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Teacher representation in news reporting on standardised testing: A case study from Western Australia.

Abstract:

News media coverage on education plays a “uniquely important role in shaping public opinion”, can influence educational policy, and can affect and concern teachers. Yet, research examining how teachers have been represented in the news is scarce. What is particularly scarce are investigations with a historical dimension. The study reported in this paper is offered as a contribution towards rectifying the deficit and pointing the way towards one of a number of avenues of research that other scholars in the field could take for various contexts (including different countries) and time periods. It is part of a much larger study whose aim was to provide a historical analysis of The West Australian newspaper’s representation of teachers in its reporting of five major educational developments in the State of Western Australia that were the subject of sustained coverage at various times between 1987 and 2007. The specific topic which is the focus of the analysis presented in this paper is “standardized testing”.

Introduction

News media coverage on education plays a “uniquely important role in shaping public opinion” (Warburton and Saunders, 1996, p. 308), can influence educational policy (Lingard and Rawolle 2004, 363; Thomas 2006, 311; Thomson 2004, 252) and can affect teachers who are concerned about a perceived negative focus in coverage of education (Blackmore and Thorpe 2003, 582; Griffiths, Vidovich and Chapman 2008, 169; Porter, 148-149; Schools Council 1990, 30). Yet, research examining how teachers have been represented in the news is scarce. What is particularly scarce are investigations with a historical dimension (Cunningham 1992, 55; Zemke, 247-251; Hargreaves, *et al.* 2007, 20). The study reported in this paper is offered as a contribution towards rectifying the deficit and pointing the way towards one of a number of avenues of research that other scholars in the field could take for various contexts (including different countries) and time periods.

The paper is based on preliminary findings from a much larger study, the only one to date on an Australian newspaper’s representation of schoolteachers. The specific aim of this larger study was to provide a historical analysis of *The West Australian* newspaper’s representation of teachers in its reporting of five major educational developments in the State of Western Australia that were the subject of sustained coverage at various times between 1987 and 2007: ‘unit curriculum’ (1987-1989), ‘industrial dispute’ (1995), ‘standardized testing’ (1997-2001), ‘teacher shortage’ (1999-2007), and ‘outcomes-based education’ (2005-2007). The specific topic which is the focus of the analysis presented in this paper is ‘standardized testing’. While the reporting took on a unique local Western Australian dimension, this topic, as with the other four, is reflective of developments in education across the English-speaking world at the time.

First published in 1833, *The West Australian* newspaper is one of the oldest newspapers in Australia. It appeared as a bi-weekly in 1879, and has been a daily publication since 1885. Being the only local metropolitan daily newspaper servicing Western Australia, it has no direct competition. It is a dominant source of news for the 2.3 million people in the State and the primary source of daily print news, with a weekday readership of 589,000 and a Saturday readership of 904,000 (Australian Press Council 2008, 2-13).

The paper is in three major parts. The first part provides an overview of studies on how teachers have been represented in various bodies of academic literature, with particular reference to the literature on how they have been represented in the press. The second part reports a brief overview on the methodology. The results of the analysis undertaken on the reporting on testing are then presented.

Overview on the Representation of Teachers in the Literature

For many years research about teachers' lives and careers received little attention from academics. In the 1970s, Lortie (1975) noted that although much research in the USA had been dedicated to teaching, very few studies had considered teachers themselves. Cohn and Kottkamp (1993) and Troen and Boles (2003) later went on to provide a more detailed description of the profession and reported that teachers in the US were increasingly feeling overworked and under pressure. In Britain, advances were made in the 1980s by Lyons (1981) and Woods (1981), who considered the motivations, experiences and strategies teachers used in their work. Nevertheless, by 1997, teachers in Britain were considered an occupational group whose lives were still under-researched (Gardner and Cunningham 1997), notwithstanding the work of Ball and Goodson (1985) and Goodson (1992). Only more recently, with work like that of Robinson (2002),

Cunningham and Gardner (2004), Day *et al* (2006) and Galton and MacBeath (2008), has the deficit begun to be addressed.

