MAKING THE GRADE: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMPREHENSIVE EDUCATION REPORTING

by

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This paper examines current education reporting practices and the extent to which these practices are failing to meet ethical and journalistic standards. Based on research on the impact of education coverage on the public, I argue that the current portrayal of education in the news misrepresents education in the United States and undermines public support and investment in education. I then turn to existing journalistic techniques and practices to create five recommendations that help reporters use familiar tools to craft stores that are both more aware of ethical pitfalls and better represent journalistic values. I also provide examples throughout of how I have used these recommendations to navigate dilemmas in my own education reporting. These recommendations and examples can be utilized by reporters to create counterframes to traditional education coverage.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

I have dedicated much of my time at the University of Oregon's School of Journalism and Communication to writing about education. I have spoken to education students, written for the Honors College newsletter, collected data about substance use prevention curricula in Oregon schools, and dug into early literacy efforts in a local school district. While politics or world news might be the first topics to come to mind when thinking about the news, the education beat is vital to the journalistic pursuit of informing the public. The problems schools face in the United States are intertwined with many of the issues that dominate the political sphere: taxes directly influence public school funding, gun violence has harmed students and faculty across the nation, and social issues like poverty directly impact students' academic performance (Hair et al., 2015). Meanwhile, the experience students have in school can impact their lives in the long term.

Despite the vital role schools play in American society, news coverage of education has room for growth. In this thesis, I identify three reoccurring patterns in education reporting, and the potential harms these portrayals cause.

People who rely on the news for an accurate understanding of the education system in the United States are receiving a warped view of education. Reporters portray a system in crisis, and because "good" news is not considered newsworthy, there is little reporting that contradicts this claim. Negative opinions of teachers, which are amplified by news coverage, are contributing to the teacher shortage. Meanwhile, the so-called education crisis is missing essential context to help people understand what might be causing the problem, or why traditional measures of success do not show the full picture. This dire view of education, with seemingly no path forward, does not encourage civic engagement (O'Neil, 2012, p. 16).

These flaws in education reporting are exasperated by how little the American public hears about education in the news. A 2018 content analysis of 35 years of education coverage in evening news broadcasting on ABC, CBS, or NBC showed that K-12 education coverage accounts for less than 1% of the news people see in the United States (Coe & Kuttner, 2018). Because the public sees so little coverage of education news, the content they do see is particularly impactful.

To address these problems, I argue for a new approach to education reporting that rethinks negative education framing, treatment of teachers in the media, and how the complexities of education are handled.

A consequentialist approach to journalism

To understand why education reporting looks the way it does, it is necessary to address how journalism has traditionally operated. Journalists charge themselves with the responsibility of providing the news the public needs to make informed decisions. News outlets have long viewed themselves as bearers of truth, objectivity, and accountability. And, while public trust in news – much like the trust in public schools and many other U.S. institutions – has fallen in recent years, these principles are still highly valued within the field (Gallup Inc., n.d.). Reputable news outlets want stories that are factual and inform the public about the world around them. At the same time, news is a business that requires profit to survive. Advertising revenue has dropped in the last 10 years, as has the average time visitors spend on news websites (Pew Research Center, 2023). To remain operational, news outlets need stories that will capture readers' attention.

But recent journalism research has shown that telling every story that editors feel will draw readers in, without care given to its potential impact, can cause harm. We have evidence

that coverage of hate crimes and mass shootings can lead to more of these crimes being committed (Meindl & Ivy, 2017; Phillips, 2018). We also know that journalists run the risk of retraumatizing victims or taking advantage of communities (Miller & Dahmen, 2020; Richardson, 2021).

This research suggests that a journalist's duty to inform the public cannot be their only consideration. A consequentialist approach to journalism, which judges the ethicality of an article based on its long-term impacts rather than the article itself, might better prevent reporters from inflicting unintentional harm (Ethics Unwrapped, n.d.).

Theoretical concepts

Journalism research has shown that news organizations hold significant power over how the public perceives different issues. Agenda-setting theory, coined by journalism professors McCombs and Shaw in 1972, posits that, by reporting on issues, those issues become more salient to the public (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). When the news frequently exposes the public to an issue, it appears more important.

But reporters do not just influence what issues people view as significant. They can also impact *how* the public thinks of those issues – a concept called "framing." Communications scholar Robert Entman wrote that "to frame is to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation" (Entman, 1993, p. 51). When framing an issue, communicators choose what parts of an issue to amplify which, in turn, causes audiences to interpret the issue in a particular way:

> News media can also influence how we think about topics through the many conscious and unconscious choices made in the production of news coverage: what is included and what is excluded, what is made salient and what is left in the background, and what narratives, frames, prototypes, and discourses are used to make sense of news topics (Coe and Kuttner, p. 2).

Both framing and agenda-setting can influence how issues are perceived. Because of this, journalists must be aware and responsible for the frames and media agendas they create. Education reporters have an obligation to both the public and their story's subjects to consider if the frames and agendas audiences are seeing accurately represent education.

I use these theoretical concepts to analyze research about education reporting and identify common frames or messages about schooling in the United States.

Developing recommendations

In this thesis, I will suggest recommendations for education reporting that are more cognizant of potential harms. Through these recommendations, I add to the definition of what good journalism looks like. The dedication to truth, fairness, and accountability remains, but I ask reporters to also consider whether it is ethical to publish a story. Simply put, will it cause harm? And, if so, how can reporters mitigate or eliminate that harm?

To accomplish this, I will explain the problems with current education reporting, as identified in education research. I have found little to no journalism research on how ethical considerations about the long-term impacts of stories can be applied to education reporting. I suspect this is likely because education reporting rarely ends up on the front page. Compared to other issues like crime or politics, education receives little coverage at all (Coe & Kuttner, 2018). As a result, research into reporting practices on highly covered issues may seem more pressing. These issues will also have more content for researchers to draw on. But education researchers, who are more closely impacted by education reporting, have been looking at the impact of

education news coverage for decades. These education studies show clear room for improvement in both the accuracy and ethicality of education reporting.

