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Media/ting Educational Reform: Junior Cycle Reform in the Media

Ann Devitt

Introduction

The manner in which the media frame current events has been the subject of extensive research, particularly in recent years where the power of the media in influencing political processes has come to the fore (Fairclough 2000). At a time when the role of the broad media landscape in shaping public discourse is in focus, this chapter aims to explore how educational reform in Ireland, specifically with regard to the junior cycle, has been represented in the national media. This chapter adds to a small but growing body of literature that investigates the interactions between the media and education. The chapter explores this existing literature, highlighting the processes and effects of media representation of education and educational processes globally and in Ireland specifically. The interpretive corpus analysis approach taken is set out with details of the

A. Devitt (✉)

School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin,
Dublin, Ireland

e-mail: devittan@tcd.ie

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composition and analysis of a one-million-word corpus of national news media articles on the junior cycle from between 2009 and 2019. The chronology of junior cycle reform and associated events is presented and findings discussed in relation to what is foregrounded, what is backgrounded and whose perspectives are presented in the Irish national media representations.

Education in the Media

There is an emerging literature on how media can shape and influence educational discourse, policy and practice as evidenced by special issues in education journals in recent years dedicated to the topic (Thomson 2004; Gerstl-Pepin 2007). While the volume of news about education in the media is typically very small (Coe and Kuttner 2018), in countries such as the UK and the USA coverage has become increasingly politicised since the 1980s (Shine 2019). Blackmore and Thorpe (2003, p. 580) have used the term “media/ation of educational policy” to express the multifaceted role of the media in influencing, shaping and directing public opinion and debate in relation to education. Entman’s concept of “framing” has been widely used in the literature in exploring media representations of events and themes (Entman 1993, p. 52): “To frame is to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them particularly salient in a communicating text. ... Frames then define problems ..., diagnose causes ..., make moral judgments ... and suggest remedies”.

Frames allow us to conceptualise how the media can influence *what* its readers and audience think *about* but also *how* they think about it. Going back 40 years, the role of the media in affecting public awareness and setting the agenda for what is important in educational policy has been widely acknowledged (Rhoades and Rhoades 1987; Gerstl-Pepin 2007). Given the important role of the media in agenda setting, it is disappointing that the little coverage there is of education in the media is typically not focused on topics such as teaching, learning and curriculum (Coe and Kuttner 2018). Instead reporting on education tends to be procedural, focused on events (e.g. in Ireland, the leaving certificate examinations or the release of national test scores) (Shine 2019) and is

typically lacking in context and not informed by evidence of good educational practice. For example, assumptions prevalent particularly in the American and British media about the value of testing as the way to improve education are not supported by evidence-based research but such questions are usually absent in media articles on the topic (Cohen 2010). There is a growing body of literature on this largely coming from the USA, Australia and the UK often taking a critical discourse analysis approach to examine what thematic and event frames are dominant in media discourses on education. The literature would strongly suggest that media reporting on education tends to be perceived as “persistently negative” (Shine 2017). Studies have identified how a discourse of education and/or society in crisis has been promulgated through the media particularly in relation to results on large-scale standardised testing and to educational reform (Anderson 2007; Berliner and Biddle 1997). The crisis is often, though not exclusively, framed in terms of falling “standards” where standards are understood as some form of the 3Rs (i.e. literacy and numeracy) (Thomas 2003). Furthermore, what is termed a “discourse of derision” (Parker 2011, p. 413) has been identified in relation to schools and educators which frames teachers as caring but ineffective and schools and teachers as “to blame” for outcomes which may relate to broader questions of social structural inequality (Cohen 2010). In particular the portrayal of teachers in some jurisdictions has been very negative, termed “teacher bashing” in the UK (Hargreaves et al. 2007, p. 9) or a war on teachers in the US context (Goldstein 2015). These discourses of crisis and derision often set the frame for discussions of accountability and educational reform in the media, in particular in the USA, the UK and Australia. In this context, teachers are often presented as resisting change and not innovative. Teacher unions in particular are presented as obstructive and resisting change while the reform project tends to be presented as innovative and effective (O’Neil and Kendall-Taylor 2011).

