

MMA'S CHILDREN MEDIA MONITORS ASK: WAS IT AN 'EVIL SPELL' OR SUN STROKE?

On 26/08/2011 *Sowetan* newspaper published a story on its front page and page 7, titled "Schools Under Evil Spell" and wrote a follow-up story on 30/08/2011, titled "Evil Spell Persists." The articles reported on two schools, Masegela Lower Primary and Bosemahla Higher Primary, in Limpopo, that have been closed down due to pupils collapsing, believed to be caused by an evil spell, Satanism and witchcraft.



The manner in which this story was reported by *Sowetan* is of concern to Media Monitoring Africa because it violated children's rights and failed to demonstrate quality, fair and ethical journalism. While MMA doesn't question religious or spiritual beliefs, it thinks the newspaper should have investigated and provided possible alternative causes behind the collapsing of the pupils, other than an "evil spell."

MMA's children media monitorsⁱ studied the two articles and suggested that the newspaper should have explored the likelihood that pupils collapsed due to medical reasons and therefore accessed and quoted medical professionals commenting on the issue.

We think it's fake they keep blaming "evil" spirits but never got medical advice. They never gave us medical findings

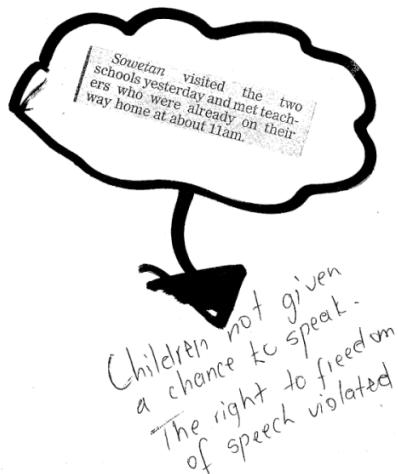
Rather than merely suggest that pupils collapsed “under mysterious circumstance,” alternative explanations for why pupils may have collapsed could be: heat stroke or dehydration due to sitting in the sun for prolonged periods during prayers; in cases where girls collapsed this may have happened due to a drop in iron levels often experienced by girls and women especially during their menstruation; exhaustion, and many others. MMA’s children monitors made the following observations:

“They could have interviewed a medical expert and got a medical view.”
“We also think it could have been a sun stroke when they collapsed because they were in the sun.”
Children are portrayed as helpless victims. They made fun of the situation. We also think after they prayed nothing was resolved they should have come up with another solution.”

They also observed that children’s identities weren’t protected. By failing to protect the identities of the children in the photographs and by naming the schools in question, the children may face possible victimization and stigmatization. If the identified children are believed by the community to be possessed by evil spells they may be isolated and discriminated against by other pupils and members of the community. The newspaper should have protected the children’s identities.



According to the children monitors, another image included in the article was “very dramatic because it shows a unconscious [sic] child being carried away and it’s also exploiting her!” The child is portrayed in a vulnerable state and this victimizes her.



The article also didn’t access the pupils at the school, despite the story being about them. Had the journalist sought out children’s voices, they might have gained insight into alternative reasons behind why the pupils collapsed.

MMA strongly encourages journalists to access children in stories, especially those concerning children and on topics about children.

Based on MMA's observations and those of the children media monitors, the two articles should have upheld children's rights to privacy and dignity by protecting their identities in the photographs and by not naming the schools where the incidents occurred. The articles also should have strived for better quality journalism by investigating the matter and providing its readers with alternative reasons behind the collapse of the children.

While South Africa's citizen's rights to religious and spiritual beliefs are enshrined in our constitution, it is the media's responsibility to inform its readers on a variety of factors that may impact an issue being reported on, in a fair and ethical way. Children monitors' suggestions for future reporting, especially on issues involving children, were to ensure people's rights aren't violated and to improve the quality of reporting. This will ensure our readers and especially our children media consumers don't feel "terrified, shocked and disappointed" when they encounter a similar story in the future.

Sandra Banjac

Changes:

1. Don't violate ANYONES rights.
 2. Report your stories better.
1. Terrified, shocked and dissapointed.

i Empowering Children and the Media (ECM) 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.