In Australia, early research by Spaul (1977, 1985) and Spaul and Sullivan (1989) revealed the pressures under which teachers worked at the time. Feminist historians (Kyle 1989; Theobald 1996; Whitehead 2003) made significant contributions regarding the gendered nature of teaching. Further insights have been provided by a body of research portraying the economic, social and cultural contexts of teachers' everyday working environments, and have illustrated how teaching, as in the US and Britain, has changed significantly, with the role of the teacher being more complex, demanding and difficult than it used to be (Gardner and Williamson 2004; Pillay, Goddard and Pilss 2005).

The portrayal of teachers in popular culture constitutes a separate body of literature. Research has concentrated on images of teacher characters in television and film, concluding that they are often depicted in terms of extremes – as either heroes or villains (Ayers 2001; Lowe 2001; Trier 2001). Some have also pointed to the relatively recent phenomenon of the 'teacher as failure' character (Kantor, Kantor, Kantor, Eaton and Kantor 2001; Fisher, Harris and Jarvis 2008). Related research includes an analysis of images of schools, teachers and teaching in rock and pop music (Brehony 1998), while Mitchell and Weber (1999) compared children's drawings of teachers to popular portrayals of them in television, films, books and other forms of media.

A third body of literature has considered the relationship between education and the news media. Research in the 1990s claimed the coverage in news media was superficial and simplistic (Baker, 1994; Lee and Salwen 1994), with Berliner and Biddle (1995) going so far as to say that the news media in the US had "manufactured" a crisis regarding the American government school system. More recent research has focused on the way educational policy has been

portrayed in the news media (Pettigrew and MacLure 1997; Lingard and Rawolle 2004; Warmington and Murphy 2004; Wallace 2007), with four journals dedicating special issues to the topic since 2004: *The Journal of Education Policy* 2004, 19 (3), *The Canadian Journal of Education*, 2006, 29 (1), *Policy Futures in Education*, 2007, (1), and *The Peabody Journal of Education*, 2007, 82 (1).

Turning to research which has specifically considered news coverage of schoolteachers, Baker (1994) concluded that in some of the British tabloids “the message of denigration of schools and teachers is unwavering” (Baker 1994, 293). Similarly, in her analysis of one Australian newspaper’s coverage, Thomas (2003) found that teachers were often positioned negatively. On the other hand, later analyses of press coverage on principals in US, Australian and British newspapers, found they were often “positioned as saviours” (Blackmore and Thomson 2004, 312). This reflected the findings of an earlier study of British newspaper coverage of teachers from the 1950s, 1970s and 1990s, which noted a prevalence of articles about “golden-hearted” (Cunningham 1994, 52) teachers. Another study of the British press concluded in a similar vein that teachers were frequently cast as heroes, “fighting against extraordinary outside pressures on them, the education system and on students”, (Hargreaves, *et al.* 2007, 57).

This is not to overlook negative coverage. In the 1980s, White analysed Australian newspaper coverage of a teachers’ strike and found that those participating were portrayed as denying a fundamental professional characteristic, that of the dedicated provision of a service to the community above all else (White 1984). Zemke (2007, 40), who examined British press coverage of teachers during the 1990s, also found that teachers were subject to high expectations and that the newspapers “came down hard” on those who deviated from moral norms. Teachers

who had sexually, or physically abused, or mistreated, children came under extremely strong criticism and were depicted as demons, villains, or deviants (Hansen 2009). Coverage of this nature, however, has typically been associated with individuals and has not suggested that these negative characteristics could be assigned to teachers overall (Hansen 2009, 345).

Another feature of newspaper reporting is an emphasis on teachers being “fundamentally accountable to the market, consumer demands and the nation” (Zemke 2007, 45). Furthermore, they have frequently been blamed for perceived declining standards of education. This approach dominated the education reportage in a major metropolitan newspaper in the US during 2006 and 2007, and was given precedence over the “caring” role of teachers (Cohen 2010, 106).

