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# Children Champion Best Practice in the Media

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A Submission to the Press Council



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## **1. Children's views to the Press Council**

### **1.1 About Media Monitoring Africa**

Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) is an independent NGO that has been monitoring the news media since 1993. It is a human rights based organisation devoted to a fair, accurate and diverse media environment in South Africa. MMA has undertaken several media monitoring projects including projects that examine the representation of children in the media. These children's projects are grouped together under a major project called Empowering Children and the Media (ECM).

### **1.2 Introduction: Empowering Children and the Media (ECM)**

One of the core components of the ECM project is the Children's Media Monitoring Project (CMMP), where children from local schools keep a close eye on the media and do daily media monitoring on the representation of children.

The ECM strategy was started in 2003. It is a coordinated strategy which, together with children's meaningful participation, has as its core goal the improvement of media's portrayal of children through the respect, protection and promotion of children's rights in media and media practice.

Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) does annual projects where children are given skills to critically read and analyse the media. After 12 weeks of intensive media monitoring, about 60 children from three schools in Johannesburg were invited to a workshop on 03 December 2010. At the workshop the pupils from Troyeville Primary School, Park Senior Primary School and Parkhurst Primary School, evaluated the media's performance with regard to the representation of children. They were then guided into making a written submission to the Press Council, voicing their praises; concerns and recommendations to the media, which were all informed by their monitoring experiences.

The children were divided into 3 main groups of 12. Each group dealt and worked on different sections of the submission to the press council. The sections were:

- Who are we;
- How the media depicts us;
- What the children want to see in the media, and suggestions to the Press Council

MMA merely acted as a facilitator in these activities to ensure that an accurate record was kept of the views of the children and to assist the child monitors in compiling their final submission.

### 1.3 Who are we?

This section highlights:

- Who the children are and which schools they come from;
- Why children are special and why the Press Council should care about them;
- What rights relate to children in the media and why they (as children) are making the submission to the Press Council.

Children from three schools in Johannesburg namely, Park Senior Primary School, Parkhurst Primary school and Troyeville Primary School, took a critical look at the media's representation of children. They describe themselves as special and unique with one child monitor stating:

*"We are the future generation for the country." – Media Monitor 2010*

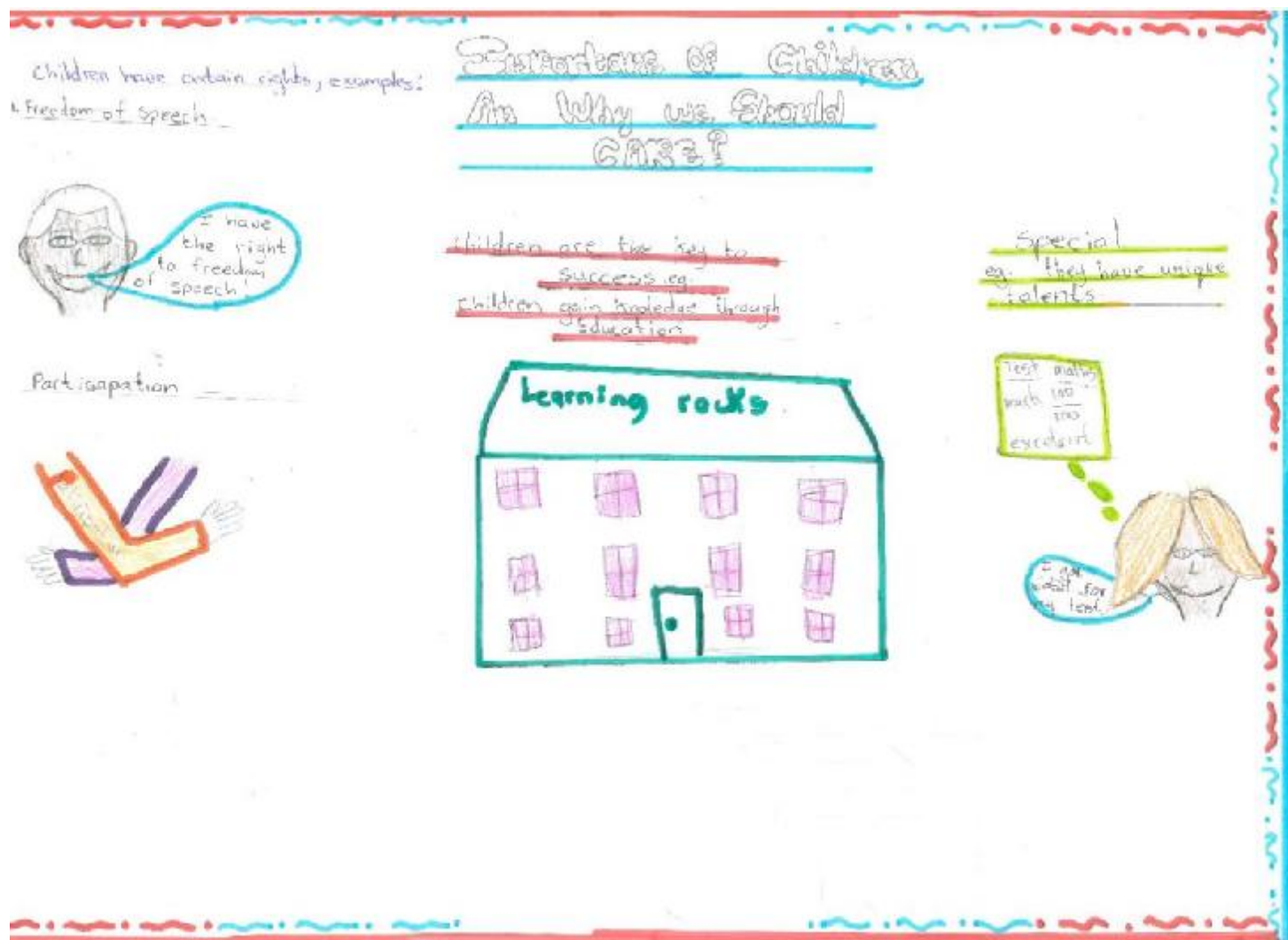
The children displayed a clear understanding of their rights in the media mentioning the right to privacy and dignity to name a few.