Studies have identified how the authoritative voice in discussions of education is often positioned outside the education system while actors within the system, such as teachers, are positioned as “to blame” or voiceless (Thomas 2003). The voices of teachers as critical and authoritative stakeholders are largely absent in the media (Cohen 2010). Within a procedural, events-based approach to educational coverage, the substance

of educational reform is often simplified or obfuscated within the cultural frames of “falling standards” or “system in crisis”.

Education in the Media in Ireland

The literature discussed above is largely focused on jurisdictions where educational reform has become highly politicised, such as the UK, the USA or Australia. The literature on media coverage of education in Ireland is much more limited, though there is some emerging (discussed below). As in other jurisdictions, there is considerable focus on national test scores, in particular The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, exemplified in 2009 with a “kneejerk reaction of the media” (Cosgrove 2015, p. 30) to negative results within the *falling standards of a system in crisis* frame. Ireland is almost unique in the “inordinately high levels of media interest in the Irish State examinations” (O’Donoghue et al. 2017, p. 145), comparable only to Egypt and New York state. The extent of media focus on the Leaving Certificate in particular was described as exceptional by the expert panel reviewing predictability in the examination (Baird et al. 2015). It could be considered both a symptom and a cause of the focus on high stakes terminal examination as the dominant mode of assessment at post-primary education (O’Donoghue et al. 2017).

There is little published critical analysis of media reporting of education in Ireland, but as a key component of the public sector in Ireland, media representations of the public sector in general are highly salient. A small but pertinent body of literature has provided a detailed analysis of how the public sector or aspects of it were represented by the media during the years of austerity post-2008 (Cawley 2012; Murphy 2010; Marron 2012). These analyses identified features of the discourse of derision discussed above with the public sector being consistently portrayed as failing and obstructive. O’Flynn et al. (2014) draw on these analyses to identify how through a process of “othering” a “public versus private dichotomy was maintained” (p. 928) rendering the public sector a visible scapegoat for the economic crisis of the time. As regards a focus on education in the media specifically, Tuffy (2018) focuses on junior cycle reform.

Her critical analysis of media representations of teacher unions in the year 2016 highlights how the Irish media deployed the standard negative frame of teacher unions as obstructive, disruptive and resisting innovation in their reporting (O’Neil and Kendall-Taylor 2011). Consistent with the literature on education in the media, Tuffy found that media reporting tended to be procedural (in dealing with events), rather than substantive (addressing underlying issues or the rationale or context for the reform process). This chapter extends the work by Tuffy in terms of both the time period from 2012 to 2017 and the broader focus on overall coverage of the reform process.

The Study

Research Approach

This chapter aims to examine how the mainstream newsprint and online media has situated and represented the junior cycle curriculum reform process. The studies of educational journalism discussed above have typically taken a Critical Discourse Approach to examine in-depth how meaning is constructed and interpreted through different media. This study takes a different approach and uses corpus linguistic analysis methods which treat the texts for analysis as quantitative rather than as qualitative data. Corpus analysis is a form of content analysis. It is a quantitative and often computational exploration of words and sequences of words in a corpus, a collection of texts from a particular register or genre. The overall approach remains interpretivist in its goals and processes as the corpus analysis findings require interpretation in their context of their original use (Hunston 2002). This study contributes to a very small but growing number of studies deploying this methodology in the field of educational research such as Mulderrig (2009) and Burns et al. (2018).