Studies of more recent press coverage of teachers suggest that they have been undervalued, underpaid and overburdened. Blackmore and Thomson (2004) found that the British and Australian press portrayed teachers as “doing good but feeling bad, of working too hard and rarely playing, of looking after other people’s children and not their own” (Blackmore and Thomson 2004, 312-313). Similarly, a review of a Chicago newspaper’s coverage in 2006 and 2007 concluded that teachers were portrayed as exhibiting a “deep personal commitment to the work and to the students, even to the point of personal exhaustion” (Cohen 2010, 114). Reportage on school principals in the press in the US highlighted that the work involved “long hours at weekends and nights, high stress, pressure, dealing with conflicting demands and being pulled from one activity to another at a frenetic pace” (Thomson, Blackmore, Sachs and Tregenza 2003, 121).

Methodology

Standardized testing, in the form of written assessment that presents all students with the same tasks and requires the same responses, originates in the early part of the 20th century (Monroe,

1918), but it was not until the early 1980s that it was implemented on a large scale. Usage increased significantly, to the extent that the 1990s was termed “the age of accountability” (Hanushek and Raymond 2005, 306). However, teachers in Australia, the US (Giordano 2005, 191), and England and Wales (Gipps, Brown, McCallum and McAlister 1995, 62-68), have generally rejected moves to introduce standardized testing.

The introduction of standardized testing was the focus of 106 articles in *The West Australian* between 1997 and 2001. Coverage began in *The West Australian* in March 1997, when the Federal Education Minister, David Kemp, called for the introduction of standardized assessment across Australian schools. Later that month, all of the state Education Ministers agreed to introduce state-devised standardized testing for students in Year 3 and Year 5. The large-scale reporting ceased after 2001, at which stage standardized testing was established for the desired age groups across the school system. It remained in place until 2008, when Australian Federal and State Governments decided to introduce nationally-prescribed tests.

The study of the reporting on ‘standardized testing’ in the *West Australian*, which is outlined in the next section of this paper, was conceptualized within the interpretivist paradigm, thus giving it a ‘social science history’ orientation as opposed to one located within in the narrative history tradition. This paradigm places primary importance on the social meanings people attach to the world around them, and how they respond to them. In other words, the perspective one has on each thing, rather than being fixed, can be constantly adjusted and shaped as a result of experience .

The latter position had direct applicability for the analysis undertaken on *The West Australian* newspaper’s perspectives on teachers in its reporting on standardized testing. The assumption was made that the perspectives presented in the reports were ‘constructed’, as

opposed to having some 'objective' reality of their own. Also, it embraced Blackledge and Hunt's (1985, 234) position that perspectives can display a certain amount of stability over a period of time. At the same time, such stability does not necessarily manifest itself indefinitely. Rather, perspectives can change as a result of the responses of others to them. Thus, the approach undertaken in the analysis assumed that the initial perspectives on teachers in the newspaper on each of the topics selected could have remained relatively homogenous throughout the period of coverage as a result of responses to the coverage, but, for the same reason, could also have changed over the period of coverage.

The meaning of the concept of 'perspectives' which is central to the study also needs clarification. Perspectives, within interpretivist theory, are defined as the "frameworks through which people make sense of the world" (Charon 2001, 4). As O'Donoghue (2007, 39) points out, these frameworks can, in turn, be seen as having the following major interrelated strands: Intentions (so it can be asked what the view is on what an individual should aim to do in a particular situation); strategies regarding what an individual should do to achieve these intentions; a view on the significance attached to the intentions and strategies by the individual; and a view on what the individual should expect as a particular set of the outcomes from the pursuit of the intentions and strategies. Finally, there is the idea that one can give reasons for what one has to say on these intentions, strategies, significance and expected outcomes.

