

“She reached the goal she wanted to”

A RECEPTION STUDY ON THE FORMAT *THE DAY I BECAME STRONG*

Andrea Holler

An IZI study involving 108 children investigated how children from Taiwan and Germany evaluate episodes of the format *The Day I Became Strong*, and how they use the stories of strength offered by the programme for themselves.

The international format *The Day I Became Strong*, which has its origins in the Strong Stories for Strong Children workshops (see also Götz in this issue) and the Storytelling Club (see also Taher et al. in this issue), tells of experiences of strength in children's everyday lives. The individual episodes are based on the true experiences of a child, and were recounted in response to the question: “When

did you notice that you are strong?” These strong stories are about, for example, a boy overcoming his feelings of jealousy towards his new baby brother (Egypt), or a girl refusing to accept a pink bicycle which does not suit her (Norway). The aim of the programme is to boost children's self-esteem, and to equip them with strength and strategies for difficult situations. IZI carried out a reception study to investigate whether the format achieves this goal, and how children themselves see the programme. Five episodes from different cultures were selected for the study, to find out whether *The Day I Became Strong* helps to foster resilience.

THE SETTING OF THE STUDY IN GERMANY AND TAIWAN

A total of 108 children of preschool and primary-school age from Germany and Taiwan took part in the study. In Germany, $n = 47^1$ children were filmed watching 4 of the selected episodes (from Germany, Egypt, Norway and Taiwan), in March and April 2018. Before and after viewing, the children, aged from 5 to 11, were questioned in individual interviews about their personal attitudes and possible courses of action in response to particular situations and problems shown to them. They were also asked how appealing they found the individual programmes.

The “after” questionnaire was used to assess any increase in resilience in the form of changes in attitude or different choices of action.

In Taiwan, $n = 61$ children aged 8 to 12² watched 4 of the episodes (from Egypt, Namibia, Norway, and Taiwan) in the context of a screening at the Taiwan International Children's Film Festival. In a standardized questioning, they filled in a questionnaire containing closed questions, before and after viewing. The following article presents the preliminary findings of this study.



Screenshot from *The Day I Became Strong* © Prix Jeunesse/IZI

Ill. 1: *Ilsa and the cherry tree*: the children questioned in the context of an IZI-study remember the protagonist's problem-solving strategy

THE INDIVIDUAL EPISODES FROM A CHILD'S POINT OF VIEW

Germany – *Isa and the cherry tree*

It is the farmer's remark that "the sweetest cherries on top of the tree are only for the birds because human beings can't climb that high" which challenges 8-year-old Isa, a sporty girl, on holiday on a farm in Bavaria. But what do you do when it suddenly becomes more difficult to climb up the tree than expected? For a short moment she is unsure, stuck between branches that do not offer any stability. By changing her perspective, she discovers a different way to climb to the top (Ill. 1).

*Be brave,
be aware of dangers,
and think creatively*

During the viewing some of the children are very tense, and speculate about whether Isa will really be able to make it. Afterwards, 10-year-old Marta recounts: "You did get a bit scared: was she going to fall down or not?" Overall, the protagonist is admired by the children in Germany for her courage and competence. Seven-year-old Tina liked the story "very much", especially the fact "that she can climb up into this cherry tree, and that she can climb back down again, because it isn't that easy." The crucial aspects for the children are the protagonist's determination and self-confidence: "She reached the goal she wanted to" (Nils, age 8). The message Lara (age 8) took away from the programme was: "If you want something then you can do it." At the same time the children realise "that the girl wasn't actually allowed to go right up to the top of the tree," and they think about how they would

have acted: "First I would have asked whether I was allowed to go up there" (Adnan, age 8), because "it could have been dangerous" (Annika, age 9). This makes it all the more important that there is a happy ending, "that she didn't fall out of the tree and didn't fall down" (Ufuk, age 7).

The children questioned remember the protagonist's problem-solving strategy. Hannah (age 8), for example, says: "What I liked about it was that she thought about why you couldn't get there, and then she tried out a way to get there."

One thing that changes as a result of the programme is the children's attitude to what is important when climbing a tree. The key thing is not so much not to be scared, but to "always hold on tightly". After the programme, three quarters of the children are aware of this safety strategy.

Taiwan – *Turtle girl*

A 10-year-old girl who loves turtles realises that she herself is like a turtle: when her parents fight, she blocks her ears and hides in her shell. The stress of her parents' fighting is taking its toll on her schoolwork and her life. She is finding it more and more unbearable. One day, when her parents are shut up in their room squabbling, she walks up to the

door, summons up the courage, opens it, and shouts at her parents, telling them how she feels. They have a long talk. This changes the situation and the parents decide to separate. Not easy, but the best thing for all of them.

*Tell your parents about your
feelings*

In their feedback on this episode from Taiwan, the children express admiration and respect for the courage the protagonist shows (Ill. 2). For example, Emin (age 8) thinks it is great "that the girl was brave enough to say: 'Stop, you mustn't fight'". The children realise that the protagonist is competent at perceiving her own feelings and communicating these feelings, and also at understanding those of her parents. Eight-year-old Jana was impressed "that the girl said: I don't like it when you fight, and it's better if you separate". The protagonist's honest behaviour encourages her parents to actively tackle their problem. She "taught her parents not to fight any more" (Till, age 7). The story connects with the children's own experiences. 10-year-old John, for example, says that his mother and father are also separated. The children very much appreciate the fact that the