Corpus analysis is based on the premise that language is not neutral in its representation of events. The lexical and syntactic choices of authors of text carry meaning and when texts are analysed collectively as a corpus it is possible to generalise over these individual choices to identify global

characteristics of the corpus which also carry meaning. If a corpus is representative of a domain then corpus analysis can allow us to identify quantifiable features of language in the corpus texts in an objective fashion which may constitute a linguistic signature. The linguistic signature can reveal key concepts or preoccupations within a domain, its implicit biases and assumptions and how it differentiates itself from other domains. For example, the lexical choice between referring to individuals in a conflict as “rebels” or “fighters” can reveal much in terms of the orientation of the writer to the conflict. If the lexical choice is established across a domain, the simple lexical choice may reveal assumptions and biases that are being communicated consistently to audiences. These choices contribute to the construction of “frames” for communication (Entman 1993).

Corpus analysis provides a means of generalising over linguistic data to yield quantitative results which can then be interpreted in the context of their original use (Hunston 2002). The term corpus analysis in fact encompasses a range of techniques both manual and computational which entail an exploration of a large body of text, usually representative of a text genre or domain. The analysis focuses on identifying lexical choices and structures which are distinctive to the study corpus in contrast to general language. The analyses conducted can vary but often include identification of keywords, collocations (common word combinations), common syntactic patterns or features and so on. While corpus analysis can provide some context for interpretation, it does abstract away from specific texts and does not conduct a fully contextualised analysis of individual texts as in, for example, critical discourse analysis. Furthermore, this approach does not make any claims about the effect of corpus documents on a reader (Allen 2017). However, the potential to draw on very large datasets of text over extended time periods making generalisations over texts not through inference but through computation is valuable.

The Corpus

This study focuses on the Irish national newspaper media representations of the junior cycle reform process. In order to capture that, a

corpus of Irish national news media texts was collected from the news database LexisNexis (<https://www.lexisnexis.com>) which includes 47 Irish national and regional print and online news outlets. Texts were selected for inclusion in the corpus on the basis of a keyword search for articles containing the term “junior cycle” from the following national news sources: *Irish Daily Mail*; *Irish Independent*; *The Irish Times*; *The Herald*; *Irish Daily Sun*; *Irish Daily Mirror*; *Irish Examiner*; *Irish Daily Star*; *Sunday Independent*; *The Sunday Times*; *Sunday World*; *Irish Mail on Sunday*; *The Sunday Business Post*; *The Irish Sun on Sunday*; BreakingNews.ie; Raidió Teilifís Éireann, Ireland’s national television and radio broadcaster (RTE) News; and *The Irish Sunday Mirror*. The date span for the corpus was from January 2009 to July 2019 to set the main years of the reform process (2012–2017) within the context of general reporting on education in Ireland. The analyses presented below mainly focus on the period 2012–2017. 2045 articles, totalling over one million words, were identified, downloaded, trimmed of meta-data and lemmatised (removal of inflexions, e.g. verb endings). The distribution of the number of articles per year across the 2009–2019 timespan is presented in Fig. 4.1.

