

Inclusion, empowerment, and participation: The representation of children in *¡Vientos!, noticias que vuelan*

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A qualitative study with 59 7- to 15-year-olds living in the municipalities of Chiapas in Mexico inquired how inclusion, participation and empowerment is perceived in the representation of children in the children's news programme *¡Vientos!, noticias que vuelan*.

*¡Vientos!, noticias que vuelan*¹ – “Winds!, flying news” – is a children's news programme that has been broadcast weekly on public television for more than 4 years on Mexican territory and, as part of an international partnership, also in other countries. Its goal is to be a space of empowerment for girls and boys that promotes participation and inclusion.

THE STUDY

The study attempts to determine how inclusion, participation and empowerment is perceived in the representation of children in *¡Vientos!, noticias que vuelan*. A qualitative approach is used for this purpose, making use of the focus group technique in so-called Children's Councils that serve to recover the oral, written, and pictorial discourses of 59 children between 7 and 15 years of age who come from the 7 municipalities of Chiapas in Mexico. The associated categories of analysis are inclusion, participation, and empowerment; these categories get concretized via the representation of the children who participate in the news

programme and in its broadcasts as their protagonists.

It is notable that the participants identify the news programme as a space of participation for real, empowered children, offering them freedom of expression and topics related to their contexts and issues that are useful for their social and personal development. They see *¡Vientos!, noticias que vuelan* as including girls and boys as protagonists without restrictions of gender, socio-economic condition, ethnic origin or any other attribute. The representation conveyed remains consistent with the goal that the news programme has set itself since the beginning:

“To represent confident girls and boys, who are able to express themselves, who are internally motivated, capable of self-reflection, capable of acknowledging the point of view of others, who take initiative, who inspire others, who are authentic. Real girls and boys.”²

Who are they and how do we represent them?

According to the UNICEF document *Breve panorama educativo de la población indígena 2018*³, in 2018, “Mexico's indigenous population came to 12 million people, equivalent to 9.6% of the country's population” (p. 10). Of these, 65.3% are between 0 and 17 years of age.



III. 1: In “Children's Councils” children were involved as “expert evaluators” to discuss the Mexican children's news programme *¡Vientos!, noticias que vuelan*



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III. 2: Topics children considered important: confronting situations and resolving them, e.g. playing the guitar to help the family

Even though we have data on the needs of this population in different respects, as part of the representation in the media, indigenous girls and boys are linked to information associated with conditions of poverty, abandonment, and vulnerability.

This adult-centred vision is not only found in the selection of the reality presented in the media, but also follows a certain tradition in the study of childhood (Calderón, 2015; Núñez-Patiño, Molinari & Alba, 2016).

On the other hand, the influence that television as medium has on the production of meaning and the way in which it reinforces social constructions has been proven from different theoretical perspectives. To cite Belmonte and Guillamón (2008), it is clear that “television as social apparatus is a powerful means of producing meaning and often contributes to normalizing and naturalizing that which is not natural, but rather the result of a complex social construction” (p. 116). Therefore, conscious of

the role played by media in society, we launched *¡Vientos!, noticias que vuelan*: a newscast that offers a space of empowerment for children and teenagers, promoting their participation and inclusion.

After 4 years of constructing a representation of Mexican children, the goal of this study is to determine how the focus on inclusion, participation and empowerment is perceived through the representation of girls and boys in *¡Vientos!, noticias que vuelan*.

How was it done and who helped us?

This study adheres to the notion of “Edu-communication” (*Educomunicación*) as a valid approach to preventing situations of childhood risk; it thus involves articulated processes of acknowledging others from the point of view of their socio-cultural construction, builds knowledge in a collaborative way, and uses meaningful contextual elements to transform

reality in different areas of development (Navarro, 2020; Canavilhas, Merino-Arribas & Kroth, 2016; De Oliveira Soares, 2008).