When asked to write down why they think children are special and why the Press Council should care about them these were some of the responses from the children:

*"Without us, there won't be life on earth" – Media Monitor 2010*

*"We are the key to success" – Media Monitor 2010*

The children also drew a picture illustrating why they think children are important and why the council should care.



### 1.3.1 Why are the children making a submission?

The children also explained why they are making a submission to the Press Council.

The children stated that they want:

*"[the media] to not violate children's rights."*

*"[the media] to put better stories of children in the media."*

*"the media to change the way they think."*

*"[the Press Council and the media] to hear their opinions."*

It is clear from these statements that these children would like more stories that do not violate children's rights to be published in the media.

## 1.4 How the Media depicts us

In this section, the children were asked to discuss how children in general are portrayed in the media. The purpose of this section was to give the submission a contextual body, outlining the children's observations of media practices. This process was informed by the monitoring that the children had conducted. The discussions included good and bad practice in the media. In addition, they also spoke about how children are portrayed and whether their voices – in the form of their opinions regarding issues affecting them etc – are heard.

### 1.4.1 Good Practice:

The children stated that they enjoy reading about other children's achievements as it gives them a sense of pride and accomplishment. These future leaders think that publishing "missing children" stories is the best way to find children. They believe that they have plenty of potential and that the increased representation of children in the news would sell very well.

### 1.4.2 Bad practice:

The children focused largely on abuse stories reported in the media stating that the majority of stories are about child victims rather than heroes. In addition, when the media reports on tragic events where children are victims e.g. a victim of child abuse, not enough information is supplied such as contact numbers or places of safety that the child can go to. They also noted that at times the faces of child victims are not blurred and their names are also published in abuse stories:

*"When the journalist wrote a story about a child that has been raped, they should not show the child's face. If they want to put a picture because they think it is important, they must try to put the side view."*

-Media monitor 2010

These children feel very strongly that their voices in the media are stifled. Often guardians or other adults such as neighbours or relatives are accessed on behalf of the child. They also do not like the *"twisting"* of their words to *"make the story stronger"*. This is a violation of their right to freedom of speech.

The children also feel that the portrayal of children is very stereotypical and limited. Some points that the children put together were:

- Boys are often reported as criminals;
- Missing children are usually girls;
- Less voices from girls;
- Few children shown as heroes;
- Many stories on child victims; and
- An increased number of stories about children being trafficked.