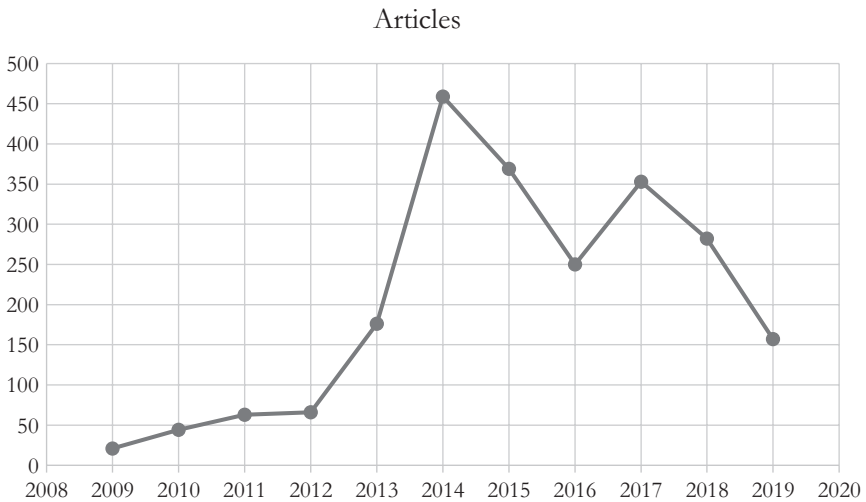


Fig. 4.1 Number of articles per year from 2009 to 2019

Corpus Processing and Analysis

Corpus analysis draws on automated text analysis techniques as well as advances in text digitisation and storage. For the purposes of this analysis, the corpus was lemmatised using SpaCy's lemmatiser in Python and the AntConc software (Anthony 2019) and SketchEngine (Kilgarriff et al. 2014) was used for keyword and collocation analysis. The reference corpus in AntConc was the British National Corpus (BNC) (2007). A stop list was added manually to eliminate function words. The frequency word list and keyword list were generated. All outputs were saved and the process was repeated each year. AntConc generates keywords, words that have significantly higher frequency in the study corpus than general language, using log likelihood, an effective test for distinctiveness of words within a corpus (Kilgarriff 1996). The P value was set to $p < 0.05$ (+ Bonferroni), setting the critical value at 3.84 (the 95th percentile) to reduce the likelihood of anomalies due to chance. Sentiment analysis was performed with TextBlob (<https://textblob.readthedocs.io>) in Python which generates a sentiment polarity metric between -1 and 1.

The Chronology of Junior Cycle Reform

The chronology of the reform in terms of the timing of key documents and curriculum roll-out has been set out elsewhere in this volume, for example, in Chaps. 9 and 12. This section sets this reform timeline in the context of broader junior cycle-related events, in particular the context of austerity and the chronology of the industrial relations dispute associated with the curriculum implementation and related industrial action. This narrative is essential to understanding the media coverage of the reform process. The social and economic backdrop to the reform process had major implications for how it was received and presented within the education sector but also by the media and the public at large. Following the banking crisis in 2008, Ireland entered a period of recession with a severe programme of austerity. In the years that followed, the education sector, along with all other public services, underwent significant cuts to

funding and teacher pay with a highly contentious lower pay scale introduced for new entrants to the teaching profession. At the height of austerity in 2011 (following poor results in PISA 2009 which received wide coverage in the national media), the Department of Education and Skills launched a literacy and numeracy strategy with far-reaching targets across all levels of the education system. Junior cycle reform had been in incubation for many years and the literacy and numeracy strategy acted as a catalyst for its launch in 2012. The chronology of subsequent events is set out in Table 4.1. Figure 4.2 presents the timeline of events against a time-series plot of numbers of articles per month (represented as an s-score of the count) of the corpus.

Representations of Junior Cycle Reform in the Media

The chronology of the reform process is set out above. This section presents the corpus analysis findings as to how this was portrayed in the news media from 2012 to 2017.

Areas of Focus: Keyword Analysis

Figures 4.3, 4.4 and 4.5 set out the top 20 keywords, the top 20 multiword key phrases and the top 10 keywords per year of the corpus respectively. The keyword analysis (Fig. 4.3) of the full corpus attests to media coverage broadly centred on those most affected by junior cycle reform: the teachers, students and schools. In addition, the teacher unions are prominent as is the theme of assessment.

The multiword analysis (Fig. 4.4) which identifies phrases that are distinctive in the corpus highlights the explicit and extensive focus on the theme of assessment, specifically school/classroom-based assessment as the only aspect of the reform agenda discussed with any regularity. The only other aspect of curricular reform discussed relatively frequently is the junior cycle short courses, in particular the new Chinese and coding

