

'Everything is negative': Schoolteachers' perceptions of news coverage of education

Abstract

Although education is a staple of news coverage, the reporting of school-based education rarely receives attention within journalism and media studies. Scholars in other areas, however, have argued that news coverage of education is highly influential and should be examined. The research consensus has been that education coverage is mostly negative and further, that teachers are frequently portrayed as to blame for perceived shortcomings in school systems. Such coverage is said to concern and affect schoolteachers. However, to date, very few studies have canvassed teachers' attitudes towards the reporting of education. This article contributes to this under-researched area by providing the results of a series of interviews with 25 Australian schoolteachers and principals about their perceptions of news coverage of education. The vast majority of the teachers interviewed considered news about schooling and teachers to be predominantly, and unfairly, critical. They described news reporting of education as frequently inaccurate and generally superficial. Many expressed a distrust of journalists and were wary about being interviewed. The implications of these findings are discussed and recommendations for journalism practice and journalism education outlined.

Keywords: news influence, education, credibility, public opinion, journalism (profession)

Introduction

News about school-based (K-12) education appears regularly in media coverage

around the world. Perceived to be of interest to the high numbers of parents among media audiences, education has, in recent years, “grown in prestige and editorial importance to become one of the top three or four areas of news coverage”, according to British researchers (Hargreaves et al., 2007: 5). Recognising the prevalence and influence of such coverage, a growing number of researchers in the field of education (Liu and Tsao, 2013; MacMillan, 2002; Stack, 2006; Thomas, 2006) have considered the reporting of education in countries including Britain, Australia, the United States, Canada and Taiwan. More recently, a smaller group of scholars (Alhamdan et al., 2014, Cohen, 2010; Shine, 2013a; Zemke, 2007) have focused on the portrayal of schoolteachers in the news. However, very few studies have examined teachers’ attitudes to the reporting of education. This article aims to contribute to this area by presenting the findings of a series of interviews with Australian schoolteachers and principals. Undertaken in 2015 and 2016, the study was guided by the following research question: How do Australian teachers perceive news coverage of education?

Concerns about the reporting of education have been documented in research from several countries, including the United States (Gerstl-Pepin, 2002), Britain (Hargreaves et al., 2007, Wallace, 2007), Canada (Stack, 2006) and Australia (Mockler, 2012). In this and other related research, the portrayal of teachers has emerged as a key issue and a number of researchers (Cohen, 2010; Shine, 2015a; Zemke, 2007) have called for more attention to be devoted to this field of inquiry. The pertinent literature, outlined below, is provided by way of background before the article describes the key themes to emerge from the teacher interviews. These are then contextualised within the relevant literature

in both media studies and education.

Background

Researchers have examined the reporting of a broad range of news topics including coverage of the environment (Hurlimann and Dolnicar, 2012; Major and Atwood, 2004), elections (Goss, 2003), war (Aday, 2010), finance (Knowles, Phillips and Lidberg, 2013), science (Machill, Beiler and Schmutz, 2006) and health (Imison and Chapman, 2012). The reporting of education though, has generally been overlooked within journalism and media studies. While journalism education has often been the subject of research, studies about the reporting of school-based education are rare. In Australia, a review of research published in *Australian Journalism Review* over 11 years (2000-2010) identified no articles about the reporting of school-based education (Hanusch, English and Fynes-Clinton, 2011). This lack of attention to, and awareness of, education reporting is also highlighted in the omission of education coverage as an entry in *A Companion to the Australian Media* (Griffen-Foley, 2014) which includes sections devoted to numerous areas of reporting including crime, disability, elections, environment, food, health and medical, celebrity, astrology, and travel. With few exceptions (Greenberg, 2004) the international situation appears no different.