I pull on education research from the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and Australia. I was unable to find a large amount of research focused on education reporting in the United States alone. This, again, highlights a lack of societal focus on education reporting in the U.S. overall. But, for the sake of this project, I argue the included countries' research is also applicable to the U.S. They share numerous characteristics. All are democratic, capitalist nations, and while their education systems may differ, journalistic practices in these countries are similar (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). Each of these countries views journalism as an essential part of a democratic society because of its role in holding public servants and institutions accountable. Journalists in these countries also tend to stick more stringently to professional codes of conduct than journalists in other countries. Journalists also tend to have lower confidence in public institutions (Hanitzsch et al., 2019, p. 295-298).

Another driving force in compiling research from these countries is the similarities in what researchers and educators have identified as problems with education reporting. News media in Australia, Canada, and the United States all tend to emphasize the results of standardized test scores in education articles, despite the flaws with this measure. They also tend to focus on negative stories, likely due to the emphasis placed on government accountability. Because of this, I argue that while this paper will focus on journalism in the United States, education research about these countries can and should inform this discussion to fill in gaps where there has been no research about the United States.

I will also show why these problems are harmful not only to education but also to journalists' overarching goal of informing the public so that they may engage with the world as informed citizens.

In my recommendations section, I will identify methods for addressing these problems. Using my journalism background, I adapt the recommendations and concerns expressed by those in the education field into actionable techniques that reporters can employ. My recommendations are based on current practices in the field. As a result, many of the recommendations are techniques journalists are already familiar with but have not been consistently applying on the education beat. These recommendations are not directed at education-focused papers, like *Education Week*. Instead, I will look at papers that cover education alongside a variety of other topics.

Finally, I will give examples of how these concerns have come up in my own work. Much of my education reporting predates this project. These experiences influenced me as I developed my recommendations. As a result, that work still reflects the recommendations I provide here. I also continued reporting alongside this research, where I deliberately employed my recommendations in my work.

Further research is needed to evaluate the efficacy of these recommendations in countering dominant frames in education reporting. However, I hope that by giving examples of how my recommendations have been used in practice, other reporters will be better able to replicate these techniques in their own work.

Literature Review

Perpetual state of failure

The negative national opinion on education can be traced back to the 1983 "A Nation At Risk" report to the U.S. Department of Education. In it, the National Commission on Excellence in Education expressed concerns that the American education system was not producing globally competitive individuals (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). This same sentiment led to the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act. This act, intended to respond to the fear that children in the United States were not learning at the same rate as their international counterparts, required schools to test student progress. Schools that failed to produce adequate results faced sanctions (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 2002). Driven by the fear that American children would not be competitive globally, the government created a way to evaluate public schools based narrowly on test scores. The standardized test scores that resulted were cited heavily by newspapers during the NCLB era and continue to be a staple of education reporting today (Cohen, 2010, p. 110; Mervosh et al., 2024). The view that the American education system is failing to meet expectations has shaped news coverage.

The "crisis frame" in education reporting is defined as coverage that is "structured by an overwhelming sense of crisis" (O'Neil, 2012, p. 6). This occurs when reporters focus on problems in education, with little to no attention to what is positive in education or potential solutions to challenges. Comparing U.S. schools to other countries can also contribute to this frame, as it plays to fears that US students are falling behind (O'Neil, 2012, p. 6).

The crisis frame is prevalent throughout education reporting. A large portion of education coverage identified in Coe and Kuttner's content analysis was about school shootings, funding

cuts, and strikes (Coe & Kuttner, 2018, p. 10). Audiences are therefore left with a dire view of education:

> One can imagine the fragmented and potentially negative image of the U.S. school system these patterns of coverage might cast in the mind of a viewer who does not have other regular means of contact with the school system: an institution known mainly for episodes of violence, labor struggles, budget cuts, and generally poor quality amid pockets of excellence (Coe and Kuttner, 2018, p. 11).

In short, those members of the public who rely on the news are given a limited view of what education in the United States looks like. The content they are exposed to in the mainstream news outlets studied here creates and reinforces the narrative that schools are in crisis.

The crisis frame is not going unnoticed by educators, either. A study of 25 Australian teachers found that all but one said they felt education reporting was predominately negative (Shine, 2020, p.8). Many said that they understood that journalists had a responsibility to report on problems in education but did not see why coverage was so unbalanced.

Teachers expressed the following sentiments in their interviews: “What makes news is bad news. Why don’t the journalists track the good stories down?” and “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” (Shine, 2020, p. 10).

To understand why so much education coverage is negative requires an understanding of what is considered “newsworthy.” In mass media, there is a handy acronym for evaluating a story’s newsworthiness: “TIPCUP.” Each letter stands for something a reporter or editor should consider when choosing what story to run – Timeliness, Impact, Proximity, Conflict, Uniqueness, and Prominence (Dyer, 2013). In the instance of the crisis frame, conflict appears to be pushing many stories.

For journalists, conflict can take the form of a tense political race, or a town ravaged by natural disaster. Take some of the biggest news stories of the past ten years: the Israel-Gaza war, mass shootings, and Harvey Weinsteins' rape allegations. This is not to say these stories are not important. We have seen firsthand how reporters' coverage of these topics has changed how people in the United States think about them. But the fact of the matter remains: news rarely covers the good humanity does. Education reporting is no different.

As education reporter Mike Baker wrote in his 1994 analysis of education coverage, "media coverage of education tends to focus on bad news. This is not to argue for a good news agenda. In general, bad news is news and the rest is publicity" (Baker, 1994, p. 293). This attitude, which writes off positive education coverage as journalists endorsing certain schools or curricula has helped produce a dominant frame that schools are in a constant state of crisis. But it is worth noting that this opinion, often held by journalists, is not reflected by those who work in education and may not be reflected by audiences, either.

