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SpongeBob or Willi wants to know it all?

Children's self-perceived learning from television

An international study among 5 countries (Germany, USA, Argentina, Cuba, UK) inquired 1,412 children's self-perceived meaningful learning spaces and increase in knowledge through children's TV programmes.

What was a TV programme you really learnt a lot from?

This is not an easy question since large parts of what the human brain draws from television are not directly accessible. Much remains in the realms of the preconscious and is not perceived as emanating from television at all. Some things, however, can be accessed and spontaneously recalled.

So far, much research has been driven by the question of what children learn from a specific show or a specific topic, or of whether there is any possible way to improve learning efficiency, for example by changing particular elements of a show. But even if these approaches are based on an understanding of the child as an active meaning-making individual, they are still dominated by adults' perspectives and interests. In this study we approach the topic in another way and ask the children themselves which TV programmes they have learnt a lot from. Of course this perspective does not scrutinise which learning space

is the most effective one, but investigates whether children themselves have experienced learning from television as meaningful, and if so, in what programmes. In the following, we present some of the results of the study.

Method

We asked 1,412 children aged 7 to 10 to articulate a learning experience which they themselves considered meaningful. In a classroom setting the children drew an experience where they had the feeling that they had really learnt a lot from TV. Afterwards, they wrote a few sentences about what they had drawn, the name of the show and what they had learnt from it.

This procedure was undertaken in different countries: Germany (n= 297), USA (n= 301¹), United Kingdom (n= 446), Argentina (n= 168), and Cuba (n= 200).

Each sample tries to represent as much as possible the typical ethnic diversity of the region and to guarantee a gender and age balance. The study took place in spring 2012.

Results: the genres and formats from which children feel that they learn

If children are asked which programme they have really learnt a lot

from, children most often mention animated shows. In second place, yet lagging far behind, are shows which can be identified as knowledge programmes for children, and sitcoms. There are also much smaller percentages indicating a wide range of genres, ranging from feature films and documentaries for adults to scripted-reality formats. The children themselves perceive a broad spectrum of genres as relevant for their increase in knowledge. And: Children's ideas of what can be learnt from a programme and when do not necessarily match adults' assumptions about "educational" programmes.

The multinational comparison between the 5 countries marked quite interesting differences between countries.

USA, Cuba, and Argentina: mainly cartoons; Germany and UK: educational programmes and documentaries for children

In the USA, over half of children name cartoon series such as *SpongeBob SquarePants* as the programmes they feel they have learnt a lot from. Sitcoms (e.g. *iCarly*) and feature films (e.g. *Star Wars – The Movie*) are also mentioned. Knowledge-centred shows scarcely feature at all.

A very similar picture emerges in Argentina. Here 40 % mention cartoon series (e.g. *Phineas & Ferb*), followed by sitcoms (e.g. *Good Luck Charlie*, *Wizards of Waverly Place*),

as significant spaces for learning. One individual programme which stands out is *Art Attack*, the art show. It is mainly US productions which children here perceive as particularly enriching.

In Cuba even more children, nearly 2 thirds, see cartoon series as the programmes from which they have learnt most. Here, however, the US cartoons are outranked by the series *Elpidio Valdés*, about the national hero of the same name. Just as in Argentina, a single programme often mentioned by Cuban children as something they feel they have learnt a lot from is *Art Attack*.

In the UK, every fourth child feels that it has learnt most from cartoon series (e.g. *SpongeBob*). In second place, for children from Scotland and Northern Ireland, are sitcoms, followed by knowledge-centred shows such as *Horrible Histories* and *Deadly 60* (both CBBC), and documentaries for children.

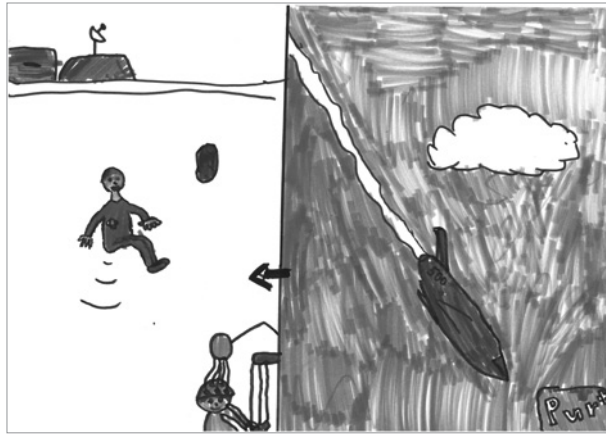
When children in Germany are asked what programmes they have learnt a lot from, almost half name knowledge programmes which have been specially produced for children (*Willi will's wissen* – “Willi wants to know it all” –, BR; *pur+*, ZDF). Clearly behind these come edutainment programmes for adults (such as *Galileo*, Pro7).

The study shows that in some countries there is a clear predominance of animations and sitcoms among the programmes which children perceive as enriching their lives (Cuba, USA, Argentina). In others, knowledge-centred programmes are most highly ranked (Germany), or make up a big part of the portfolio along with documentaries and other genres (UK).

What children believe they gain from the programmes

Facts

On average, nearly half of the children answer the question of what they have learnt from the programme mainly with factual knowledge, primarily from the fields of biology, technology, and history. Thus for example a 7-year-old girl recounts how she has learnt



Ill. 1: A 9-year-old boy from Germany learnt from *pur+* “that when a plane takes a nosedive with its engines running, you float as if you were in space”



Ill. 2: “Phineas and Ferb, I am going to accuse you!” – a 9-year-old girl from Argentina learns from *Phineas and Ferb* “that you should never accuse people”

from the programme *Willi will's wissen* “that mountain water is purified by nature”, and draws the presenter, Willi, in the mountains by an alpine stream. Or a 9-year-old boy has discovered from *pur+* “that when a plane takes a nosedive with its engines running, you float as if you were in space”, and draws the corresponding scene from the knowledge programme (ill. 1).