Table 4.1 Timeline of junior cycle reform–related events

Date	Event
Oct 2012	1/10 minister launches framework for junior cycle 24/10 primary and post-primary teachers protest austerity cuts
Jan 2014	Junior Cycle Student Award (JCSA) implementation paper Unions ballot members re industrial action
Mar 2014	Department of Education and Skills (DES) sends circular to schools regarding junior cycle implementation Unions vote for industrial action
Jul 2014	Minister Ruairi Quinn resigns, minister O’Sullivan appointed
Sep 2014	Junior cycle English starts in schools Talks ongoing between minister, department and unions
Oct 2014	Unions vote to extend industrial action
Nov 2014	Talks on junior cycle reform with unions and department
02-Dec 2014	Strike action by Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI) and Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI)
22-Jan 2015	Strike action by TUI and ASTI
Mar 2015	Travers report “A way forward for Junior Cycle (JC)”
22-May 2015	Minister announces breakthrough in junior cycle reform
14-Jul 2015	Agreement reached with TUI union on all aspects
29-Aug 2015	ASTI decides to put proposal to a vote
Sep 2015	ASTI rejects department proposals for junior cycle
Oct 2015	ASTI rejects Landsdowne road proposals
Jan 2016	First junior cycle English Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) ASTI issues letter to members not to engage with junior cycle
Feb 2016	JC science and business specifications published
Mar 2016	Circular to schools re junior cycle implementation, ASTI junior cycle conference
Sep 2016	Junior cycle science and business studies start ASTI ballot to continue industrial action
Oct 2016	ASTI votes for industrial action and announces seven strike days
Nov 2016	ASTI-DES dispute, followed by talks and statement of assurances from DES
12-Jan 2017	ASTI recommends rejection of DES proposal
02-Feb 2017	ASTI rejects DES proposals
May 2017	ASTI announces special convention to suspend industrial action
Jun 2017	ASTI suspends industrial action First junior cycle English exam
Sep 2017	JC Irish, Modern Foreign Languages (MFL), art, wellbeing start
01-Nov 2017	ASTI votes to continue to suspend industrial action

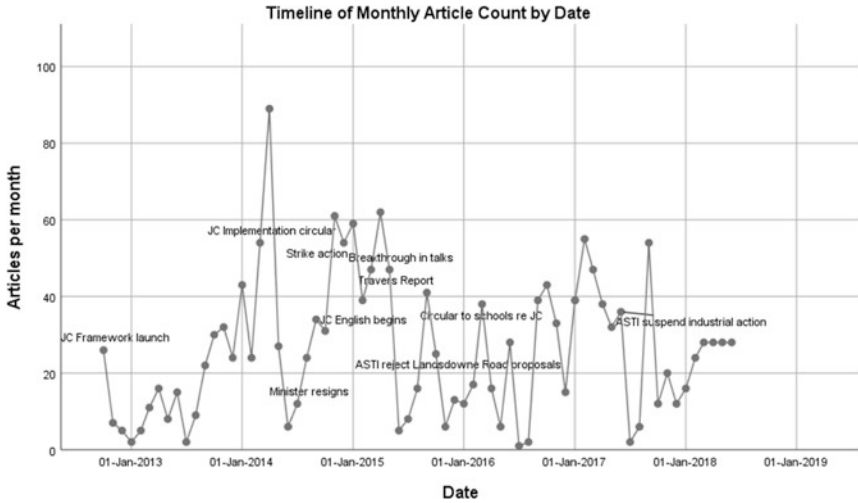


Fig. 4.2 Timeline of junior cycle events with monthly news article count

school	student	teacher	junior	year	education	cycle	new	union	level
ASTI	ireland	exam	reform	subject	cert	one	assessment	work	learn

Fig. 4.3 Top 20 keywords in junior cycle corpus

(new) Junior Cycle (reform)	industrial action	school-based assessment	general secretary	strike action	senior cycle	second level	continuous assessment	classroom-based assessment	primary level
third level	second level education	external assessment	secondary school	continuous professional development	short course	school management	new curriculum	education system	classroom assessment

Fig. 4.4 Top 20 key multiword phrases in JC corpus

courses created by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). These keyword and multiword phrases demonstrate the narrow focus on the reform agenda evident in the media. The focus on industrial action and unions illustrates the predominance of events (procedural frame) in relation to reform and an emphasis on the major contentious issue—changes to assessment—as opposed to a broader discussion of the reform context and goals. While assessment is critical to curriculum reform and enactment due to the backwash effect of assessment methods