Why the crisis frame matters

A seasoned reporter might argue that it is only natural that the research and observations of those in the education field would critique the crisis frame, as they are part of the institution being critiqued. Journalists pride themselves on holding institutions accountable, not pleasing their subjects. For example, when the *Boston Globe* broke the story about child sexual abuse in the Catholic church, they did not rewrite the piece so the church would approve.

But the problem with the crisis frame is not that it displeases educators (though their expertise should not be brushed off). Instead, it lies with the effect it has on audiences. When reporters bombard readers with negative images of schools, the public is less willing to support education reform because the problems seem impossible to solve (O'Neil, 2012, p, 16).

Journalists are failing to prompt audiences to engage with the problems in education in a productive way. Instead, the problem becomes viewed as insurmountable, especially when reporters fail to provide any potential solutions (O'Neil, 2012, p. 16).

Teachers at fault

With so much education coverage centering around the failure of the education system to adequately teach students, reporters often try to identify what might be causing the problem. For the last few decades, teachers have been named as contributing to the problem. In the "A Nation At Risk" report, the committee claimed, "too many teachers are being drawn from the bottom quarter of graduating high school and college students" and that teachers received inadequate training (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). While numerous other contributing factors were identified – like the low teaching salary and teacher shortages – teacher incompetence remained one of the most talked-about causes of struggling schools. The report would later be called into question by several education scholars, who argued that it was misleading and failed to cite the statistics used to prove schools were underperforming (Park, 2004). Despite this, the report gained much media attention and was followed by major changes to the education system (Park, 2004).

In 2001, the United States further amplified this concern with the No Child Left Behind Act. It put "teachers at the center of educational reform by arguing that a lack of qualified teachers and insufficient external oversight of teacher practice" were causing American children to fall behind (Cohen, 2010, p. 105).

News in North America and Australia has reinforced this message through its depiction of teachers. Teachers in Australia felt that the news often portrayed teachers as poorly trained and unable to get better jobs (Shine, 2020). Coverage of teacher strikes can also contribute to a

poor opinion of educators, portraying unions as militant and disruptive to classrooms (Baker, 1994, p. 290). Furthermore, teachers felt that teaching received more scrutiny than other professions: "We don't make league tables of lawyers or journalists. We don't see other public service organizations looked at in this way" (Shine, 2020, p. 12).

League tables, as mentioned in Shine's interviews, are just one way of ranking schools and educators – a pervasive practice in education journalism. With access to standardized test scores, journalists can quickly put together graphics or tables to compare schools. Some publications have even gone as far as to rank teachers themselves. The *Los Angeles Times* published an investigative series, "Grading the Teachers," in 2010 which analyzed the "value" of over 6000 teachers. To do so, the paper hired a statistician to create a method that would ascertain teacher value based on the students' predicted and actual standardized test scores. The results were published in a searchable database (Ulmer, 2016, 45). Other papers, like *the New York Times* and *the Wall Street Journal*, followed suit. *The New York Post* published the names of teachers who had an evaluation score of zero, and "publicly stigmatized one educator as the 'city's worst teacher'" (Ulmer, 2016, p. 47). Targeting teachers this way may distract from systemic problems and, in extreme cases, lead to harassment. If audiences believe their child's individual teacher to be at fault for poor academic performance, then they are not considering that the issue may stem from a lack of professional development opportunities or a poorly structured standardized test. And, if the root of the problem is not being acknowledged, then it is unlikely to be fixed.

In Australia, critique of teachers prompted the Queensland Minister of Education to offer a $50,000 payout to "incompetent" teachers who left the public school system in 2002 (Keogh & Garrick, 2011). *The Courier Mail*, an Australian news outlet, covered the payout, writing that so-

called “substandard teachers” would be replaced by young, high-achieving graduates. As a result, longtime teachers were made out to be undesirable, compared to new teachers (Keogh & Garrick, 2011, p. 427). The experience of teachers who dedicated their lives to the profession was devalued by the government, and that opinion was amplified by newspapers covering the payout. While reporters have a duty to inform the public about new initiatives from the government, reporters are meant to do more than regurgitate a press release. The article included the perspective of the teacher union vice president, who only commented on union concerns and “did nothing to counteract the continuing deficit view of teachers” (Keogh & Garrick, 2011, p. 428). Reporters failed to reach an essential voice in this story: teachers themselves. After this article was published, many similar articles followed, causing public trust in teachers to wane (Keogh & Garrick, 2011, p. 431).

This points to another major problem with news coverage of teachers: if teachers are not identified as the source of a problem, often they are not included in coverage at all. A critical analysis of coverage of Canadian standardized tests by Canadian outlets *the Globe and Mail* and *the National Post* found that, rather than going to teachers or principals, who work directly with students, articles relied heavily on government sources to interpret scores (Stack, 2006, p. 64). As a result, the perspective of the educators who are charged with preparing students for these tests was left out of coverage.

Sixty percent of the Australian teachers interviewed in Shine’s 2020 study of teacher’s perception of news felt that reporters did not accurately represent education (Shine, 2020, p. 14). Coverage failed to capture the nuances of the education system, they said. The voices of teachers could also challenge and complicate dominant narratives, like the crisis frame:

> Indeed, media platforms do not only provide space for negative metanarratives but also provide productive ground for democratic expansion of voice and counter-narrative(s). Rather than create one dominant narrative that seeks to describe an entire teaching profession, a fresh outpouring of teacher voices could introduce complexities into educational discourse and reframe public perceptions of teachers (Ulmer, 2016, p. 51).

But, when asked if they would want teachers to have more dialogue with the press to help clear up misunderstandings, few Australian teachers agreed. One principal feared their colleagues would be "torn apart by journalists" (Shine, 2020, p. 16). Rather than speaking to journalists, some researchers have suggested that teachers utilize social media and blogs to ensure their voice is heard (Ulmer, 2016, 51).