Taking cognisance of these four strands led to the generation of the following guiding questions which were posed in relation to the coverage on standardized testing, and appropriately adapted when interrogating the coverage on each of the other four topics:

1. What intentions did *The West Australian* portray as being those which teachers should have in relation to standardized testing and what reasons were given as to why they should have these intentions?
2. What strategies did *The West Australian* portray as being those which teachers should adopt in relation to standardized testing and what reasons were given as to why they should adopt these strategies?
3. What significance did *The West Australian* portray as being that which teachers should attach to their work on standardized testing and what reasons were given as to why this should be the case?
4. What outcomes did *The West Australian* portray as those which teachers should expect from their work on testing and what reasons were given as to why they should expect these outcomes?

As guiding questions these were not formulated as specific questions to be answered. Rather, they were questions which suggested themselves from the particular social science position underpinning the study as being the most productive guides to generate data pertinent to the overall aim. In pursuing them, stability and change in perspectives over time, both within and across topics, were also examined. Also, because the study was conceptualised within the interpretivist paradigm it was recognised that it should be evaluated in terms of ‘trustworthiness’ and its associated criteria of ‘credibility’, ‘transferability’, ‘dependability’ and ‘confirmability’ (Maykut and Morehouse 1994, 146), as opposed to the more positivist criteria of validity and reliability.

Representations of Teachers in Reporting on Standardized Testing in *The West Australian* newspaper

In general, *The West Australian's* coverage of the introduction of standardized testing portrayed teachers as subversives, resistant to accountability measures, opposed to standardized testing, and willing to undermine its introduction. The manner in which it did so will now be considered by elaborating on five propositions generated in relation to these portrayals.

Teachers and schools are to blame for declining educational standards

While some of the reporting indicated that schools and teachers were doing a good job, the coverage overall conveyed the message that educational standards were declining due to inadequate teaching. On 5 September 1997, the then Prime Minister, John Howard, was quoted as saying that studies conducted cast doubt on contemporary “faddish” teaching approaches, and he called for a return to “back-to-basics” in education. Five days later, an opinion piece in the *West Australian* supported these assertions, stating:

School systems have tended to fall prey to educational fads, which had led to silly practices such as not correcting spelling and grammatical errors. A concerted campaign is needed in schools to improve students' English. This means that all teachers should be teachers of English and all should help children to reach better standards.

Another article on 12 January 1998, reported that “teachers are falling into the trap of assuming illiteracy is an individual student problem rather than a problem which affects specific groups”.

The reporting of test results also claimed that teachers were not adequately fulfilling their role. When detailing the results of the first standardized tests, *The West Australian* claimed on 2 December 1998, that one-in-five Year 3 students had “failed to make the grade in reading, writing and spelling in a State-wide literacy tests”. When the newspaper received additional information about the test results the ensuing coverage was even more damning. A page-one article on 8 April 1999, entitled ‘Literacy shock: 120 schools fail the tests’ said that the majority

of the Year 3 students in 120 of 595 primary schools had failed either the reading, writing, or spelling, components of the previous year's tests.

The sense that schools and teachers were under-performing continued in 2000 and 2001, with several articles referring to a need for improvement. In one such article the newspaper quoted the Western Australian Education Minister on 15 March 2000, as saying that the government planned to focus on a "clear improvement in education standards", which would be achieved through such measures as the annual literacy and numeracy tests. Another article on 19 June 2000, outlined the findings of a Federal Government report which claimed that 20 per cent of schoolchildren had inadequate literacy and numeracy skills and needed special attention. It implied that this was due to poor teaching, saying that teachers "needed to pay more attention to parents' concerns".

The message that teachers and schools were to blame for declining educational standards was a dominant theme in the coverage. However, *The West Australian* did publish some articles within the early part of the coverage in 1997 and 1998, which presented a more positive picture. In one such article on 15 September 1997, an academic at Curtin University in Perth described teachers as "very practical people trained to identify what strategies best suited each child". In another, on 8 October 1997, the head of the principals' association was quoted as saying that the results of an international mathematics and science study showed Western Australian schools were going a good job. Such praise for teachers, however, was rare.