Although it has rarely been considered in media studies, news coverage of education has increasingly been the subject of research in the field of education. Some researchers have considered the topic in relatively broad terms (Hargreaves et al., 2007; MacMillan, 2002) while others have examined the reporting of specific issues such as the release of the results of standardised

testing (Shine, 2013b; Stack, 2006; Warmington and Murphy, 2004), curriculum review (Thomas, 2002) or changes to educational policy (Blackmore and Thorpe, 2003; Thomas, 2003). Regardless of the focus, research in this area has argued that news coverage is highly influential (Snyder, 2008; Thomson, 2004; Warburton and Saunders, 1996). According to Stack (2006: 65) the news media plays “a central role in determining the issues that are debated and ultimately how policymakers and the public interpret these issues”. This is significant given that most of the research in this area has concluded that news coverage of education tends to be negative, superficial and preoccupied with testing and standards (Berliner and Biddle, 1995; Shine, 2013a; Thomas, 2003). School systems, particularly government-run systems, are often portrayed in the news as deficient, and teachers are frequently targeted as to blame for a perceived decline in educational standards (Cohen, 2010; Keogh and Garrick, 2011; Shine, 2015a). Various criticisms have been leveled at teachers, according to the research, with descriptions ranging from “incompetent” (MacMillan, 2002: 30) to “untrustworthy” and “intransigent” (Thomas 2006: 218) and “low-achievers” (Shine, 2015b: 509). Goldstein (2015: 5) argues the ongoing public questioning and criticism of teachers is so prevalent and intense that public school teaching has become “the most controversial profession in America”. Goldstein (2015: 8) further claims teachers are under attack from a “media war”, citing the example of a Newsweek cover story from 2010 entitled ‘The Key to Saving American Education’ that showed an image of a blackboard with a single phrase written over and over again: ‘We must fire bad teachers’.

The impact of such coverage on teachers has rarely been directly examined. While a limited number of studies (Blackmore and Thorpe, 2003;

Hargreaves et al., 2007; Liu and Tsao, 2013) have sought teacher responses to news coverage, most of what is known about teachers' reactions to news has emerged from research that has considered other issues such as teacher retention (Fetherston and Lummis, 2012) or policy change (Griffiths, Vidovich and Chapman, 2008). In Australia, teachers have reported that news coverage regarding schools and teaching can affect their relationships with friends, family and the wider community (Blackmore and Thorpe, 2003). Furthermore, the impact of news coverage is such that some teachers have named misleading and negative reporting of educational issues as a factor in their decision to leave the profession (Fetherston and Lummis, 2012).

Around the time the interviews took place, school-based education featured particularly prominently in the news in Australia. Equity in education funding had, for several years, been a major political issue and the subject of extensive, ongoing news coverage (Shine, 2016). Teacher quality was also a recurring topic of news coverage and a federal government review of teacher education had recently taken place. Standardised testing continued to receive media attention as teacher unions maintained their opposition to the publication of national school testing results on the federal government's myschool website, and concerns about the effects of testing on students intensified. News about teacher shortages, particularly in areas such as science and maths, also appeared regularly.

Method

The teachers interviewed for the study were contacted through professional

associations or word-of-mouth. The final group comprised 14 female and 11 male teachers from four Australian states. Seven were from New South Wales, six from Queensland, six from Western Australia and six from Victoria. These states were chosen as they are the most populous Australian states. Four of the teachers were from regional or rural areas. Of the 25 teachers who took part, 18 worked at high schools (catering for students aged 12-18) and seven were based in primary schools (catering for students aged 4-11). The majority of the participants (19) were from publicly funded government schools but the sample also included six teachers from the private or independent sector. These were included to see whether teachers from the private system had different perspectives to those who worked in public schools. Nine principals were also included because principals are generally more likely to engage with journalists and news media outlets than schoolteachers. The inclusion of the principals also allowed for comparisons to be made between the perspectives of teachers and principals. Six of the principals were men; three were women. The project was approved by the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee and all participants received an information sheet, and signed a consent form before their interview.