These sentiments are echoed in a 2023 study that asked 122 teachers in Massachusetts how they perceived media portrayals of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only did teachers once again take the blame for public dissatisfaction with schools – in this case, school closures – respondents also mentioned that coverage routinely left out teachers, once again citing a preference for government officials and union representatives in news coverage (Nerlino, 2023, p. 298). While this study did not indicate whether teachers shared the same hesitancy to speak to reporters mentioned in Shine's interviews of Australian teachers, the frustration expressed by American teachers shows that they do not trust journalists to accurately portray their profession:

> One response mentioned, "The media made it seem like teachers didn't want to teach and just wanted to get paid for sitting at home." Two others commented respectively, "We were characterized as lazy, selfish, and only looking out for ourselves," and "I am a professional but not respected as such. I feel like I am questioned and portrayed as being 'difficult' or making decisions that are not in the best interest of students…" (Nerlino, 2023, p. 295).

Why teacher voices matter

The villainization of teachers in the news and the absence of teachers' voices cause two notable problems. The first involves trust. It will not come as a shock to anyone in the field of

journalism to hear that public trust in the news is low in the United States (Gallup Inc., 2023). The research I have gathered highlights that teachers do not feel they can trust reporters to accurately represent them. Educators have expressed that the media has amplified stereotypes about the profession and failed to seek out their input. Their voices are a vital part of any education reporting; speaking to a department of education representative or superintendent does not represent classroom experiences. Teachers spend every day with their students, giving them insight into their classrooms that others may not be able to provide. Including the voices of teachers for more accurate reporting will require journalists to repair their relationship with educators.

Second, by amplifying the mistrust of teachers that has dominated public discourse for the last 40 years, publications may be contributing to the teacher shortage. "A Nation at Risk" acknowledged the harm that teacher shortages have on the education system, but the problem has persisted to this day. Multiple studies have indicated that negative public opinion of teachers may make people less likely to go into the field and made current teachers want to leave the field (Keogh & Garrick, 2011 p. 430; Shine, 2020, 19). News outlets that continue to posit that teachers are incompetent could potentially escalate the problem further.

Superficial coverage

Reporters are tasked with taking complex problems and breaking them down so audiences will understand. Under deadline pressure, they must find out as much as they can. While seasoned reporters who have been covering the same beat for years will understand the intricacies of the topic they are covering works, short-staffed newsrooms do not always have enough reporters for that sort of specialization (Pew Research Center, 2008).

Education is a complex system. Each state, county, and school district functions a little differently. A reporter cannot expect to understand why schools teach the curriculum they do without understanding their selection process and funding. Like any aspect of the government, public schools are dictated by both state-level administrative rules and the district's specific socioeconomic situation. With short deadlines and word limits, reporters are hard-pressed to fit every detail into an article. Newsrooms must decide what the most important stories are, and what pieces of information the public needs to know.

Over half of the educators interviewed in Shine's report said they felt news coverage was not accurate. One principal explained that when reporters convey information about an issue, they fail to capture *why* things are the way they are. They felt that journalists did not understand how complex the education system is (Shine, 2020, p. 16). Some attributed this issue to an overreliance on statistics and government agencies to tell stories (Shine, 2020, p. 17). Coe & Kuttner's analysis of evening broadcast news in the United States points to a similar problem: when reporters choose to focus on one aspect of education by omitting the system it exists in, they present a warped view of the education system (Coe & Kuttner, 2018, p. 11)

Part of this disjointed image of education is a result of how topics are split up. A report that analyzed education reporting across 20 mainstream US media outlets, both print and broadcast, found that coverage of overarching issues in education, like funding and system structure, did not include the on-the-ground learning happening in classrooms. Similarly, coverage of the classroom was unlikely to include discussion of how education works systemically (O'Neil, 2012, p. 13). As a result, when policy decisions that impact funding or how schools should function systemically come up, the public does not always understand how these decisions might impact everyday learning.

The separation of the education system and people's real-life experience with it also produces a one-way accountability system. When something goes wrong in the classroom, the media often speaks about accountability in terms of the government holding teachers and schools accountable. In a 2016 study that used framing theory to identify common frames used when reporting on education in Australia, researcher Aspa Baroutsis explains that this top-down approach can result in teacher evaluations and standardized testing which punish schools for failing to meet standards (Baroutsis, 2016, p. 9). But this erases the responsibility of governments to their schools.

By moving beyond superficial frames of education, journalists can identify why schools might be struggling. This could lead to a bottom-up approach of accountability, where the government would be charged with making the necessary resources available for schools to succeed (Baroutsis, 2016, p. 10).

Beyond the disjointed and oversimplified view of education in reporting, some researchers have called into question whether the common measures of educational success used by journalists are even accurate. As mentioned in the above sections, reporters have heavily relied on student test scores to evaluate school performance (Coe & Kuttner, 2018; Cohen, 2010; Shine, 2020; Stack, 2006; Ulmer, 2016). But few reporters have taken the time to investigate if test scores are accurate measures of student performance.

In the 2000 presidential election between Bush and Gore, both candidates made education reform a major part of their campaign. While their platforms varied, both stressed the importance of testing as a form of accountability. As reporters shaped their coverage of the race, many focused on polling and politics. According to researcher Cynthia Gerstil-Pepin, "They did not question whether accountability is an effective means of improving education or whether

testing is an effective method of assessment" (2002, p. 45). By moving beyond this framework, reporters could give readers a better understanding of test scores and how much weight to put on them.

Evaluating the accuracy of standardized test scores is not particularly different from speaking to a source. Journalists are expected to ensure the information is accurate. A reporter might ask other sources the same question to see if answers line up, go to an expert on the subject to gain their insight or do a background check to assure a person's credibility. But when it comes to test scores, reporters take politicians' words at face value and do not question the effectiveness of their ideas for education reform.