2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Irish •all •course •Quinn •Euro •cost •short •Chinese •old •institute •book 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •ASTI •member •course •Quinn •history •per cent •concern •Road •Haddington •deal •agreement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •teacher •junior •education •cycle •union •minister •reform •Ireland •Quinn •change •plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •teacher •union •reform •minister •assessment •teachers •plan •O'Sullivan •strike •travers •proposal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •ASTI •union •exam •member •pay •question •section •over •strike •mark •action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •ASTI •member •time •pay •English •action •science •result •language •industrial •dispute

Fig. 4.5 Top ten keywords for each year of the junior cycle corpus

on teaching and learning, the narrowness of coverage of curricular reform in the media could not provide the public with a broad and balanced view of the reform agenda. Furthermore, the discussion of assessment focused on the industrial relations dispute rather than engaging with an evidence base around the issue, exemplifying Gerstl-Pepin's notion of the media as "thin public sphere" where "the media operate more as a billboard of opposing viewpoints" (2007, p. 4).

The procedural, events-based approach (what Anderson [2007] calls a spectacle) is further demonstrated in the year-on-year keyword analysis illustrated in Fig. 4.5 which highlights a focus on the events and protagonists in the reform dispute. The reform itself fades into the background. It becomes merely context to a newsworthy industrial dispute affecting the nation. The prominent players are Minister Quinn, Minister O'Sullivan and the unions, with the ASTI particularly prominent as the ASTI dispute extended into 2016–2017. The theme of assessment is still dominant in 2015 and 2016 (with the keyword "mark") as this was the focus for the industrial action. The keyword "pay" only emerges in 2016–2017 as the industrial dispute impacted on pay for supervision for ASTI union members as the dispute escalated. Schools and students are no longer keywords nor is learn. The focus for coverage is not the reform itself but the negotiation around reform. This limited representation of what junior cycle reform really entailed could have significant implications for public opinion and the reform process, given that the public and even teachers often learn about major curriculum change through the news media (Shine 2019).

Sentiment Orientation to Reform

Figure 4.6 sets out the automatically generated monthly sentiment measure for the corpus articles as a moving point average, a graphic representation which smooths out short term fluctuations and highlights long term trends. The graph demonstrates the trajectory of peaks and troughs from launch through an increasingly negative media around 2013, reflecting not only negativity to junior cycle reform but also to austerity and the public service more generally. The initial industrial dispute with both teacher unions through 2014 follows another dip in sentiment with its nadir as the teacher strikes took place in December 2014–January 2015. The subsequent period with the publication of the Travers report, talks and possible breakthrough points in negotiations shows a gradual upswing in sentiment. This is followed by a period of ever-increasing negative sentiment only reaching a turning point with renewed optimism over talks in January 2017. This aligns with Tuffy (2018) who found consistent negative framing of the teacher unions in her analysis of the media representations of ASTI during this period of significant negative sentiment in 2016.