Teachers resist accountability measures aimed at improving educational standards because they fear being compared

The sense that teachers would resist accountability measures because they feared being compared to one another and to standardized criteria emerged in 1998. It then continued in 1999 as *The West Australian* campaigned strongly for the right to publish full details of the testing

results. The first reference to teachers being concerned about comparisons arising from test results was published on 20 June 1998, when the newspaper quoted the president of the School Teachers' Union of Western Australia (Teachers' Union) as saying that "teachers were worried that the national tests...would result in unfair comparisons between teachers, students and schools". The message was reiterated a number of times throughout the rest of the year.

On several occasions teachers' fears of comparisons were linked by *The West Australian* to a lack of accountability on their part. For example, an opinion piece on 20 August 1998, published around the time the first tests were conducted, referred to the "traditional reluctance of sections of education to accept the principles of public accountability, particularly the State School Teachers Union". This overt criticism of teachers and the Teachers' Union continued in the publishing of comments by the newspaper's editor, who claimed on 9 April 1999, that the union had "a vested interest in teachers not being seen to fail". An opinion piece written by a staff reporter on 18 August 1999 further condemned the Teachers' Union for stamping "its obstructionist seal of rejection on the tests for Year 3 and 5 students". The article continued:

Once more, the SSTU is thumbing its nose at the demand for some accountability of educational standards....If the SSTU became involved positively with the literacy tests, it would do more good for education than sniping from the sidelines....It would also help refute the suspicion that the root of the union's opposition to the tests was a fear that poor results would reflect poorly on the competence of its members.

The coverage of the introduction of standardized testing did not include any articles in which teachers were seen to welcome the comparisons which might arise from the publication of test results.

Teachers are under pressure and testing aimed at improving educational standards increases that pressure

A sense that teachers were under pressure was conveyed by *The West Australian* from the start of its coverage on the introduction of standardized testing. One of the first articles, appearing on 15

March 1997, claimed that teachers often found themselves in circumstances that called for training in social work, or psychology, because of the challenging social circumstances of some of their pupils. On several occasions the reporting indicated that the introduction of standardized testing had increased the pressure on teachers. This included the publishing of comments on 8 July 1998, made by an academic from the education studies department at Curtin University who claimed the tests would place teachers under “incredible pressure”. The Teachers’ Union was of the same opinion, according to the newspaper, which reported which reported on 15 March 2000 its officials as saying that the tests put unwarranted pressure on teachers to ensure their students performed well, and that teachers needed more support due to increased workloads associated with literacy and numeracy testing.

Teachers will undermine the testing process if testing is enforced

Throughout its coverage *The West Australian* reported that teachers opposed standardized testing. Also, from mid-1998 to the end of the coverage, it made it clear that teachers would take steps to undermine the testing process. From 1998 to 2001 it reported that the Teachers’ Union had directed its members to boycott the tests. On 9 July 1998, in one of the earlier reports of this nature, union vice-president, Pat Byrne, said that teachers would probably “refuse to co-operate” in delivering the tests. Another article on 20 August 1998, predicted that the tests would “likely be thrown into chaos” if teachers proceeded with the plan of opposition. Subsequently it was reported that some teachers and principals had followed through on the threat to boycott, forcing the Education Department to call on staff from district offices to administer some of the tests. Other articles, published in 1999, 2000 and 2001, referred to the continued Teachers’ Union boycott of tests, with one on 10 August 1999 quoting the Federal Education Minister, David

Kemp, describing the Western Australian teachers' action as "obstruction which undermines the standards of education".