After the election of Bush and implementation of No Child Left Behind, journalists regarded test scores as solid evidence for or against a school's performance. But, according to those who work in education, standardized testing does not give a comprehensive view of student success. Standardized tests do not show how well students are doing in the arts or how much student attendance has improved. They also do not account for socioeconomic factors students and districts might be facing (Baroutsis, 2016, p. 22). While test scores may be "true" they are often decontextualized. Pitting two schools' scores against one another will not automatically reveal which students are smarter or which teachers are more skilled.

Why accurate coverage matters

The Society of Professional Journalists has a code of ethics that mirrors those of many famous news publications. The first section, titled "Seek truth and report it" describes the importance of accuracy in this profession (Society of Professional Journalists, n.d.). Journalists arrive at the truth through extensive fact-checking and accurate representations of the subject matter. Journalists should take responsibility for the accuracy of an article, correct any errors, vet

sources, and provide attribution for all information. Truth is, perhaps, the most important value in this field.

Nearly all the research I have located about education reporting has voiced the same frustration: reporters are getting it wrong. If that is the case, the approach of journalists to education reporting is failing the most rudimentary of tests: is it true? The public relies on the press to inform them about what is happening around them. But the research says that, when it comes to education, audiences are getting half-truths. They are told the system, and its educators are failing their children, but not what systemic factors contribute to it. They are told that their school has fallen behind others, but not the flaws of the tests these rankings are based on. A journalist who reports a quote out of context would surely face professional reprimanding. But publications around the world have been reporting on the education system without context for decades, with little attempt to change it.

What next?

A 2007 paper by Darleen Opfer argues against critiques of existing education coverage, saying that "supporters of public education have assumed that the role of the media in a democracy should be to strengthen the public's goodwill and support for its institutions" (2007, p. 171). It is not a journalist's job to encourage the public to support government institutions according to Opfer (2007, p. 165). A successful journalist, according to this mindset, prompts people to learn about and engage with public affairs (Opfer, 2007, p. 173).

I do not argue that this is incorrect, but I do question if current education reporting is fulfilling that definition. Journalists *should* prompt the public to engage with public affairs and it is not a reporter's place to regurgitate state propaganda. Journalists have a responsibility to the

public to offer comprehensive and accurate coverage. My research has led me to believe journalists are not upholding it.

Journalists must report on the systems that shape our society, and that coverage will not and should not be strictly positive. Still, it should not lead people to think these problems cannot be solved, nor should it assign blame through inaccurate rankings and soundbites from politicians. In the following section, I will lay out suggestions for covering education issues, both positive and negative, in a constructive and comprehensive manner. It is my hope that this approach is not only a more accurate portrayal of education but also one that achieves the public engagement Opher argues for.

Recommendations

In this section, I will propose five tips to help challenge traditional education framing. These recommendations are based on the research outlined in the previous section and attempt to address frequent assumptions and misconceptions reporters have about education. They also seek to prompt audiences to be more engaged with the education system. Not all of these recommendations will apply to every story, and it is possible that industry constraints may make it difficult for reporters to follow through on them. However, if reporters keep these points in mind, they will be engaging more critically with the work they are doing, and the impact it may have.

1. Include solutions elements in stories that critique education

The crisis frame shapes a large portion of education. As I have outlined above, this frame can make audiences less likely to engage with potential changes to the education system and contributes to a feeling among educators that coverage of education is unbalanced. Journalistic values require reporters to call attention to problems in public institutions. However, reporters can adjust *how* they report on problems. By incorporating solutions elements into critical education reporting, journalists can continue to report on issues within education while also presenting audiences with a sense that these problems can be fixed.

What is solutions journalism

The Solutions Journalism Network explains that "while journalists usually define news as 'what's gone wrong,' solutions journalism tries to expand that definition: Responses to problems are also newsworthy," (Solutions Journalism Network, 2023b). Solutions stories include four elements: response, which identifies how people are responding to a problem; insight, which

explains why the response matters and what it can tell us; evidence, which illustrates the response's efficacy; and limitations, which contextualizes the response and identifies where it might fall short (Solutions Journalism Network, 2023b). This approach allows journalists to highlight potential solutions to the problems they report on, without blindly endorsing a specific approach. And, as the evidence has shown, audiences are more willing to engage with solutions stories.

Research on solutions journalism has shown that audiences tend to be more interested in news with a solutions focus (Solutions Journalism, 2021). A Reuters study found that, while the number of news avoiders is at an all-time high, these individuals reported an interest in solutions-based journalism (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2023). Finally, a 2017 study reported that solutions stories made audiences less anxious and more willing to actively engage with the issues being reported (Gielan et al., 2017). Some outlets that have shifted towards more solution-based reporting have also reported increased subscriptions, clicks, and time spent on news sites, making solutions journalism a sustainable source of profit (Solutions Journalism Network, 2023a).

By employing solutions-based reporting in education, reporters can better appeal to audiences and avoid making problems appear insurmountable. Under Opfer's definition of successful journalism, which argues that an article is successful if it informs audiences and prompts them to engage with their community, solutions-based stories are *more* successful than their more traditional, problem-based counterparts (Opfer, 2007).

Solutions journalism does not shy away from holding structures accountable, nor does it turn reporting into state propaganda. It does, however, offer a more positive outlook by illustrating potential paths forward. I argue that this approach would be viewed as more

"balanced" by those in education while also encouraging audiences to critically engage with the education system.

2. Include the voices of teachers

To ensure that journalists are capturing the full picture when it comes to education, reporters should be seeking out teachers' perspectives. Research shows that reporters often opt for state officials to represent educator's side of the story (Stack, 2006, p. 64). While education departments can offer insight into the big picture and help break down how the system functions, their perspectives should not be relied on exclusively. Unlike state officials, teachers see how education functions at a classroom level. They can identify instances where a well-intentioned program might fail to meet student needs or explain the challenges of reaching state expectations.