Participatory spaces called “Children’s Councils” were designed in which the children were involved as “expert evaluators”, gave their opinions and recommendations about the development of the news programme and allowed us to achieve the goal of the study (III. 1).

A qualitative approach was taken, using mixed methods, which allowed us to recover the discourses of participants in a rigorous and disciplined way using different expressive languages, which do not only acknowledge the oral dimension, but

also the symbolic, by way of playful exercises. The participants were girls and boys between 7 and 12 years of age who came from both indigenous and non-indigenous communities and spoke Spanish and Tsotsil.

The discussion group was defined as the technique employed: a technique that allowed us to grasp social meanings and to understand the phenomenon in its different dimensions. According to Ibáñez (2003), the technique is useful for understanding the points of view of the participating girls and boys, because they express their feelings and thoughts naturally by way of words and gestures during the activity.

Inclusion and participation were guaranteed by the help of simultaneous translators, so that indigenous children had the possibility of expressing themselves in their own language Tsotsil.

7 Children’s Councils were held in the same number of locations with 31 girls and 28 boys, making a total of 59 participants.

RESULTS

To analyse the results, we used the technique of content analysis, which is similar to thematic analysis (Aronson, 1994, cited in Cáceres, 2003). To systematise the analysis, we created matrices in which the responses in the playful activities were quantitatively entered, thus translating the pictorial, oral or written discourses, in order to make the general result visible and develop a qualitative analysis of each of the categories.

Inclusion

In order to construct 3 stories that would be included in one of the broadcasts, the participants chose among 5 characters, 5 places or the same number of elements associated with actions or topics. At the end of the activity, tag questions were posed to the group.

The participants constructed their reports, associating them with different socioeconomic conditions: nonetheless, they privileged the middle and upper socioeconomic strata

and a rural geographic location for the homes in which the protagonists lived. Music, animals, sports, and science and technology were the recurrent themes. Topics appeared that are related to confronting situations and forcefully resolving them, like saving an animal, building a house, hunting a lion, becoming a professional athlete, and getting a job to help your family (Ill. 2). "Her name is Ana, she likes to plant trees and roses and to sell them, so there's oxygen, and to sell them, so she earns money." (Hilda, 10 years old, Chenalhó)

"The girl plays guitar to help her mom with her expenses, so that they can build a house." (Rosaura Fabiola, 9 years old, Zinacantán)

Participation

In the case of this category, the perceived honesty of the protagonists was an important indicator and the questions used to guide the discussion made this clear; the truthfulness of their stories and the confidence with which they told them were also important indicators. They identified girls and boys who told their true stories from real places and without any sort of mediation in their account.

When we compared the qualitative responses provided via the oral discourses of those who participated in the tag questions justifying the reason for their choice, it became clear that they regard the news programme as a space that gives children a voice.

"Because they talk about their life, their home and the environment. All children have the opportunity to learn and to appear in the programme." (Brayan Alexander, 9 years old, Zinacantán)

The feelings that stood out most with respect to the participation of the protagonists were happiness and excitement, accompanied by some nerves and embarrassment about talking in front of the cameras.