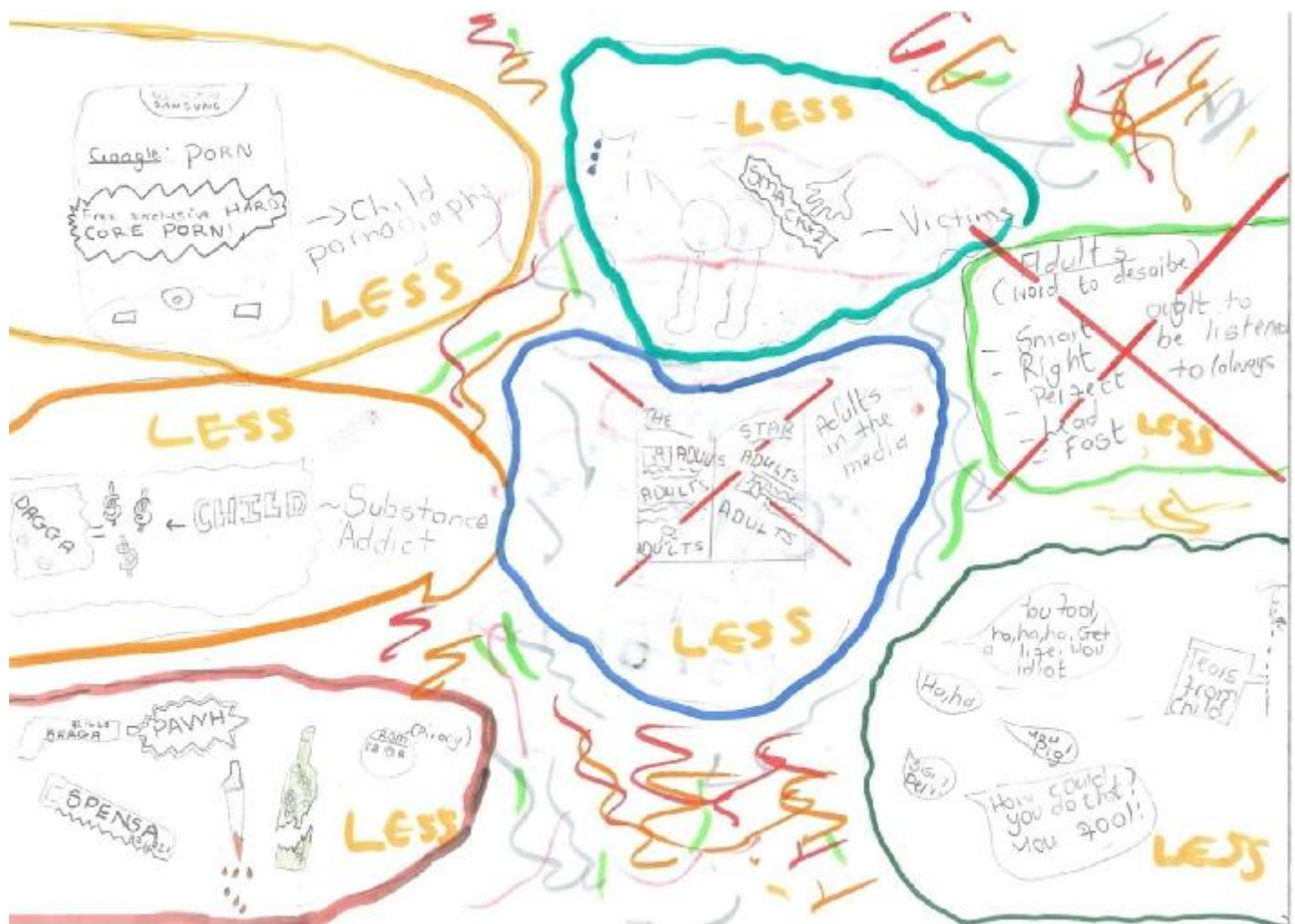
### **1.5 What the children want to see in the media, and Suggestions to the Press Council**

In this section, the children reflected on their concerns of the media's coverage and then provided suggestions to the Press Council.

They discussed what they would like to see less and more of in the media, and overall suggestions to the Press Council which summed up these points.