Furthermore, good journalistic practice, as stated in the SPJ code of ethics, says that journalists should "diligently seek subjects of news coverage to allow them to respond to criticism or allegations of wrongdoing" (Society of Professional Journalists, n.d.). Teachers who, as I have shown, often take the fall for flaws in education, should be included in this guideline. By allowing teachers a chance to speak for themselves, journalists can gain a better understanding of how education functions in a classroom setting and avoid unfounded critique of teachers. While I do not advocate painting teachers in a positive light when it is not supported by evidence, including teachers in the conversation could help repair the broken trust between journalists and educators. This way, educators may still be unhappy with critical coverage but will be less likely to feel that it is unfair.

Gaining educators' trust

The broken trust between reporters and educators, caused by decades of critical coverage of varying quality, presents a circular problem. To begin repairing their relationship with educators, journalists must actively seek out teachers to include in stories. But educators may be wary of reporters, afraid they will be misrepresented or "torn apart" (Shine, 2020, p. 16).

The good news is this is far from the first time journalists have faced reluctant subjects. In investigative reporter Brent Walth's chapter of *Interviewing: The Oregon Method*, he outlines several reasons why subjects may refuse to be interviewed, and how a good reporter can work to gain that subject's trust.

Clear, honest communication goes a long way when trying to get a subject to go on the record. Tell them who you are, what your story is about, and, perhaps most importantly, why their input matters. Reporters interview people because they believe that person has a unique perspective that will help audiences understand the story (Walth, 2019, p. 63). In many cases, reporters may want to speak to teachers to get a firsthand understanding of what is happening in the classroom. This way, the public sees not just the systemic functioning of education, but the everyday interactions between teachers and students. Reporters should ensure that the source understands that.

Keeping that trust alive continues into the interview. Approach the interview as a conversation and show real interest in what your subject has to say (Walth, 2019, p. 63). Explain the difference between on the record, off the record, and on background to give subjects control over the situation. Be clear and honest about why it is important for them to be on the record, but make sure they understand that the choice ultimately lies with them (Walth, 2019, p. 66-67).

Address concerns and allow your subject to ask you questions. Sometimes, getting past people's initial hesitancy is just a matter of showing that you are human and that you recognize them as one too.

3. Put the education system in context for readers

Part of a reporter's job is to break down complex systems in a way layman audiences can understand. It is impractical to expect every education article to open with a full breakdown of the education system, from the federal to state to county levels. But this does not mean stories cannot be contextualized for readers. Often, education reporting either focuses on systemic issues or in-classroom learning. There is little overlap between the two subjects in coverage, despite them being intrinsically connected (O'Neil, 2012).

This fragmented view of education can contribute to educators' feeling that news coverage of their profession is inaccurate. To avoid this, reporters should take a step back and consider how to merge systemic and everyday education in their work. For example, a story on funding cuts could include comments from educators about how the loss of funding might influence them in the classroom. Reporters should take the time to consider how big-picture stories will look at a classroom level, and vice versa. This comprehensive picture of education also allows journalists to consider who should be held accountable throughout the system, rather than focusing on only one level at a time.

Two-way accountability

Moving away from a one-way accountability system will require reporters to embrace the idea that problems may have more than one cause. When covering subpar test scores, reporters should ask themselves both "what is causing schools to fail to meet the government's expectations" and "what is stopping the government from giving schools the support they need to

achieve expectations." Perhaps, a reporter will find that one party is doing everything they possibly can, but it is more likely that there is work to do on both ends. Regardless of the outcome, all possibilities must be explored before pointing to any one cause. This will lead to more balanced and more accurate stories.

4. Evaluate the quality of test scores before using them as evidence

When collecting evidence for a story, journalists often rely on quantitative data. In education reporting, this tends to come in the form of standardized test scores. However, education research has found that reporters have put little consideration into the quality of test scores as a measure of success (Gerstil-Pepin, 2002; Stack, 2006), while educators often feel that scores are taken out of context or misrepresented (Shine, 2020). These concerns do not mean that reporters must disregard standardized testing altogether, but they should take care to investigate the limitations of this data. These limitations should be clearly laid out for readers within the article, so audiences can draw accurate conclusions.

Limitations of standardized testing

There are a number of methods for reporters to learn about both the benefits and limitations of using standardized test scores in articles. The first option is to call upon a subject expert. When writing about complex topics, like science or international affairs, reporters will often call on subject experts who can provide insight into an issue and boost the story's credibility. Numerous education researchers exist across the world, many of whom have looked at the efficacy of test scores as an accountability measure. Talking to these individuals can help audiences understand where this data might fall short.

Along with subject matter experts, reporters can ask educators themselves. As the people administering and preparing students for standardized tests, educators are experts in their own

right. Not only will they be able to point out any reasons they feel test scores are not fully representing students, but they can also identify other potential measures. Teachers and school administrators may use a variety of methods to check how students are performing. Having numerous measures of success to pull from can help create a more accurate picture of education quality.

5. Use ranking systems with care

Reporters' use of school ranking systems, like league tables which often rank schools or districts based on test scores, is a source of concern for educators and researchers alike (Baroutsis, 2016; Shine, 2020; Ulmer, 2016). These comparisons offer a simplistic view of schools and educators by attempting to compare schools without fully considering "underlying characteristics that may explain the comparative performance of schools" (Baroutsis, 2016, p. 21). Layman readers will not always realize the limitations of the data, which could lead them to place more weight on the rankings than is supported by the evidence (Baroutsis, 2016, p. 20). For example, a ranking of all school districts in a state based on third grade reading scores would not necessarily represent which schools are best at teaching students to read. Reading scores are influenced by other factors, like socioeconomic status and the percentage of students who speak English as a first language.