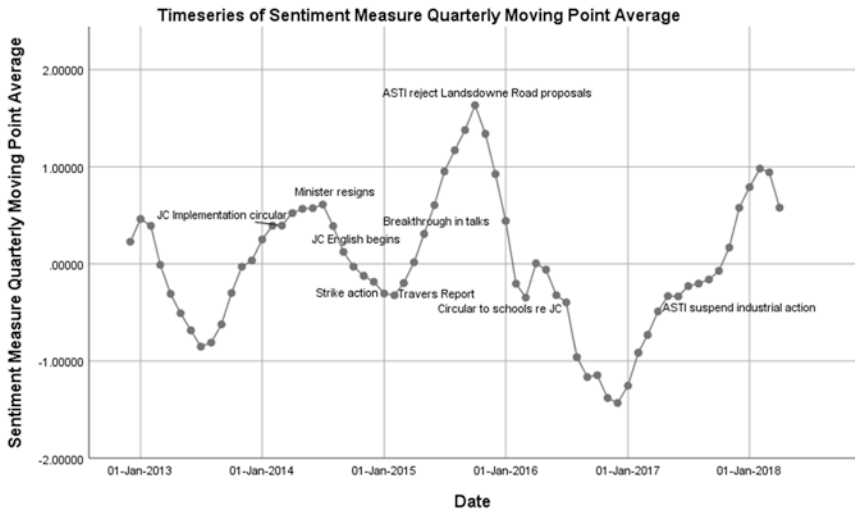


Fig. 4.6 Timeseries plot of monthly sentiment measure

Stakeholder Perspectives

This chapter also sets out to identify which of the stakeholders within the reform process (officials, teachers, students and parents) are most prominent and how their perspectives are represented in the media. This was explored through collocation analysis for each stakeholder group, examining which words most frequently co-occur with the stakeholder label and in what grammatical structure. This provides an insight into whether different stakeholders are represented as active or passive and how/whether their views are communicated.

Teacher: The word teacher occurs 5151 times in the corpus, 4182 times as plural “teachers” and 969 times as singular “teacher”. Approximately 200 instances of the word teacher in the entire corpus refer to actual teachers being quoted or interviewed. This would strongly suggest that while teachers as a group (e.g. “many teachers” occurs 61 times) are highly prominent in the media coverage (in particular as a unionised group), individual teachers are not. The voice of teachers is represented via the teacher unions and via the education journalists but rarely in discussion with individuals who are teachers. The predominance of instances of actual teachers’ voices in the articles is at the times of the teacher conferences where teachers are easy for journalists to access. As regards the major themes discussed in relation to teachers, again “assess” is the most frequent verb (100 instances) that co-occurs with “teacher” in subject position, “mark” accounts for 29 co-occurrence instances, illustrating the dominant concern with the assessment theme in junior cycle reform. Similarly, among the most common modifiers of the noun “teacher” is “own” which occurs in sentences related to teachers assessing their *own* students’ work. Nouns modified by teacher demonstrate the focus on the industrial action with common collocations including “union”, “concerns”, “strike” and “opposition”. Interestingly, the relative frequency of

modifiers “new” and “young” which co-occur over 120 times with the word “teacher” illustrates the dispute over lower pay scales being introduced for new teachers during austerity which was contemporaneous with the junior cycle reform process and related industrial action.

Students: Students also are highly prominent in the media coverage of junior cycle, with 5677 instances of the word student and 688 instances of the word pupil. However, while the students are discussed throughout the corpus, individual student voices are all but absent from the media coverage. Given that the argument against school-based assessment often centres on its impact on the student-teacher relationship, the perspective of the student should be critical to understanding this. This is hence a notable absence.

Parents: The term “parent” understandably is less prominent in the news coverage with only 948 instances of the term in the corpus, most commonly co-occurring with the word student(s). Other common collocations emphasise parental concerns (“anxious”, “needs” and “concerns”, etc.). Again, the voices of actual parents are typically not represented but rather a generic parent body (“many parents” and “most parents”) is presented.

Principals: School management (62 instances), management bodies (45 instances) and principals (455 instances) have some visibility in the corpus. Interestingly, of the 185 instances of the word principal in the singular, almost half refer to named principals discussing relevant issues. In contrast with teachers who are clearly the main focus for media coverage, individual principals’ voices are given greater prominence.

In summary, teachers are not represented as knowledgeable contributors but rather as a homogeneous protagonist group in the key dispute around assessment and pay. Principals on the other hand are given somewhat privileged status of critical and knowledgeable stakeholders with valuable commentary on the issues. The absence of student and parent voices indicates their representation as passive participants, rather than

active agents in events. Again, this analysis of stakeholder representation points to a procedural frame for reporting on junior cycle reform with a narrow focus on events and protagonists in relation to the major contentious issue with little engagement with the broader research agenda.