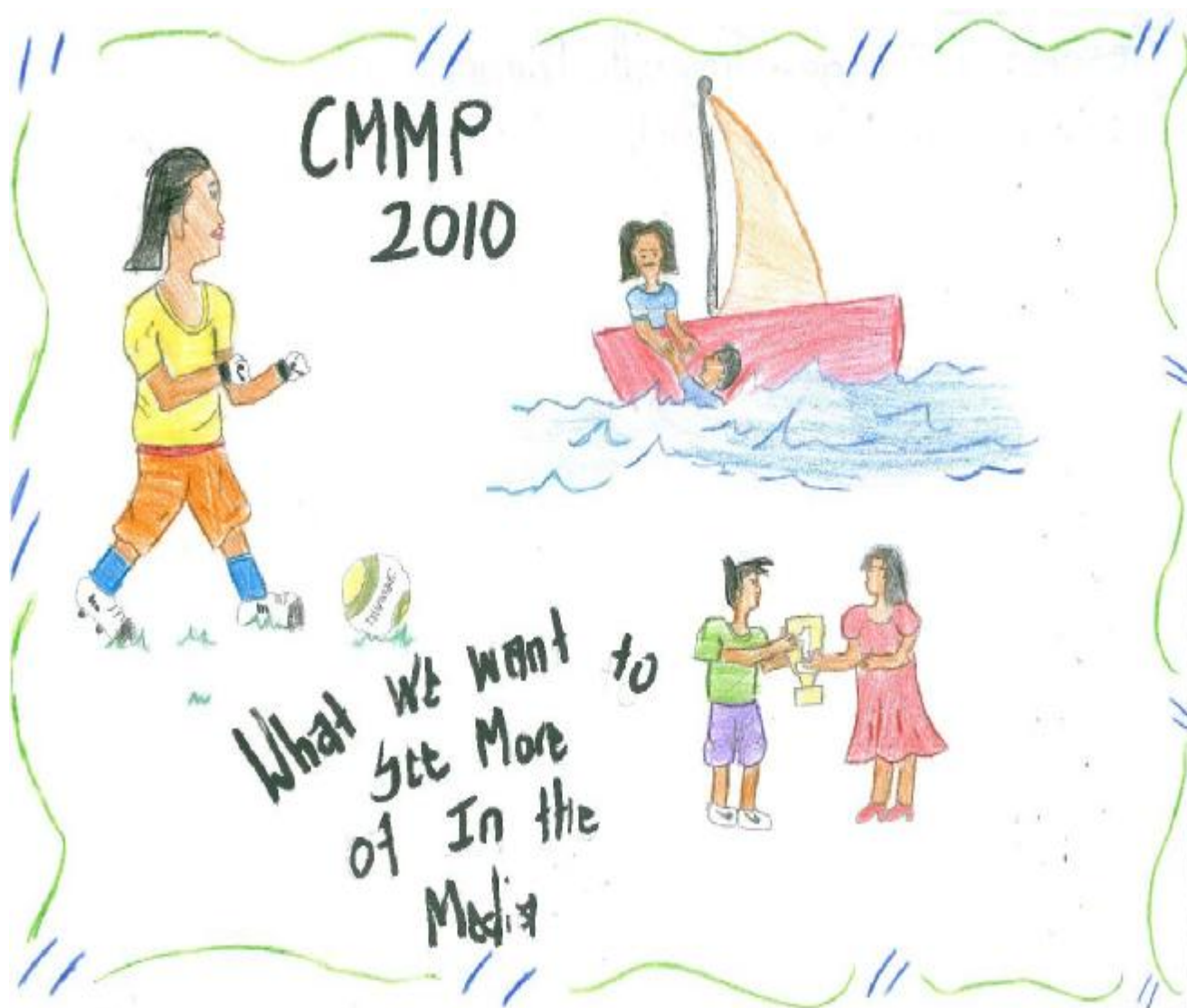


Below is a picture drawn by the children of what they would like to see less of in the media





In addition, below is a picture of what the children would like to see more of in the media:



The children have the following suggestions on what could be added to the Press Code to protect children in the media.

- Less stereotyping of girls and boys in “traditional” gender based roles;
- Issues which involve children should directly access children when in their best interest; and
- It should be clearly stated in the Press Code that a child’s identity should be protected in every way when it is not in their best interest.

In addition, the children feel that their rights are continuously being violated in the media. Therefore, they would like to remind the media to:

- Stop identifying children when it is not in their best interest;
- Ensure that their rights to participation are not violated;
- Remember that they are also the target market of print, broadcast and television media; and
- They have the right to be respected as children.