The study was guided by the following research question: How do Australian teachers perceive news coverage of education? A list of open-ended questions was prepared and these were posed to all respondents to allow for comparisons to be made and frequency of occurrence of major themes to be calculated. Other questions were added if deemed necessary, according to individual responses. The author conducted all of the interviews, which took place during 2015 and early 2016. Although most of the semi structured

interviews (17) were conducted over the phone they were lengthy, usually about one hour in duration, and generated a rich source of data for analysis. The interviews were transcribed and subsequently coded and analysed using the qualitative software Nvivo to identify themes and sub-themes and develop inductively derived theory. The analysis occurred in tandem with the interviews and the interviewing process concluded when theoretical saturation (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) was achieved. All of the interviews were audio recorded. They were subsequently transcribed and de-identified. As a way of distinguishing the participants each of the teachers was assigned a random number ranging from 1 to 25.

To elicit important background information the participants were first asked about their news habits. Almost all said they watched, read or listened to news daily. All of the teachers said that they regularly consumed news. When asked to specify from where they got their news, the majority of the teachers named major mainstream metropolitan news organisations. The most popular source for news was the major public national broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Commission, with 17 of the 25 participants (68 per cent) saying they listened to the news on ABC radio or watched ABC television news, while three of the participants regularly watched news on the other public broadcaster, SBS. About 40 per cent of the teachers said they regularly watched commercial television news. Most of the teachers said they regularly read or at least “skimmed through” their local metropolitan newspaper. Fairfax’s *The Sydney Morning Herald* was the most commonly read newspaper (6) followed by the News Limited national broadsheet, *The Australian* (5) and the Brisbane based *The Courier Mail* (5), *The Age* in Melbourne (3) and its tabloid counterpart,

Herald Sun (2), *The West Australian* (2), *The Guardian Australia* (2) and Sydney's *The Daily Telegraph* (1). A relatively low number (4) said they got their news from social media. All of the participants said they paid particular attention to news about schools and teachers.

This article focuses on the key themes to emerge about the nature of the coverage of education in the Australian news media. Generally, there was a remarkably high level of agreement among the respondents, regardless of whether they were principals or teachers, from primary or secondary schools, or from the public or private sector. The major themes are outlined below and relevant quotes from participants provided to illustrate and support these.

Findings and discussion

'Everything is negative'

All of but one of the 25 teachers interviewed commented on perceived negativity in news coverage about the Australian school-based education system. Furthermore, a very high proportion (88 per cent) of the participants said that they believed the reporting of schools and schooling was predominantly negative. This negativity was often evident in the reporting of results from the Australian national standardised tests known as NAPLAN and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests, teachers said, as the coverage tended to focus on decline and comparisons. Such reporting generally presented a "doom and gloom scenario," for the education system, according to a participant. "It's represented as bad... literacy results are declining and young people today are illiterate and can't spell," she said. Another teacher believed

that news about schools was often based on politicians' responses to test results. "I think the newspapers are really good at saying 'the minister says we need better teacher training or NAPLAN shows that we have stagnated'," he said. A teacher from a Queensland government school acknowledged that from "time to time" good stories about schools did appear but said that most the coverage was "shock, horror, look at all these dreadful things that are happening in the school system".

Others believed the influence resulted from the cumulative effect of repeated – usually negative - news coverage of an issue. "Whether or not they believe an individual story I think there is a general perception that is created by constant media stories about what is going wrong," was one comment. Another participant made a similar point in relation to the reporting of test results:

If you have the PISA results thrust at you all the time and somebody saying, 'not only are we worse compared to every other country in the world but also we're getting worse compared to ourselves 10 years ago', that's got to stick.

The teachers argued the consistently negative portrayal presented in major news outlets was unfair and inaccurate, and that the positive elements tended to be ignored. One cited the selective reporting of testing results as an example:

When the NAPLAN data was published our federal minister had quite a lot of material published about how we were slipping down the league tables, but last year when our 15 year olds were rated the 5th top all rounders (in PISA)...that barely got a squeak.