Screenshot from *The Day I Became a Strong* © Pixi, Innesse/IZI

Ill. 3: *I'm not a pink bike girl*: the protagonist feels strong after telling her father that a pink bike doesn't suit her

parents give me a present which I don't like". While children assume before viewing the programme that it is always better to say nothing, afterwards 70% of the children in Germany and 61% of those in Taiwan can imagine that it might also make sense to politely explain to their parents why they aren't so keen on a present. In both countries the children feel more certain, after viewing the programme, that it is important to perceive and communicate their feelings honestly.

reality of children's lives is dealt with authentically: "Because I found it so honest: sometimes things aren't that good in the world and in life, and sometimes in life you have to cry" (Hannah, age 8). At the same time, they enjoy the moments of relief: it was important to 6-year-old Veronika that the girl in the film was not alone with her problem, but "that she was always with her friends". The protagonist's pet is also crucial for many children. Seven-year-old Larissa, for example, is impressed "that she has this turtle, and that she cleans it with a toothbrush, that's very cool". These moments in the stories of strength are enjoyable and insert humour into what are sometimes stressful situations for children.

The before-and-after test makes it clear that the story of *Turtle girl* showed children in Germany and Taiwan the importance of communicating their feelings, and talking to their parents about it if they are sad.

Norway – *I'm not a pink bike girl*

Anna is confronted with a gender categorisation she hasn't experienced before. She looks forward to getting a new bike from her father, but he gives her a pink bike, which instantly makes her feel uncomfortable. At first Anna does not know why, but when she swaps the

bike with her best friend's bike, she realises she is not a "pink bike girl". In this situation, she develops self-esteem and even finds a way to tell her father about it and make him see who she actually is (Ill. 3).

Communicate your feelings honestly

What the children find "really good" about this story from the far north of Norway is "that she said that pink wasn't the right colour for her" (Lukas, age 8). They recognise the moment of self-awareness, or, as 7-year-old Tina puts it: "That she knows (...) that she doesn't like pink (...), she's aware of her feelings and so on". Also crucial for some children was the behaviour of the girl's (male) best friend, who offers a way out of the emotional crisis: "Then they swapped her bike, and then she felt that everything was really good again" (Julia, age 7).

The children very much enjoyed the role of the father, the fact "that the dad understands what she means" (Erik, age 7), and "that the father wasn't angry that she had a different bike" (Lara, age 8).

Changes in attitude towards more resilient behaviour appear in the item "When

Egypt – *The day I became a big brother*

Eight-year-old Ahmet has a new baby brother and suddenly has mixed feelings about the new situation (Ill. 4). He is jealous and unsure if he likes how his family has changed. When he has to take care of his little brother one day, he first feels challenged by this task, but then decides for himself that he wants to take care of this little human being (Ill. 5). By overcoming his greatest challenge, changing a full and stinky nappy, he puts his own decision into practice: to become a big brother – and a real man.

It is OK to have mixed feelings

In their statements on this story from Egypt, the children particularly emphasise the fact that the protagonist of the film develops in a positive way. Many of the respondents refer to his emotions, e.g. 7-year-old Luna: "Yes, at first he was jealous, but (...) then he got used to it and then he was really nice (...), then he got nicer and nicer." In the course of his story of strength, the boy learns to be aware of his mixed feelings and to deal with them. At the beginning he is perceived by the children as sad and envious, and towards the end of the film "he has somehow understood that he doesn't have to be jealous any



I started feeling that my parents totally changed...



that I am responsible for him and I am his older brother.

Screenshots from *The Day I Became a Big Brother* © Prix Jeunesse/IZI

Ill. 4 and 5: *The day I became a big brother*: in the course of his story of strength, the boy learns to be aware of his mixed feelings and to deal with them, and decides to become a responsible big brother

more" (Veronika, age 6). In the eyes of the children, the protagonist undergoes a positive development into a real, helpful big brother, "because the brother realised that he was now responsible for his little brother, and he then showed responsibility" (Jakob, age 9). The children think it is great that the boy has become aware of his role as big brother, that he assumes responsibility and, in the end, helps out by changing his little sibling's nappy. Eight-year-old Nils was particularly impressed by the fact "that he felt that his brother needed him". When asked, before viewing the film, what they think it is like "When you get a little brother or sister (...)", the children in both Germany and Taiwan tend to give the socially desirable but unrealistic answer: "You are happy and

thankful and you can understand that your parents have less time for you." After viewing the episode, more and more children see that one might also become a little jealous, and feel rejected or demoted. Being able to perceive one's own emotions is an important part of building resilience; it can, for example, help to avoid suppressed aggression. An even clearer change is apparent in attitudes to the question of who should change a baby's nappies: only women and girls, or boys and men too? In Germany, surprisingly, a third of the children were sure this was only a job for women. This changed after viewing the programme: the children now believe that boys and men can also perform this task.

CAN A CHILDREN'S PROGRAMME PROMOTE RESILIENCE?

The preliminary findings of this study already show that the format *The Day I Became a Big Brother* is very well received by children. They get actively involved as they watch, they imagine being the characters, they obviously experience the exciting moments very intensely, and they think about how they would have acted. Many children see the value of determination, an awareness of dangers, and problem-solving strategies, and develop their own strategies for how they would have dealt with the situation depicted. The message they take away is that it is important and right to be aware of their own feelings and to express these (politely) to other people. This boost in certain aspects of the protective factors (see also Fröhlich-Gildhoff & Rönnau-Böse in this issue) is also shown by an increase in one of the central items for resilience: after viewing the programme, children in Germany and Taiwan are more inclined to believe that "children can master really difficult situations". An important step towards resilience.

NOTES

¹ 23 girls and 24 boys from 3 after-school clubs and a kindergarten in Bavaria took part in the study. All the first names given for the respondents are pseudonyms.

² 33 girls and 28 boys filled in a questionnaire before and after the screening.

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