The coverage also indicated that teachers would undermine the testing process by 'teaching-to-the-test' to improve their students' results. In other words, it articulated a vague notion that teachers would find a way to achieve required test outcomes through providing students with mechanical formula without necessarily promoting understanding and internalising their learning. This emerged on 18 March 1998 when the newspaper reported that the Teachers' Union had warned of a situation whereby "teachers would teach to satisfy test requirements and not student requirements". This was reiterated in a later article on 20 June 1998, which said the union had claimed that teachers would "end up teaching to the test and not the curriculum to improve their students' chances of performing well".

An article published on 15 September 1999, appeared to verify the union's claims, reporting that more than two-thirds of teachers who had taken part in a survey believed that testing could lead to staff being guided in their teaching primarily by the demands of the test rather than the requirements of the curriculum. A similar claim was made by the head of the Western Australian Council of State School Organisations, who was quoted on 19 August 1998 as saying she had been told teachers were conducting practice tests to help their students perform well and that she had "always feared teachers would end up teaching to the test instead of concentrating on the curriculum". At the same time, not all were reported as taking this view. For example, the Western Australian Education Minister defended teachers, saying on 17 August 1999, that he did not believe they would "behave unprofessionally and corrupt the testing process". The reporting of this view, however, was an exception, with none of the articles

reporting comments by individual teachers, or teacher organizations, refuting claims about teachers 'teaching-to-the-test'.

Teachers legitimate their opposition to standardized testing by claiming that it has no educational value

Teacher reaction to standardized testing published in *The West Australian* was almost entirely confined to responses from union representatives, who consistently claimed their members opposed standardized testing on the grounds that it had no educational value. The coverage was very repetitive. For example, an article on 2 December 1998, which revealed the results of the first Year 3 tests said that teacher groups believed the results "did not show anything that they did not know and vindicated their position that the tests were a waste of money which could have been better spent on remedial programs". The same message was repeated on 9 April 1999, when the newspaper later reported that the union believed "the test results told teachers and parents nothing they did not already know". Similar wording was used in at least six subsequent articles.

An article on 15 September 1999, reporting the results of a national survey of teachers further reinforced the sense that they were against testing. It indicated that more than half of the Year 3 teachers surveyed believed their students were stressed leading up to, and during, the 1998 literacy and numeracy tests. The article concluded by saying that same proportion of teachers believed the tests were too difficult and students had not enjoyed taking them.

Reports published in 2000 and 2001 indicated that the union's stance on testing remained unchanged. On 1 April 2000, the union vice-president was quoted as saying that test results were of more use to politicians than teachers, or parents. The article went on to quote him as saying that "the tests were extremely limited and even the people administering them did not have much faith in them". The newspaper also reported statements on 7 August 2000, from union officials, claiming that the tests were unfair, too stressful for students, politically motivated and a waste of

time and money. Furthermore, it said the union believed the tests were not necessary because schools had adequate assessment and reporting practices to inform parents of their child's progress.

Only rarely was there any indication that some teachers did not oppose testing. Exceptions were two articles published in August and September 2000, at a time when the newspaper's own position changed to overt support for testing. The first of these quoted the president of the WA Primary Principals' Association on 8 August 2000, refuting the union's claim that the tests were a political tool for the Federal Government and stating that the tests' results were valuable in helping to improve learning. In the other example, from 1 September 2000, a school teacher who had helped to mark the literacy and numeracy assessments also praised testing. She said she was initially opposed to the tests but had changed her mind. "I did not," she stated:

.... believe in the tests because I thought the data was already available in schools and the tests were just more stress for the kids. But I can see these tests can give us more accuracy and we can avoid doubling up. This experience has been the best professional development I have had.

These, however, were the only two articles amongst the total body of coverage which suggested some teacher support for testing.