Several teachers said that they accepted that reporting of education had to include negative stories. Some argued that news outlets had a responsibility to expose the deficiencies and issues with the education system. However, the participants consistently said that the coverage lacked balance. To many it seemed that the major commercial news outlets were only interested in negative

news. As one said: "What makes news is bad news. Why don't the journalists track the good stories down? They're there." Most of the teachers believed members of the public, particularly parents, would welcome more positive news about schools and students: "Everything is negative and I think if we change the perspective you'd draw a lot of people back in, to the good news stories, particularly with education."

While most of the teachers acknowledged there were problems with the Australian school system, they believed it was generally performing well, describing it as "world class" and "one of the best of in the world". One teacher argued that, in her experience, Australia compared favourably with other countries: "I've worked on three different continents...and I think we have a brilliant education system that is really undersold through our media."

A number of the teachers made the point that negative news coverage of schools usually appeared in the bigger news outlets such as the daily city newspapers and commercial televisions news and that the situation regarding smaller news organisations, particularly local newspapers, was quite different. "Read a local paper and you will find good news about schools everywhere," according to one of the participants. Others said that local papers welcomed contributions from schools because they did not have the resources to produce enough material for their publications. Many of the teachers were under the impression that the bigger news outlets were not interested in positive news about schools, as evident in this comment: "If someone was doing something really wonderful...I can't imagine someone saying, 'let's call the bigger papers or one of the news stations'."

The teachers' perception that news coverage of education is predominantly negative aligns with a large body of research that has identified the prevalence of negative stories in news reporting. The preference for negative over positive news was documented in the seminal Galtung and Ruge (1965) study of foreign news and has since been confirmed by a number of researchers (Schudson, 2011; Shoemaker and Cohen, 2006), including Harcup and O'Neill (2001, 2016) who, in twice reviewing the original Galtung and Ruge news values, concluded that "bad news" remained a key requirement in contemporary news selection.

Researchers in education who have studied news content (Shine, 2013a; Baroutsis, 2016; Thomas, 2006) have also noted the predominantly negative tone of the coverage. Among the first to point to this were Berliner and Biddle (1995: 10) who argued the news media had effectively manufactured a crisis through "distorted and hostile" reporting of the American educational system. Similar findings have emerged from Britain in studies of tabloid newspapers (Baker, 1994, Macmillan, 2010). Other related research (Shine, 2015a; Baroutsis and Lingard, 2017; Wallace, 2007) has noted a particular recent focus on testing, performance and accountability in the reporting of education, and a repeated questioning of standards. Consistent with the findings reported here, a recent Australian study (Baroutsis, 2016) that considered news coverage of standardised testing also found that metropolitan news outlets generally framed coverage negatively, while the reporting in local and regional news organisations tended to be more balanced. This may be due to the fact that teachers and/or principals are more likely to have an ongoing relationship with a local or regional news journalist or editor. It may also be that local news outlets

generally adopt a less adversarial approach to dealing with schools and teachers than do their metropolitan counterparts.

'Teachers are to blame'

Another dominant theme to emerge from the interviews was the perception that news coverage tended to be critical of teachers. A high number of the teachers interviewed (84 per cent) said they believed teachers were portrayed unfavourably in news coverage of education. Poor performance was considered to be most common criticism of teachers. Almost of the teachers said that they felt that news coverage of education unfairly attributed deficiencies or problems in education to teachers. "If things go wrong, teachers are ultimately to blame," was one comment. Several participants referred to the prevalence of news coverage that portrayed teachers as not well educated or trained, and/or as low achievers academically. "We continually hear about low entrance scores to get into teaching," said one. "We continually hear about teacher under performance." Another said that teachers were typically represented in one of two ways: "They are either rabid unionists or people who could not get a better job."

