapproval with the innocence of the concentration camp victims: “Because people were killed, even though they didn’t do anything.” (Baturay, age 9) Emotionally, all the children found it gripping; some of them perhaps even

a little “too gripping”, as Marie (age 9) explained: “[It was] actually a little bit scary because the Nazis were mean.” For some children (predominantly girls), the emotional intensity of the programme was too high. The scientific advisors therefore recommended building in more moments of relief, selecting a more friendly voice for the voiceover, reducing the density of the verbal commentary, and taking the emotive music down a notch. This meant that in the final mix there was less verbal and musical intensity, and the dramatic male voice was replaced with a pleasant female voice. The final mix was seen by n=86 children in total and was rated using a before-and-after questionnaire (study 4). The children intuitively liked the programme more, and they rated it as no longer quite so gripping. The children were nonetheless very involved, understood the details of the story, acquired some knowledge and, above all, took away a moral message.

Understanding of the stories

All the children, without exception, understood the plot of the stories. They could describe almost all the plot strands in episode 1, and they understood why Anton really wants to join the Hitler Youth, even confronting his father over it. They experienced empathy when they saw what racism can mean, i.e. that innocent people such as Greta are excluded and threatened. They could understand Anton’s thoughts; they were able to comprehend why he initially is wrong but changes his mind and why in the beginning he does not want to help Greta and her family, and they thought he was right to change his mind and help them in the end. The goal of multiperspectivity was achieved in the case of every child (to different degrees). In the case of episode 8 (in the version in which it was recast after study 2), now all the respondents classified the concentration camp as a highly

problematic place to which a Jewish girl was brought. They recognised that Jews were treated very cruelly and were not to blame for this. The majority of the children understood why and how Eva helps the debilitated Renata. Some children understood very clearly the further depths of the story, such as the additional burden of guilt that Renata must carry; others were not yet able to access this.

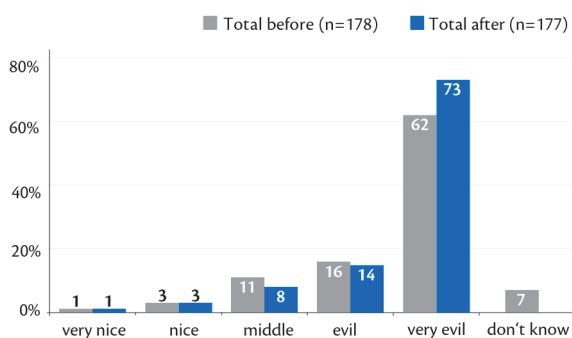
ACQUISITION OF KNOWLEDGE AND CLEAR MESSAGE

In their own opinion, the children acquired, above all, the fundamental moral orientation that “War is not good and you shouldn’t join in.” (Anita, age 9) Some children took from episode 1 moral references on the right way to act and behave; others felt they had gained a more appropriate perception of their own standard of living and had therefore come to appreciate their living conditions. Episode 8 gave them a basic knowledge of anti-Semitism, i.e. that the Nazis deliberately vilified the Jews (“put them down”). After watching the episode, 6 in 10 of the children were able to give a description of a concentration camp that was accurate in terms of content, and 100% of them knew that people were also murdered in a concentration camp. Before the reception, when asked about the scale, over a third of the children answered with 5,000 or 50 people, and 1 in 10 children answered with “I don’t know”. After watching the episode, 78% gave the correct scale: around 5 million people.

OPINION ON THE PERSON OF ADOLF HITLER

Before and after the programme, we asked the children’s opinion of the historical person of Adolf Hitler using a distinctly naïve formulation: “What kind of person do you think Adolf

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Ill. 3: Children's answers to the question: "What kind of person do you think Adolf Hitler was?"

Hitler was?" The children answered using corresponding emoticons on a scale of five from "very nice" to "very evil". In addition, "don't know" was offered as a possible answer. Before the reception of the programme, 15% of the children located him in the positive to middle area, a percentage which at least reduced slightly after watching the first episode. In total, the proportion of children who saw Adolf Hitler as a problematic figure increased. The most noticeable change was in the attitude of those who, prior to this, had no concept of Adolf Hitler. After watching the episode they judged him to be "very evil" (Ill. 3). In other words, those who had not yet formed a concrete opinion of Adolf Hitler prior to this now knew that he was not a peaceable man.

This becomes much clearer in the qualitative statements. Heiko (age 10) articulates what he has learned: "That the National Socialists were bad people." Janis (age 10) has learned: "It shows you that you shouldn't work with the Nazis."

For most of the children, the name Adolf Hitler clearly had negative connotations after watching the programme. One 9-year-old states what she has learned from the episode: "That Hitler was an evil person and that we shouldn't be like the Germans back then." (Leila, age 9) As well as rejecting the person of Adolf Hitler, Leila here also articulates how

she deals with the breach in a positive national identity. She forms the categories "Germans back then" and "Germans now" and of course counts herself as part of the latter. Some children transferred the message of the programme onto the present time and onto our fundamental behaviour towards other people (e.g. refugees).

SHOULD OTHER CHILDREN WATCH THIS PROGRAMME?

In the class discussion we asked whether other children should watch this film. All the pupils were united in this: all children should watch it! They justified this by saying they had learned a lot themselves, that children wanted to know something about "War and the Nazis in Germany", and that they did not think it was right for adults to try and shield them from the subject of war. At the same time, the children said that there should be an age limit for the programme (8+).

In the discussions with the children it became very clear how much they valued being able to engage with the topic. They felt they were being taken seriously; they had many questions, and up until now they had had neither cause nor opportunity to ask these. They found this also enriched their lives today – or, as Robert (age 9) put it: "Because you can learn a lot about how things were and what we can do better today."

NOTES

¹ <http://www.looksflm.tv/en/kids-courage> [18.3.19]

² Translated from German

³ A test for the youngest tier of the Hitler Youth

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⁴ The necessary permissions for the children to take part in this pedagogical project as part of their school lessons were acquired for each child from the parents. Children with an experience of war (mostly Syrian refugees) did not take part in the study and were taught in other classes during this period.

⁵ The names of the children have been changed.

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