An 8-year-old girl from the UK reports “I learnt that piranhas can strip a cow to the bone in less than a minute”, and draws a scene in which Steve Backshall, the presenter from the programme *Deadly 60* (CBBC), feeds piranhas.

Models for behaviour

1 in 3 children from the study mention behaviour as something which they have “really learnt a lot about” from television. This is usually about social skills and appropriate ways to interact with other people, as with the 10-year-old boy from the US who learnt, from a story about *SpongeBob* and his friend Patrick, to “never be selfish and always share”. Often it is conclusions that are drawn from a story. In *Phineas and Ferb*, for example, Candace frequently accuses her brothers for playing tricks on her. The conclusion drawn by a 9-year-old Argentinian girl is “that you should never accuse people” (ill. 2).

Skills

According to their own perception, nearly 1 in 5 children gain skills in areas such as art, sport, music, and mathematics, by copying what they have seen on the programmes. From the programme *Art Attack*, a 10-year-old girl from Cuba learnt “to make manual work. Like: a castle I made, a cardboard pencil, a drawing that closes with a paper curtain etc.” From *Lego Ninjago*, a 10-year-old boy from the USA learnt “how to defend yourself”; he draws “a green ninja golden star and his gear and he is training in his HQ”.

Perception of dangers

A few children also learnt about dangers or threats from the programmes

they had seen, for example that “different berries can poison you if you’re not careful and can make you ill” (girl, 8 years old, UK) (ill. 3).

Country-specific emphasis

In keeping with the national differences regarding what programmes children learnt a lot from, there are also differences in the learning content which children feel they have gained. While children in Germany and the UK emphasise factual knowledge, the emphasis in the USA, Cuba, and Argentina is more on wise maxims and models for behaviour, or skills in the artistic realm, especially on the show *Art Attack* (see fig. 1).

Children’s learning spaces

According to their own perceptions, children get different things out of programmes. Some of this is content which matches the dominant understanding of educational content, and some is content which lies more in the realm of social learning or special skills. It is not always immediately obvious to the adult eye what children have got out of a programme and why, and how they will apply



Ill. 3: A 8-year-old girl from the UK learnt from *Pokémon* that berries can poison you

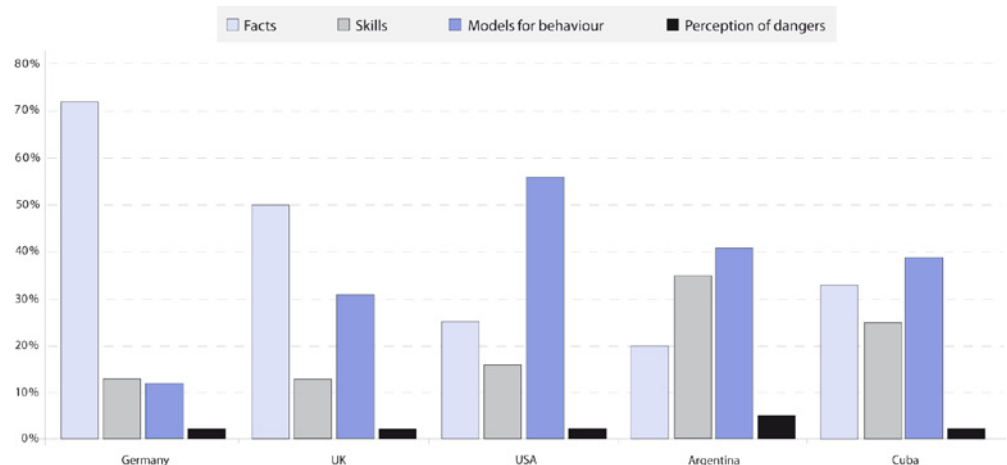


Fig. 1: International comparison: what children believe they gain from television

this knowledge in their everyday lives. This makes it all the more important to look at the utility value of programmes from the perspective of children, and to try to understand how they see these shows. There is still a considerable need for research here. It is already clear, however, that:

In all countries, there is a broad spectrum of things which children perceive themselves as learning, and of programmes in which they locate this learning. At the same time, national differences become very clear. Programmes such as the US-produced *SpongeBob* (Nickelodeon) or the sitcoms *iCarly* (Nickelodeon) or Disney’s *Hannah Montana* and *Phineas and Ferb* are shown all over the world. And in every country, children derive behavioural principles and maxims from these programmes. In

those countries where children have access to attractive, humorous knowledge-centred programmes and documentaries made especially for children, these are very well received. Formats such as *Horrible Histories* (CBBC), where bizarre facts from history are presented in the

style of Monty Python, or *Willi wills wissen* (BR/KiKA), in which a young man eagerly investigates everyday questions such as “Where does the pipe in the loo go?” or “How does the mail get to Mexico?”, prove particularly profitable from the children’s point of view. Issues of identity, such as those which *SpongeBob* consistently and humorously evokes from the point of view of children, are also undoubtedly enriching. At the same time the outstanding position of *Art Attack* could be interpreted not only as a hint that it is an attractive show, but as the fact that children in the US, Argentina, and Cuba love to learn from children’s TV. It must be the goal of society to provide children with a complete programme, using the possibilities offered by TV to give children attractive access to knowledge and allow them an understanding of the world they live in. The clear disparities in the international comparison could point to the danger of an information divide. ■

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NOTE

¹ Comprising nearly 100 children each in the West (Los Angeles), in the Midwest (St. Louis) and East Coast (New York area).