Teachers noted that cases of teacher misconduct, whereby, for example, a teacher had committed a crime or had an improper relationship with a student, invariably attracted intense news media attention. Some of those interviewed believed that teachers were treated differently to other professionals in news coverage, and were subjected to greater scrutiny and pressure. For one participant this was exemplified in the use of league tables to rank schools. "We don't make league tables of lawyers or journalists. We don't see other public service organisations looked at in this way." Another made a similar point. "What I do each day is questioned at every level," she said. "People don't question

doctors in the same way.” The few teachers who did not perceive news coverage of teachers as critical did not see it as positive either. For example, one (T16) described the news portrayal of teachers as “indifferent” while another (T2) said she did not believe that teachers had an image in the media, adding: “How sad is that?”

Research from Britain has questioned the claim that teachers are routinely criticised in the news, finding that “contrary to teachers’ almost unanimous perceptions, there was much explicitly supportive or positive reporting of teachers” in a large sample of news from the 2000s (Hargreaves et al., 2007, 5). However, Goldstein (2015: 9) offers a starkly different perspective about coverage in the United States, claiming that the news media repeats “ad nauseam, anecdotes” about the worst types of teachers “(such as “rubber room” teachers, who collect pay, sometimes for years, while awaiting termination hearings on accusations of corporal punishment or alcoholism)”. Most of the related research confirms that teachers do often come under attack in the news but contends that the coverage tends to centre around performance, directing blame at teachers for a perceived decline in educational standards (Cohen, 2010; Shine, 2015a; Thomas, 2011). The focus on performance is likely linked to accountability measures such as large-scale testing that have been introduced in many developed countries. Such measures, combined with a focus on improving teacher quality, have put teachers under increased pressure, intensified their role and affected morale (Ball, 2010; Day, 2012; Dinham, 2013). Related news coverage is said to compound the problem (Hattam, Prosser, and Brady, 2009; Shine, 2015a; Thomas, 2011). This has been confirmed by Australian teachers who have reported “feeling attacked” and in “a constant state of defence of the

profession” (Blackmore and Thorpe, 2003: 583, 588) due to news media representations.

‘Very often, there’s a spin on it’

When asked about their views on the accuracy of news coverage of education, 60 per cent described it as inaccurate and/or unbalanced. The views ranged from participants who considered it strongly and overtly inaccurate to those who said that the reporting generally contained elements of truth but that the selection of material for publication tended to reveal a bias or agenda on the part of the journalist or media outlet. Some organisations, namely the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), were considered more trustworthy and accurate than others. Overall, participants were most skeptical about newspapers, or “the press”, and a more than one-quarter of the teachers singled out “the Murdoch press” as particularly likely to publish inaccurate or biased information.

Several of the teachers attributed clear cases of inaccuracy to journalists not doing their job properly. One said: “I have seen articles and news reports that were blatantly incorrect. It’s as if the journalist spoke to one source and never even thought to check a website to see if the facts and figures were right.” Another said reporters tended to make “sweeping generalisations” about educational issues. Such generalisations were a strong source of frustration for one, who described his reaction to journalists reporting that standards of teaching and education are in decline.

From time to time I’ve taken issue with such people and emailed them and said, ‘where is your evidence of this? You present this as though it is an incontestable fact. You did not write ‘some people think that standards have been falling’.

In some cases, perceptions about accuracy in coverage were based on the participants' own interactions with journalists, which were almost always characterised as negative. A principal, who had been interviewed on multiple occasions, said he had developed a strong preference for live TV or radio interviews because the content could not be edited. "With print journalists you never know what you are going to get," he said. Others reported similar experiences, including a teacher who said she had become more aware of deficiencies in coverage after being interviewed.

Once you have been quoted yourself you are really aware of how inaccurate they are. In my last interview I spoke to the journalist for about an hour and I was quoted in one paragraph and she managed to misquote me.

