

The wrong trainers

The British CBBC production *The wrong trainers* from 2007 is an animation programme with documentary elements for 7- to 11-year-olds.

The programme raises the issue of child poverty in Great Britain, where, statistically, every 4th child grows up being poor. In animated episodes, 6 children aged 7 to 11 talk about their family situations. Their fates range between neglect (cf. screenshot 1), a mother being addicted to drugs (cf. screenshot 2), or disability (cf. screenshot 3). The seemingly inevitable consequence of all of these circumstances is a life in financial poverty, which drastically constrains the children's personality development and often causes social isolation. Thus, the special quality of the programme is the discussion of a topic that affects a large number of children but is hardly ever discussed in public.

A key feature of *The wrong trainers* is the animation aesthetics that is partly very expressive and partly very simple: classic cartoons and stick figures (cf. screenshot 4) cause an effect of alienation that protects the privacy of the children being portrayed and, at the same time, shows their shocking experience without presenting them sensationally (cf. screenshot 5 and 6). This also brings out the general aspect of poverty that the individual fates have in common. The political criticism of *The wrong trainers* is unusually strong for a children's programme: At the end, the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair (cf. screenshot 7) sets himself and his generation the goal to overcome child poverty in Britain by 2020. The portrayed children answer that in 2020 they will already be adults – if this political promise will ever be put into practise at all (cf. screenshot 8). CBBC also offers online material as part of its involvement in this matter.

The wrong trainers was a winner of the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL 2008 in the category 7-11 non fiction and has already won 10 national and international prizes including the BAFTA Award of the British Academy of Film and Television Arts.

International experts' opinions

At the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL 2008 the programme was discussed by several panels. The questions were whether such a programme about child poverty was more appropriate for adults than for children and whether children could get something out of it or not. One critical position was that the programme showed the children as victims only and did not offer them any action options. Others replied that seeing their fates presented on TV was already an important experience for children living in poverty.

Most experts saw the animation aesthetics as a very positive aspect, making the programme attractive and protecting the personalities of the children being portrayed. Critics, however, feared a loss of emotionality and pondered whether a documentation with real people would not have been possible as well.

“What is the purpose of it? There are no solutions offered. ... Just raising consciousness is not enough.” (female expert, Argentina)

“It was not only a programme for children and about children but also a message to the government. Like: are you going to leave us like that or will you do something about it? And from the children's point of view if you have the same living standard like those children, you see that you are not alone. But it also raises expectations that they're not going to live like that forever, that things will change.” (female expert, Ethiopia)

“It's really important that you see the child but not really detailed and let the animations do the rest. Just imagine if you'd see it for real: you'd focus a lot more on the images and much less on the story. I think that this is done in a smart way and really respectful.” (female expert, Germany)



III. 1: Dillon is neglected by his parents



III. 2: Chris and his drug-addicted mother



III. 3: Samara and her siblings have a disability



III. 4: Chantell is falling out of the window



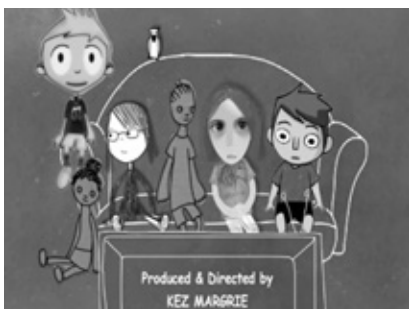
III. 5: Danielle, as a cartoon character



III. 6: The real Danielle



III. 7: Tony Blair wants to end child poverty



III. 8: In 2020, Chris, Chantell, Samara, Keona, Danielle, and Dillon (from left) will be adults

Children's opinions

11- to 12-year-old children with non-academic and immigrant background at a Munich basic-level secondary school watched and discussed the programme in several groups. They were emotionally moved and expressed strong feelings of sympathy and concern. At the same time the children felt the need to take a slight distance from the subject to protect themselves emotionally. Therefore, most of them judged the aesthetics of the animated sequences positively.

"It has really touched me... Well, one girl fell out of the window and was in a coma! That the boy had to sleep on scruffy mattresses and... Somehow, I thought... Absolutely impossible, if you start thinking about it! ... I was about to start crying." (girl)

"I also liked the animations a lot because small children can understand that, too. Because, if I imagine it for real, you would probably be afraid of the mother's addiction to alcohol, the way she looked. She was already a bit upsetting in the animation, but I think it actually was kind of okay." (girl)

... the subject and intention of the programme...

The pupils understood the intention of the programme to raise a stronger public awareness for the problem of child poverty and to impose pressure upon the responsible politicians. Partly, however, they also tried to find the major part of responsibility in the families concerned.

"I also found it quite good as there are children who may not have that much money either. The programme simply shows that their situation isn't that good because other children might not notice that so much." (girl)

"I also think that this is everybody's business and that it is said that maybe they should pay better attention. Because if everybody pays attention, the government can't pretend anymore that this is nothing or something like that." (girl)

"Well, for me this only shows that there are always two parts to blame – the parents, too. As you could see in one of the stories, where the mother was addicted to drugs and I think the father didn't do anything about it either." (girl)

...what they learned...

Several pupils critically questioned the consequences of their own actions concerning bullying at school or the social marginalisation of the socially deprived. At the same time, however, the programme did not only arouse the children's empathy, but also the fear of losing their own social status. What is more, several key terms such as "drug addiction" would have had to be explained, as not every child knows what they really mean.

"I think the programme is for arrogant children, who make fun of things like that. Well, for me I think the programme was actually somewhat informative because I've already done a lot of bullshit to poor kids, who were, well, not that normal." (girl)

"I wouldn't have liked to be the boy or the girl. This is really totally bad. And I bet everybody would have liked to help them... And one important advice: always study at school in order to get a good job and to have money." (boy)

"But I also didn't like it a lot that there were words that you didn't know yet. Yes, for example 'drugs'. Or 'addiction to alcohol'. 7- or 6-year-olds, for example, don't know that. Or even some people at the age of 11 neither." (girl)