Children who participated in this submission are as follows:

#### **Park Senior Primary School**

|                    |                    |                      |
|--------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| Branden Molotsi    | Diane Minni        | Lizalle Korasec      |
| Michael Hattia     | Moesha Isaacs      | Sheneez Coolman      |
| Brittany Francesca | Esther Sobuza      | Nacha Hendricks      |
| Micheala Lekay     | Nkosinathi Ndiniso | Tanica Ban Der Walt  |
| Damian Thompson    | Keanu Phillips     | Merton-Curtis Notrem |
| Michelle Sithole   | Shaelin Govender   | Tumisho Noto         |

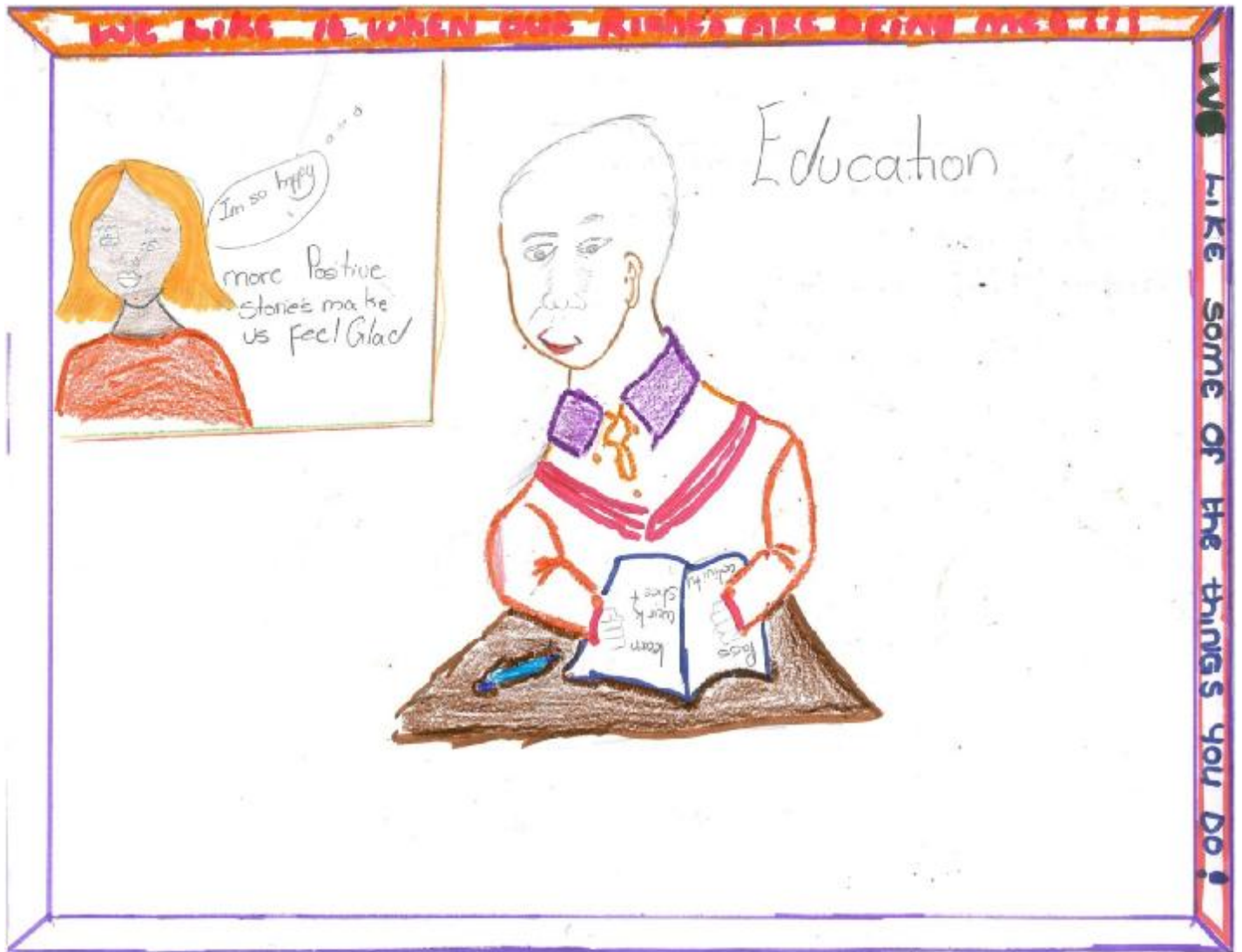
#### **Parkhurst Primary School**

|                   |                   |                    |
|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| Athim Akawula     | Fortune Malatjie` | Lethabo Kgawathisi |
| Philisiwe Siyoyo  | Terrence Mokotedi | Yamkela Ndlungwane |
| Zinhle Tshabalala | Daniel Mokonza    | Gaositwe Moloisane |
| Nkosinathi Moyo   | Priveledge Mbiba  | Tione Lwanja       |
| Yaone Molefe      | Esther Sibanda    | Leslie Mpofu       |
| Pearl Dube        | Sibonginkosi Dira | Vusani Ramafamba   |
| Yonela Cele       |                   |                    |