Another participant said to ensure accuracy she generally tried to bypass reporters entirely by writing her own stories and submitting them to the local newspaper.

Others described the situation as more complex and variable, saying the issue was more about a lack of balance in the coverage. "I would not say it is inaccurate but if you use a bit of critical literacy you can see what sort of spin they [the journalists] are trying to put on the situation," said a principal. Another teacher said that while some of the facts were generally accurate, the coverage was influenced by the selection of material and the way it was put together. Some believed reporters sought the quotes and the information they needed to present a certain story. "Very often there's a spin on it. You can identify the journalists who write with a bias. They select the data, the information they want to present to justify their argument," said one.

Despite their frustration at perceived inaccuracies in coverage, very few of the teachers or principals were seeking to be interviewed by journalists. When asked if they believed teachers should be able to speak freely to the news media, more than one-third of the participants 25 responded 'no'. A further 30 per cent stipulated that teachers and principals should only deal with journalists after undergoing formal media training. "I've seen people torn apart by journalists because they are unprepared," said one principal. "If we're going to let teachers talk to journalists then we need to give them some necessary skills and abilities." Such distrust of journalists can have significant implications for news coverage and this is discussed in more detail later in the paper.

'No one seems to tell the real story'

More than half of the teachers interviewed (56 per cent) said that they believed news coverage of education did not reflect the realities of life in the classroom. The reporting of education was generally perceived to be superficial, based on what one principal described as "single issue stuff". The stories often presented a series of facts, generally related to statistics, but rarely seemed to look into the reasons behind what was happening in education. Overall, the teachers believed the reporting did not adequately capture the realities of contemporary teaching and learning. To the participants, it seemed that journalists rarely seemed to understand the complexities of the issues in education, as illustrated by this statement: "They seem to think education is black or white. There is a multitude of issues that need to be dealt with sensitively from different angles. I don't see a lot of that in education journalism."

However, journalists were not considered solely to blame for shortcomings in the reporting. Some participants attributed the perceived lack of

reality in the coverage to the way schools tended to interact with the news media, which was usually through government departments. “I think anything that we see on the news about education is incredibly superficial and simplistic,” said one teacher. “It’s not the real world at all. It’s been set up and the department sets it up, not the journalists.”

Other factors were also seen to contribute to the limitations of the news coverage. For example, one of the participants believed teachers were generally not good at explaining their role. A number of others recognised that it was inherently difficult to adequately capture the nature of schools and teaching. One of the teachers said she thought it was hard for journalists to comprehend how the education sector worked, adding: “If you have not worked in our system, it’s a different world and a different language.”

For some teachers a particular frustration related to news coverage about the teaching role. Such coverage, they believed, generally failed to portray the true nature of contemporary teaching. A principal argued that there was “an absolute failure” on the part of the news media to recognise the complexity of teachers’ work. “Teachers are not going to school, they are going to work and it’s highly complex and highly technological,” she said. Others referred to a lack of coverage about how teaching had changed:

I personally have not seen any news reports that have told me the reality of the changing face of teaching. It’s very different place from 20 years ago. The pace is much faster. The workload is much increased. Teachers have a lot of demands on their time that they didn’t use to have and no one seems to tell the real story. (T17)

One of the repercussions of such coverage, according to many of the teachers, was that the general public often believed that teachers had a relatively easy job,

worked short hours and had lots of holidays. This was a frequently raised frustration. Almost two thirds of the teachers interviewed referred to community misperceptions about their working hours and holidays. Many said they regularly had to “defend” themselves against comments about teacher holidays and workloads.

Other research (Baker, 1994; Blackmore and Thorpe, 2003; Shine, 2016; Thomas, 2002) has also described news coverage of education as simplistic and lacking context and analysis. One such study, that analysed the reporting of education topics over 20 years in a Western Australian daily newspaper, (Shine, 2013a: 225), concluded the content generally focused on the events of the day and “rarely presented detailed explanations or explorations of issues”. Instead, news coverage of education tends to focus on presenting opposing perspectives on various measures or policies (Shine, 2015a).