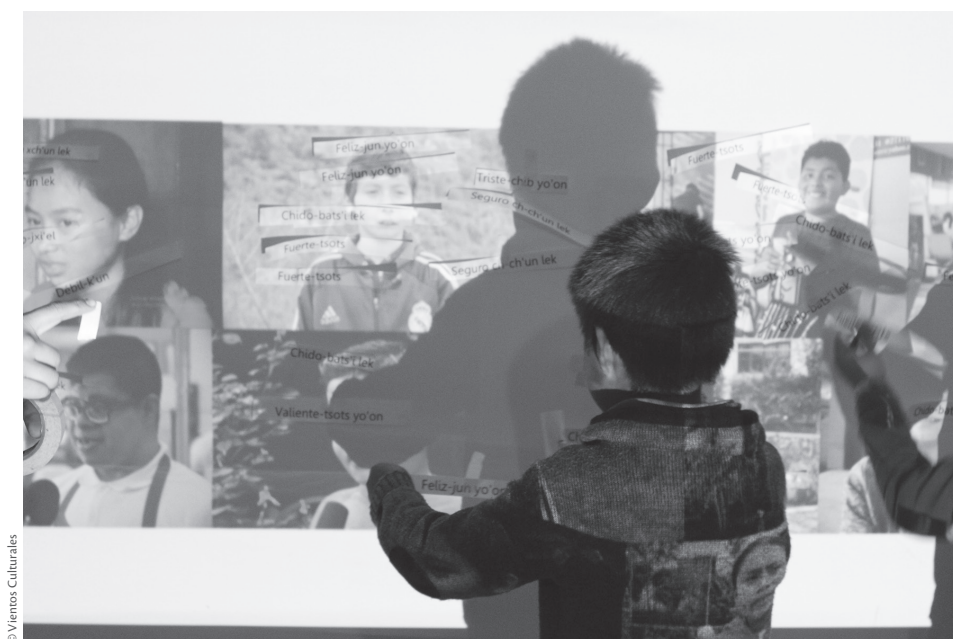
"Proud, happy because they're helping the environment. They'd be happy because they are going to talk about their life." (Rosa Arcely, 10 years old, Zinacantán)

Empowerment

The overall result revealed girls and boys who are happy, capable, strong, confident and brave, even though sadness and weakness are also seen in some of the protagonists (Ill 3). This characteristic shows that they are perceived as real girls and boys with both positive and negative feelings, but who are empowered with respect to the subject they presented and of which they are the protagonists.

Representation

For this activity, each participant received a special tool consisting of a sheet with references to the 2 protagonists. The participants, either keeping or folding away the references, constructed a story that they thought best represented the girls and boys who are the protagonists of *¡Vientos!, noticias que vuelan*. The



Ill. 3: The participating children were asked to characterize the protagonists



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Ill. 4: The study design unveiled the children's opinions and recommendations

options were always in Tsotsil language and in Spanish.

It is striking that they connected the representation of their community to rural spaces: with great pride and prepared to highlight their traditions and customs. Interested in learning from the knowledge of their community with the aim of helping others, they were described as girls and boys who are strong, empowered and able to achieve their goals through their efforts. They are unique and interesting girls and boys.

"Alex is a boy who lives in the country, is confident about his knowledge of growing plants. He likes talking about plants and showing them. He is very motivated to learn about medicinal plants. He knows his knowledge can help him when he needs it and that he can help others with what he knows. This is why Alex is an interesting and unique boy". (Description provided by Kevin, 12 years old, participant in a Children's Council)

CONCLUSION

The overall goal was achieved in the very design of a participatory methodology in which the activities are designed to unveil the opinions and recommendations of participants, in a way that is effective but also pleasant for them, via the different oral, written, and pictorial languages (Ill. 4).

The idea that the news programme is inclusive and that any girl or boy can participate is what we found in the discourses. On the other hand, it is recognized that they are real girls and boys who have freedom of expression with respect to the topics, the places, and the way they are presented. The situation is ideal, inasmuch as the participants in the Councils not only would like to be protagonists, but also regard this as a real possibility.

In addition to submitting the results of the research project, at the same time a training process was initiated with the *¡Vientos!, noticias que vuelan* team. This training process develops research skills that will allow for the development of rigorous and systematic processes for obtaining results that continually reinforce the newscast's goal. These results give rise to a direct benefit for the audience that follows the news programme in Mexico.⁴

NOTES

¹ <http://vientos.tv/>, <https://vientosculturales.org/>

² The definition by Vientos Culturales for the representation of the protagonists (girls and boys) who participate in the programme.

³ Short outline of the education level of the indigenous population 2018

⁴ This project includes a training process for developing research skills and was funded by the network "Tejiendo Redes Infancias" and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Ulises Soto and Zaira Lobato participated in it as members of the research team.

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