#### **Troyeville Primary School**

|                    |                    |                     |
|--------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Agostinho Desalema | Dimpho Morupisi    | Gilda Vamussa       |
| Jossy Mukunda      | Michel Lolo        | Siyabonga Nkomzwayo |
| Tresor Tchamuganda | Collette Malatjie  | Enrico Klein        |
| Grace Kamanda      | Matlakala Mamabolo | Portia Mhlanga      |
| Sokoluhle Stemela  | David Thipe        | Frank Iradukunda    |
| Jessica Mampuya    | Mbalabu Kaniki     | Rabby Bokomba       |
| Tebogo Makamo      |                    |                     |

Below is a picture depicting a child's ideal view of the media, and reveals the important role of the media in the life of a child.



## **2. Proposed Children's section of the Press Code**

In light of the Children's Formal Submission and Suggestions to the Press Council, MMA has drafted new clauses for the Press Code that deal specifically with Children. MMA proposes that these clauses be included in any amended Press Code.

### **Preamble to the Children's Section of the Press Code**

A "child" means a person under the age of 18 years.

Section 28(2) of the South African Constitution, 1996 states that the "child's best interests are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child". When trying to determine the best interests of a child, the child has the right to have his/her views taken into account, the Press must give due weight to these views in accordance with the child's age and maturity.

In reporting on the lives and welfare of children, the Press undertakes to act in accordance with the Constitution and in appreciation of the vulnerable situation of children.

The Press recognises that children's rights to privacy and dignity deserve the highest degree of protection, and undertakes to respect these rights in every situation.

The Press will maintain the highest possible ethical standards in reporting on children and undertakes to consider the consequences of reporting to children. Specifically the Press will strive to:

- 1) Seek the truth and report it as fully as possible;
- 2) Act independently; and
- 3) Minimise harm.

### **Proposed Children's Section of the Press Code:**

#### **1. Minimising Harm**

- 1.1) The Press shall avoid stereotyping and stigmatising children or sensationalising stories about them.
- 1.2) The Press shall avoid exposing children to reasonably foreseeable abuse, discrimination, retribution, rejection or harm by their communities or by society at large as a result of a publication, this includes but is not limited to:

- 1.2.1) protecting the identity of child soldiers, asylum seekers, refugees or displaced people where there is a risk of exposing children to harm or retribution;
- 1.2.2) not, directly or indirectly, disclosing a child's HIV status unless there are exceptional circumstances and informed consent has been obtained from both the child and the child's guardian/parent, giving due weight to the age and maturity of the child;
- 1.2.3) avoiding the use of sexualised images of children;
- 1.2.4) desisting from taking photographs of children in situations where they may be embarrassed or vulnerable. The press shall wherever possible obtain the informed consent of the children and/or their guardians.

1.3) Child pornography shall not be published.

## 2. Identification and Informed Consent

- 2.1) The Press shall always adhere to the statutory restrictions on the naming and identification of children which prohibits the identification (either directly or indirectly) of children who have been victims/perpetrators of abuse or exploitation; been charged or convicted of a crime or have been a witness to a crime.
- 2.2) Subject to Clause 2.1 above, the informed consent of the child and parent/guardian shall be sought in cases where the identity of the child is to be disclosed and such disclosure is potentially harmful to the child.
- 2.3) Where it is editorially necessary to publish a picture of a child that is potentially harmful to that child, the identity of that child shall be obscured in such a manner that the child cannot be identified.

## 3. Representation and Access

- 3.1) The Press recognises that children have the right to have their voices heard and to participate in decisions affecting them giving due weight to their age and maturity:
  - 3.1.1) where appropriate, the Press shall give children access to the media to express their views; and
  - 3.1.2) when verifying information provided by children, the Press shall take care not to place the children at risk.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, MMA hopes that the Press Council will consider the children's submission as well as the proposed children's clauses with the aim to improve and strengthen reporting on matters involving children.