In the case of a contentious topic such as standardised testing, the coverage is framed in terms of arguments for and against testing, according to Gerstl-Pepin (2002: 43) who argues such an approach neglects to ask “complex questions surrounding the tests themselves”. For a number of the teachers interviewed here the reporting of testing results was a particular source of frustration. Many claimed that journalists did not understand the national testing system, NAPLAN, and that it was regularly misrepresented.

Implications and recommendations

Recent research has suggested that repeated negative news coverage can have repercussions for teacher workforces. A survey of trainee and newly qualified teachers in the United Kingdom found “teacher bashing in the press” was the second most popular reason named for contemplating quitting, with 30 per cent

of participants referring to the impact of such coverage (Marsh, 2015). Negative and misleading news coverage has also been named as a factor in Australian teachers' decisions to leave the profession (Fetherston and Lummis, 2012). Other research has argued that prospective teachers may be deterred from entering the profession due to the news media's focus on teacher performance and its frequent portrayal of teachers as low achievers (Shine, 2015b). As teacher shortages are a regular and ongoing issue for many countries including Britain, Australia and the United States, this finding is concerning and provides a strong argument for more balance in mainstream news coverage of education.

The perception that news coverage is often biased and/or inaccurate, as described by the teachers, affects the credibility of news, journalists and news outlets. It also contributes to a documented overall lack of trust in journalists (Cushion, 2009; Morales, 2012). Despite the fact that reporters have identified objectivity and balance to be central their role (Stack, 2007), this and other studies suggest that the public believe reporters often present biased stories (Gilde Zúñiga and Hinsley, 2013; Glynn and Huges, 2014). One of the implications of this, as described by some of the teachers in this study, is that members of the public can be wary of reporters and reluctant to be interviewed. This limits the ability of reporters to canvass a wide range of views on various issues and to effectively represent the wider community. In the case of education news, teachers' voices are often absent from the coverage (Cohen, 2010; Shine, 2013a; Thomas, 2006). This is in part due to the fact that they are usually prevented from speaking to the media without approval from their employer. Previous research (Thomas, 2011; Ulmer, 2014) has argued that teachers should be able to regularly contribute to news debates about education and that such

contributions may improve the nature and tone of the coverage. This study suggests, however, that teachers themselves may not be seeking a greater say because they are worried about being misquoted or misrepresented in the public domain.

It would be valuable for future research to seek the perspectives of education reporters and editors on the challenges and limitations of reporting on schools and teaching. According to Schudson (2011), most of the subjectivity in news coverage arises from the structures, routines and limitations of newsgathering, as opposed to personal biases on the part of reporters or editors. Time pressures and deadlines necessarily restrict the amount of research and fact-checking that can take place. Deadlines and space restrictions have an impact and can result in stories that ostensibly meet objectivity requirements with the inclusion of two opposing perspectives. Another consequence of the limitations of daily news production is the tendency for journalists to rely on certain official sources such as politicians, bureaucrats, government employees and academic experts for comment as they are often easily accessible and considered credible and reliable (Deuze, 2007). In the case of reporting of education, research has shown politicians, academics, commentators and union representatives are the dominant sources quoted in news coverage (Shine, 2016; Shine, 2013a; Stack, 2006). If teachers are generally reluctant to be interviewed, as this research suggests, journalists are forced to increasingly rely on official sources to the ultimate detriment of both teachers and the public.