Conclusion

This paper, part of a larger project, reported on a study of the *West Australian's* representation of schoolteachers in its reporting on standardized testing for the period 1997-2001. Five propositions were generated regarding the nature of this reporting. It is too early to tell whether these propositions are upheld in relation to the other four topics studied as part of a larger project and also if new ones suggest themselves. Preliminary analysis does suggest, however, that,

across all five topics, newspaper content was dominated by negative and sympathetic representations of schoolteachers, while positive representations were relatively rare. In the reporting of standardized testing, negative coverage was particularly pronounced, with most of the reporting blaming teachers for a perceived decline in educational standards or questioning their resistance to increased accountability measures. However, some sympathetic coverage was also evident in the reporting of articles which conveyed the message that teachers were overworked and under pressure and that the introduction of testing was making their jobs even more difficult. Although coverage of this nature acknowledged the challenges facing teachers, it also presented a negative image of teaching as a profession.

In many cases, the negative messages about teaching came from union representatives who were among a core group of officials, including politicians, bureaucrats and academics, regularly quoted in *The West Australian* in regards to educational matters. Significantly, the majority of statements about teachers and teaching from all these official groups were negative. Like the union representatives, the other officials routinely emphasized the challenges facing teachers, while also suggesting that teachers were failing to cope with the demands placed upon them. The reporting included very few examples of statements from any of these groups praising educational standards, or teachers, or highlighting the advantages and rewards of being a teacher.

While this study is a small one, albeit highly focused, it points the way towards related avenues of research that other scholars in the field could take for various contexts (including different countries) and time periods. For example, while the adoption of a modified grounded theory approach to the analysis of the reporting was deemed appropriate, it should also be recognized that various other analytic approaches could have been used, including social

semiotic analysis, discourse analysis, and quantitative content analysis. Equally, the study could have examined photographs and cartoons published on the topic in *The West Australian*.

It is also instructive to consider that there is a need for future research to consider teachers other than those employed by state governments, especially those from faith-based schools, ‘alternative’ schools and home school settings, as well as research on the forces that operated to bring about changes in reporting on particular topics. The latter should involve interviewing key participants, including reporters, editors and managers of newspapers. The point, however, is that it would be very difficult to develop a meaningful framework for constructing questions for such personnel without first engaging in the type of analysis reported here.

To conclude, the paper began by stating that news media coverage can influence public opinion in regards to education and teachers, and that teachers are frustrated at what they have perceived as a negative focus in coverage. The outcomes of this study would suggest such concerns are justified, and point to certain implications for journalism education and journalism practice. For example, the study has the potential to inform such education at the tertiary level as well as in newsrooms. Such preparation could aim to increase awareness of the tendency to negative reporting of education, teaching and teachers. It could also draw attention to the implications of such coverage on public perceptions of educational standards, schools and teaching. Furthermore, it could point to the reliance on certain official groups as spokespeople for education and suggest alternative people and organizations to approach for interviews. Such information and direction could possibly be incorporated in a series of guidelines for journalists on the reporting of education and teaching.

At the same time, although media outlets such as *The West Australian* must take responsibility for its choice of interview subjects and the placement of articles and illustrations, it

cannot control what those interviewed say on any particular issue. Hence the key interviewees in education, such as teacher union representatives, politicians, academics and bureaucrats, need to consider what messages they want to convey to the community regarding teachers and teaching, and to shape their media comments accordingly. Efforts to recognize and praise the essential and valuable work of teachers through the news media have the potential to raise the public image of the profession and ease the ongoing recruitment and retention problems affecting many developed countries.

Further to this, it would be beneficial if teachers were encouraged to play a more active role in contributing to news media coverage about education. While education and teachers feature prominently in newspaper coverage, the majority of research in the area, including this study, has found that teachers themselves are typically excluded from news coverage. However, this doesn't have to be the case. In Britain, where researchers noted a shift to "explicitly positive and supportive reporting" in newspaper coverage over the past decade, teachers are said to enjoy "remarkably high visibility as a key voice in the public debate" (Hargreaves, *et al.* 2007, 61). Teachers are legitimate stakeholders and are entitled to a greater say on educational matters. They can also play a valuable role in improving public perceptions of their profession by making statements to the news media which emphasize the benefits, importance and rewards of teaching.

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