Consider potential harms

While I do not argue that rankings systems should never be used, they should not be employed without serious consideration of potential harm. Educators can use performance evaluations to augment personal growth (Baroutsis, 2016; Ulmer, 2016). But journalists run the risk of portraying these scores as infallible, especially when they fail to include the voices of

educators in their articles (Ulmer, 2016, p. 48). Rankings have the power to reinforce misconceptions about teachers and erode public trust in education (Ulmer, 2016, p. 48).

When publishing articles that could potentially harm people's trust in teachers and schools, reporters must be confident that the information included is accurate and laid out in a way that will not be misconstrued.

Implementation

In this section, I will provide examples of my recommendations from my own reporting. Through this, I hope to provide examples of how my recommendations can be applied in the field.

I will focus on my experience reporting on two stories. First is a piece I am currently reporting on, about early literacy efforts in the Bethel school district (hereafter referred to as Story A). Here, I was able to deliberately implement the recommendations from the section above. For this article, I chose to focus on one school district's approach to tackling a statewide problem.

The second is a project on substance use prevention in schools (hereafter referred to as Story B), which I worked on under the guidance of experienced reporters. During this project, we gathered data from school districts all over the state about what addiction prevention curriculum they use. This data informed a series of articles about the state strategy for addiction prevention in schools and how effective the current strategy is. As this project predated my research for this thesis, the examples I pull from it are not instances of me intentionally following my recommendations. These experiences instead informed me as I developed the recommendations later.

While both these projects focused on K-12 education, they differ greatly in content matter, scope, and the number of reporters working on them. Through these differences, I aim to show the versatility of my recommendations, as well as instances where some recommendations are inapplicable.

Story A

Solutions journalism

Early literacy is a statewide problem. Stories from major news outlets around Oregon identified that over 60% of third graders in the state are failing to read at level (Silverman, 2023). Of the three school districts in the Eugene area, the Bethel School District had the lowest number of third graders reading at level.

I began my pre-reporting with the intention of finding out why, focusing on the cause of the problem rather than a solution. But as I spoke to members of the Bethel community and school district, I learned that Bethel had been taking important strides to boost early literacy rates. Current literacy scores were low, but the improvement from one year to the next was higher than any of its neighboring districts. With the governor asking districts across the state to develop literacy plans to receive the grants from the new "Early Literacy Success Initiative," it struck me that the Bethel school district may be using strategies that could be effective in other districts.

I decided to shift gears. Rather than focusing on the problem – low early literacy scores across the state – I would learn about what methods Bethel was using to improve early literacy instruction. For the response portion of the piece, I spoke to the superintendent, kindergarten and first-grade teachers, and a literacy coach to learn about what early literacy in Bethel looked like. The insight portion came from what I had originally wanted to be the story's focus: Oregon's low literacy rates and the new state initiative.

Evidence came from test scores, observations from the superintendent, and teachers' experience with students in the classroom. All the while, I tried to learn where Bethel's strategy

might not be having the impact the district wanted or how the strategy may be inaccessible based on district resources.

Teacher voices

Much of the strategy to boost literacy in the Bethel school district centered on teachers. Teachers had gone through intensive professional development programs, each elementary school had a literacy coach whom educators could go to for advice, and the new curriculum's success depended on teachers' ability to implement it in the classroom. Even beyond that, though, I knew I wanted their voices in the story. They would best be able to describe what early literacy work actually looked like in the classroom.

It took many emails and phone calls to set up my interviews with Bethel teachers. I worked largely through the district's public information officer, who was quick to connect me to many of the people I spoke to at Bethel. But getting the names of teachers took more back and forth than any of the other interviews I requested. There was never any indication that reaching teachers was being made intentionally difficult; everyone seemed eager to help. But teachers spend their days with students – and unlike those in more administrative roles, speaking to the press is not a given part of the job description.

Because district staff and faculty were so helpful, it was largely a manner of patience and dedication to get interviews scheduled. That said, I took care to show my trustworthiness each time I interacted with the district. In my interview requests, I told subjects what I wanted to speak about and what my story was about. In each interview I let my subjects know that they could tell me if they wanted something to be off the record. With the more media-experienced subjects, this was probably unnecessary, but I wanted to set a precedent for how I would conduct myself in future interviews.

Eventually, I was able to schedule conversations with three of Bethel's teachers. By the end of my conversations with them, I understood more about how the district's approach to literacy had impacted them. For example, the professional development training they underwent was extremely time-consuming – but all of them still expressed that they were glad to have done it, and wanted to see more of their colleagues undergo the training.

I was also able to start identifying patterns in their responses. They had similar thoughts on the professional development training and new reading curriculum. Two spoke about students who had struggled to read when they entered the classroom but had grown into successful readers. As I heard educators echo the same sentiments, I became more confident that their experiences were not limited to just their classroom.

The teachers I spoke to offered vital insight into the classroom that the administrators I spoke to could not describe in as much detail.

Contextualizing education

There is no shortcut to putting education in context for readers. In my experience, the first step is to understand the system yourself. During interviews, I tried to ask clarifying questions when needed. I learned a lot about literacy during these conversations and found that often when one person mentioned something, my other interviewees would bring up the same topics. I always asked about what challenges my subjects faced with early literacy instruction, as well. Some spoke about staff capacity, others mentioned low attendance and the effects of the pandemic. This made the articles more complex to write. There were many factors at play but understanding them made for more accurate and comprehensive coverage than trying to find a single cause.

When attempting to merge classroom-level learning with the more systemic side of literacy education, I found that it came naturally in the literacy story. The context of what is happening at the state level is key to telling readers why the story is significant.

