

Universities are important. In modern, thriving democracies, we need high-level skills. In a cut-throat, globalised world, we need high-level skills to avoid falling behind.

As a nation, we need to aspire to be brilliant, especially in regard to knowledge. We have aspirations to shoot for the stars that begin many years before tertiary.

We have challenges of poverty and inequality, development and growth. We need people to take us into a future no one has ever lived. We need to imagine, plan,

dent paper again, for satirising our vice-chancellor and saying women had something called a clitoris.

There were contradictions. Knowledge opened eyes to critique. Innovative courses and progressive lecturers revealed power relations and gave flashes of an African future. We organised for change.

"Liberal" universities gave more space than BJ Vorster liked.

Then 1976 came. The country slid into a different future, costing the blood of brave young people, largely in the Black

nique, not always well handled, sometimes driven by financial considerations.

Access is slowly being straightened out. Most entrants to university are black. Yet poor basic education means that only half of black pupils get to matric, many fail, a dismal 12 percent go on to tertiary, compared with about 60 percent of white kids who nearly all matriculate.

Demographics have shifted, though race is sadly still a dynamic. How do you identify real talent? Universities have

Knowledge

Alexandra and the University burg every da

out of money. Many students hungry, sleep in computer is convince Gogo that a R45 000 not make you rich. How do you top or books?

Riots over financial exclusions reflect a life of pain to disappear, an alternative. More positively, students get and nights hoping for ad

Children make themselves heard

YUMNA MARTIN AND MIKE RAHFALDT

IT'S A crisp, winter afternoon in Lebowakgomo, a township outside of Polokwane. A group of 15 high school pupils sit in a circle, shooting questioning glances at one another. It's just about time to wrap up the final day of a training workshop aimed at giving young people the tools and skills to produce their own radio shows.

At the end of each day, the young reporters-in-training are called upon to reflect on their experiences.

The first time 15-year-old Thoriso Tladi was asked to speak in front of the group she was close to tears. It was a terrifying and unimaginable act — one that many young people dread.

But not for long. After a week of radio training, Thoriso wasn't afraid to talk. In fact, she was eager. She used every opportunity she saw to make her voice heard.

She said the radio training built her confidence, and encouraged her to express her opinion.

"It was really nice that we got to share our ideas with each other and expose our talents."

Thoriso is one of 15 youth radio reporters trained by the Children's Radio Foundation at community radio station Greater Lebowakgomo FM. In partnership with UN Children's Fund in South Africa and Limpopo's Department of Education GEM/BEM clubs, the weekly radio show offers a platform for young people to share their views about what is happening in their community. During the workshops they are taught how to research, debate, create and structure stories, interview, and learn how to turn these elements into radio broadcasts.

After a week of training, the young reporters in Lebowakgomo were ready to produce their first show for broadcast on the radio station. They chose to speak about gangsterism in



NEW VOICES: Children's participation in the making of radio programmes can create spaces through which mutual trust and respect can be fostered with adults.

PICTURE: ABAQOPHI BAKWAZISZE ABAKHANGAYO CHILDREN'S RADIO PROJECT / HELEN MEINTJES

their schools.

In their 30-minute broadcast, the group shared views about how gangs affect young people's chances of getting a good education.

They interviewed several members of the community, including Lebowakgomo's police captain and a former young gangster. They asked nuanced questions from their own perspectives as young people, as the primary stakeholders in the matter.

Children account for 39 percent of South Africa's population, yet they seldom make the news.

Media Monitoring Africa's research on how children are portrayed in 13 major South African newspapers showed that children's voices were heard in only 2 percent of all news stories monitored last year.

Many journalists argue that children are difficult to access. The practical, ethical and legal framework in place is there to protect young people

from exploitation, but are often seen by journalists as impediments to getting a child's point of view.

When children's views do feature in the news, they are rarely given the opportunity to express themselves at length.

Initiatives such as Greater Lebowakgomo FM's youth show allow young people to create content that brims with honest, authentic feeling, that is about young people, for young people, and created by young people.

It allows listeners to hear directly from young people about the issues that matter to them. Sustainable long-term youth media projects break the traditional media stereotype of framing young people as victims, and balance out the dominant adult point of view.

They create a space where young people can speak freely, and where their peers and the wider community can share, listen, and learn in

meaningful ways.

Training young people in media requires more than just teaching technical skills. Before you can teach children to produce their own media content, you need to create a safe space where they feel free to express their thoughts and opinions and where their contributions are seen as relevant and valuable.

Confidence and communication skills are developed at the same time.

Fifteen-year-old Mashoto Mphahle experienced that in the workshop. "For the first time in my life, I feel like I can express myself, and really get out of my shell."

Actively engaging young people in media and giving them space to be both producers and consumers of media play a key role in realising the rights of children and putting these rights into action. It encourages young people to not only question, reflect, listen, and learn in front of the mic, but to do the same in their classrooms, homes, and their larger community.

Diane Dikobo, a 16-year-old from Lebowakgomo expressed this need: "The workshop, for me, was a platform to show us what we can do, and to teach us how to improve on things we thought we couldn't do. The shows will also be a way to show other young people that they can talk about these issues, too."

Children are not characters to be used to substantiate news. They are able to fill diverse roles and experience many issues featured in the media, offering valuable perspectives and experiences. It's about time we listened.

● Yumna Martin is a trainer and producer for the Children's Radio Foundation, and Mike Rahfaldt is its executive director. The foundation is featured in *South African Child Gauge 2011*, which was released this week by the Children's Institute, UCT.