One way to address the perceived shortcomings of reporting in education would be to examine the reporting of education within journalism school curricula. As part of this, students could be provided with information about the

structure and nature of contemporary schooling and introduced to some key issues in education such as the use of standardised testing, and the related research. The prevalence of negativity in mainstream news coverage raised here should be explored within the context of journalism education. For example, journalism students could be asked to consider why news is so often framed negatively, and whether the tendency to focus on the bad is always in the public interest, or indeed, what the public actually wants. A number of studies (Coleman, Morrison and Anthony, 2012; Gans, 2004; Lee and Chyi, 2013; Lowrey, 2009) have argued there is a significant gap between journalists' news values and audience interest. After interviewing news consumers from around the world, Shoemaker and Cohen (2006: 351) found that personal relevance was found to be the most important consideration in the participants' definition of news, and that "in all of the 10 countries, people (including journalists) disagreed at least partially with how the news was selected and presented in their newspapers". According to Coleman, Morrison and Anthony (2012) people are turning to alternative sources for information including Google and Youtube in a desire to find raw, unfiltered information with no bias or agenda. As Lee and Chyi (2013: 817) argue "the fact that most news content is deemed of little value by the public today calls for industry introspection".

Students and journalists could also be encouraged to explore alternative reporting approaches such as solutions journalism. This relatively new model of journalism is defined as rigorous reporting about how people are responding to problems. According to a NiemanReports article (Dyer, 2015), an increasing number of news organisations have adopted this approach, including *The Seattle Times*, which publishes an ongoing solutions journalism series known as

Education Lab that highlights “promising responses to persistent challenges in education”.

This study contends that journalism students, journalists and editors need to be made aware of teachers' perceptions about the flaws and weaknesses in education coverage. Access to teachers is an ongoing issue but journalists can and do interview teachers and should persist in their efforts to do so. They need to earn the trust of teachers by accurately quoting and representing them. They should aim to look beyond the orchestrated education media events and instead aim to provide detailed and contextualised education news that reflects the reality of contemporary schooling and teaching.

Teachers and educators also have a role to play in improving the reporting of education. Despite their misgivings, they must work with journalists to ensure teachers' voices are heard and their roles are appropriately recognised. They need to bring the news media's attention to shortcomings in the education system as well as highlight the many positive elements of schools and schooling. Teachers can help journalists better understand the system and represent it more appropriately and accurately. However, to do so they need to be more available to the news media. To this end, education bureaucracies should adopt a more open and proactive approach to dealing with the news media.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined the dominant themes to emerge from interviews with 25 Australian schoolteachers and principals about their perceptions of news coverage of education. Overall, the teachers were not satisfied with the reporting

of school-based education. Almost all of those interviewed considered news coverage of education to be predominantly negative. While they recognised that there were negative aspects to the school system, they believed that news coverage generally overlooked or ignored the good stories about schools. News coverage was seen to frequently criticise and blame teachers for perceived problems in education, and to portray them as low-achievers. Generally wary about journalists and reluctant to be interviewed, about one third of the participants believed teachers should not speak to journalists, while another third believed teachers and principals needed to be 'protected' from the news media and should undergo formal media training before being interviewed. The teachers and principals were skeptical about accuracy and balance in news coverage of education. Many of them expressed frustration at perceived simplistic reporting that failed to capture the complexities of schooling and teaching.

Journalists have a responsibility to inform the community, particularly in matters of public interest. School-based education is undoubtedly a significant public interest issue for many reasons, including the fact that it is publicly funded. The school system and teachers should be accountable to the community, and subject to news media scrutiny. However, this and other research, suggests that the news media may be focusing on accountability and performance to the detriment of the overall coverage. The teachers interviewed here believe the coverage of education to be unfairly negative about the school system and unfairly critical of teachers. They are concerned, frustrated and even angry about the coverage of education, and generally dissatisfied with what they consider to be superficial and inadequate reporting. While it is recognised that

teachers are likely to be more sensitive to negative news about education than general members of the public, they are also better informed about schools, schooling and teaching than other members of the community, including journalists. Their concerns about negativity, bias, inaccuracies and inadequacies in the coverage warrant attention and point to the need for introspection and change.

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