Test scores

Tackling the test score dilemma was a major challenge for the literacy article. Politicians and news outlets rely on third-grade standardized test scores to gauge students' reading proficiency. Recent scores, especially following pandemic school closures, have failed to meet expectations. But when I asked Bethel's superintendent about test scores, he explained that, while that summative data is important, the test used in Oregon is rather lengthy. Some students choose to opt out altogether. Furthermore, districts do not receive the results of those assessments until after students have moved on to the next grade level – making it difficult for educators to rely on those tests to evaluate current student needs.

Test scores are still an important element of the story. They are the biggest piece of standardized quantitative data in the state that indicates student reading proficiency. But, after hearing about their limitations, I also asked what other measures the district uses to examine how students are doing.

I learned that, in Bethel, students have short, one-on-one reading tests with teachers every six weeks to check progress. This, according to the superintendent, was a more useful test from the district's perspective – the results were immediate, and students did not have to strain to complete them. Teachers can observe students as they read and note what aspects they might be struggling with. Then, they can immediately begin working with the student to address their challenges, without waiting months for the results.

I also asked him how successful these measures of success showed the district's approach to literacy to be. He told me that they had seen improvements in kindergarten through second grade but were having more difficulty reaching students after third grade. This fell in line with what I had already seen. The district report card for the 2022-2023 school year showed that the number of third graders reading at level had increased by 3% since the previous year (Oregon Department of Education, 2022).

Ranking systems

I will not include a league table in the early literacy story. Both the research from this thesis and the accounts I have heard from educators have led me to believe a league table would not accurately represent which districts have the best approach to early literacy. However, I will likely include comparisons between Bethel and other districts in the story itself. I have discussed the best ways to approach this with my editor at length. With his guidance, I have decided that Bethel will only be compared with other "like" districts, or districts in Oregon with similar characteristics, like socioeconomic status. This evidence will be important to show if the Bethel approach is successful. Still, I am working to ensure that any comparisons I include do not mislead audiences by failing to account for other factors that might influence test scores.

Story B

Solutions journalism

Solutions journalism played a key role in the addiction prevention project as well, but because there were multiple reporters on the project, my individual was not as solutions based. The project produced a package of stories. My article focused on the support districts were receiving from the Department of Education and Health Authority. As I focused on that piece,

other reporters on the project sought out schools that were seeing positive results from their addiction prevention programs. Because this project had more manpower, I could feel confident that, although my portion of the work was more problem-centric, that would not be the only perspective that audiences would see.

Teacher voices

Much like the solutions elements of the project, while I did not personally interview teachers, other reporters on the project did. In fact, because of its focus on state-level support, my story was one of the few that did not feature commentary from the classroom. I did, however, speak with a district nurse who helped guide the substance use prevention work in her district. Between her voice and the other stories in the package which focused much more on teachers, I felt confident that their voices were still being incorporated.

Contextualizing education

I spent much of my time on the substance use prevention project asking subject experts to explain how the system worked – from putting together lists of recommended curricula at the state level, to how the state's approach to prevention had changed over the years. It was not reasonable to expect that I could learn all there was to know about how each state department operated before the story went to print, but I tried to get a handle on as much as I could in the time I had. I also tried to get numerous perspectives to fill in the gaps. State officials could comment on the systemic functions of curriculum requirements, recommendations, and supports, while speaking to school staff helped show me how the current system was influencing the classroom.

But when writing about the state-level approach to substance-use prevention, it was difficult to connect the bureaucratic functions of the state education department with day-to-day

classroom experiences. With state officials, the answer was often about funding or needing to be given authority to perform certain functions. It was not always clear how to show the impact that had in the classroom.

In the end, speaking to the district nurse about what support her district received when choosing substance use prevention curriculum – and how those supports, or lack thereof, impacted prevention in her district – gave me a way to show readers that what happened at the state-level has real impacts on schools.

Test scores

Because the substance use prevention story was focused on student health, not student achievement, standardized testing was not a topic we needed to tackle for that project. That did not mean that there was no data to evaluate, however. We looked at the Oregon Student Health Survey to gauge substance use rates in each district. Reporters on the project spoke to subject experts about how reliable the results were to decide how best to use them in the story. Through those talks, the team identified several limitations to the data, which were laid out in detail when the database was published.

Ranking systems

Creating a database that showed what curriculum each school used was a major part of our work. Oregon Student Health Survey scores were used to give more context to the district profiles. However, the project's lead reporter took care to investigate the limitations of these scores. She found that there was concern over the accuracy of the scores – as students self-reported on their behavior. She also found that not every district used the same test – or was obligated to test at all – making any comparisons even more unreliable.

Ultimately, we decided that the database would only show one district profile at a time. Curricula and health survey scores would only be attached to the district they applied to; the database design would not give users the option to compare districts. That way, the public could still access the data, but it would not be presented in a way that would lend itself to false conclusions.

Conclusion

Almost every person who grows up in the United States will have some interaction with the American education system. Educators are asked to teach children the information they will need as adults. Education matters. For better or for worse, students will often feel the effects of their time in school long after they have moved on to other things. The opportunities and resources students receive during their K-12 education can propel them toward success later down the road. Similarly, students who are overlooked or left behind by the education system may grapple with the effects of that neglect for the rest of their lives.

Because of the monumental impact education has on both individuals and society as a whole, it matters how we, as journalists, talk about it. As I have shown, failing to accurately represent education can intensify the problems educators already face. Schools may see a lack of public support, teachers may leave the profession, and necessary reforms may be overlooked.

Journalists have a responsibility to expose difficult truths. I argue, however, that they can mitigate potential harm by equipping a consequentialist lens when reporting on education. This does not restrict their ability to bring awareness to issues in education. Instead, it should make them more cognizant of what the long-term effects of their story's framing might be.

Further research is needed to ascertain the efficacy of the recommendations I list here. They are, however, crafted based on common flaws in media representations of education, as identified by education researchers. By incorporating them into their work, journalists can make more conscious choices about what information they include and how they can create counterframes that challenge existing portrayals of schools and educators.

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