Discussion

This chapter set out to explore how junior cycle reform was framed in the Irish national news media in order to consider media influence on public discourse in relation to this topic. The corpus analysis presented here clearly identifies that the media framed the reform process as focused primarily on one key theme, that of assessment. This emerged in the keyword, multiword and stakeholder analyses. This prioritisation of assessment aligns with the well-documented exceptionally intensive Irish media coverage of the State examinations process in Ireland each year (Baird et al. 2015). It also is in consonance with the testing focus in the US and UK media (Cohen 2010). Assessment is presented as the subject of conflict in an overall procedural or event-based frame for coverage of the reform process. Within this, there is little evidence of a critical discussion of the evidence base for different models of assessment. Given that the media are often the main source of information on major curriculum change for the public and even teachers (Shine 2019), this narrow focus on assessment and the limited critical engagement with even this topic would not provide support for well-informed public debate on this pivotal dimension of the reform agenda.

While the corpus analysis strongly suggests that the reform process is presented within a shallow procedural frame with limited substantive engagement with the reform agenda, the coverage of junior cycle reform in the media did not utilise the *system in crisis* frame which is very common in other contexts (Anderson 2007) and in the coverage of the public service more generally (Cawley 2012; Murphy 2010) and especially the health service (Marron 2012) during this period in Ireland. Nor was there a specific focus on assessment as the mechanism to improve a failing education system as promulgated in the US and UK news media (Cohen 2010). Importantly there is also no evidence of a “discourse of derision”

(Parker 2011, p. 413) in relation to schools and teachers utilised by mainstream media in other jurisdictions, such as Australia or the UK. This is not to say that the coverage of educational professionals is positive in the news media. The sentiment analysis presented above does indicate a negative orientation in coverage of events, particularly at the critical periods of the industrial dispute. The analysis of the stakeholder perspectives strongly suggests that the media does not represent teachers as knowledgeable, critical *individuals* with insights into the reform process and agenda. Teachers are represented in the context of the teacher unions and industrial action and as noted in Tuffy (2018), the media deployed the standard negative frames of obstructive, resistant teacher unions. However, the voices of individual *principals* in the media coverage did provide a space for educational professionals as stakeholders with a valued contribution to make on the process that could inform public opinion and debate.

The analysis demonstrates that, while the media coverage of the reform agenda was shallow and limited in its capacity to inform public debate, it did not position the education system as a failing and ineffective system. The coverage would do little to inform public debate but was not overtly structured to orient public opinion against the education system as a whole.

Summary

This chapter identified how the coverage of junior cycle in the Irish news media was very much “events-based”, focusing on the industrial relations issue and how the context, rationale and content of the reform were largely obscured. The changes to teaching and learning and curriculum content received little attention in contrast to a primary focus on assessment, a common topic in educational journalism and the focus for the industrial dispute. The discussion highlighted how this representation mirrors international trends in journalism to take a procedural rather than critical approach to educational reform and education more generally. Such a representation in the media skews the portrayal of the reform and of the teaching and learning process to the public. While there were

some early pieces about the broader reform agenda, the news coverage quickly focused on the assessment and industrial relations issues. Furthermore, the authentic and individual voices of the key stakeholders in junior cycle reform, the students, parents and teachers, are largely absent from the media coverage. Clearly, the complexity of the reform agenda and the requirement for changes to beliefs as well as practice in teaching and learning require a more engaged and critical discussion in the public arena. Simplistic and un-nuanced coverage of education in the media has prompted recommendations for specific education-related training for journalists focusing on a deeper understanding of fundamental issues such as standardised testing (Shine 2019). For example, the Media Centre for Education Research Australia (<https://www.mcera.org.au/>) was established in 2017 to communicate educational research evidence to the media and foster more informed debate on educational policy and practice. Against this backdrop, the author echoes recent calls for educators (Thomas 2011) and students (O'Sullivan 2014) to reclaim the discourse on education, to provide counter-narratives based on lived experiences, to engage with the media and to move the debate from a "thin" public sphere to a richer arena for public debate.

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