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Individual Paper

**Newspapers' portrayal of the teaching profession during the COVID-19 pandemic
in England: A content analysis**

Laura Oxley & Lisa E. Kim

Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers in England reported that they felt the teaching profession was negatively portrayed by the media, leading to a sense that teachers were not valued in society. This perception may have contributed to a decline in teachers' wellbeing during the pandemic. We examine the extent to which teachers' perception of the media's negative portrayal of the teaching profession is supported by evidence. We conducted a content analysis of frontpage headlines in newspapers in England, related to COVID-19 and aspects of pre-16 education, between March 2020 and January 2022. The findings supported teachers' perceptions, that there was an element of negativity in headlines related to teachers during the pandemic, to some extent. However, the findings indicated that other groups (e.g., teaching unions, medical professionals, and the government) were also portrayed as responsible for the challenging situations in schools in England during the pandemic. There was no difference found in the portrayal of the teaching profession between newspapers of different political ideologies. As teachers' perceptions of the media portrayal of their profession during the pandemic has been linked to teachers' wellbeing, further research into the origins of this portrayal of teachers could be beneficial to prevent the exacerbation of this issue.

Keywords: *teachers; wellbeing; content analysis; media; COVID-19 pandemic*

Introduction

Teachers educate and look after the welfare of pupils, and thereby are essential to the educational system. Yet, the low occupational status of the teaching profession has long been an issue in many countries (Cohen, 1967), including England, which persists to today (Dolton et al., 2018; Stromquist, 2018). Such low social esteem of the profession is reflected in teachers' belief that their profession is not valued by society. Specifically, results from OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2018 showed that, on average, only 25.8% of teachers believed their profession is valued by society (OECD, 2020; Schleicher, 2018). Though slightly above OECD average, there was a decline in the perceived value reported among teachers in England: from 35.4% in 2013 to 28.8% in 2018 (OECD, 2020).

The pandemic somewhat exaggerated the low appreciation of the teaching profession in England. A longitudinal analysis of teachers' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic found that teachers in England reported a consistent feeling of being undervalued (Kim et al., 2021). This was despite the fact that teachers' workload increased, and they had to upskill themselves to ensure that they could continue teaching and looking after the welfare of the pupils (Kim et al., 2021; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020) as schools oscillated between reopening fully and partially, despite the increased risk of COVID-19 infection that they exposed themselves to (Baker et al., 2020).

Portrayal of Teachers in the Media

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, studies have reported a negative portrayal of the teaching profession around the world (e.g., Alhamdan et al., 2014). The discourse of teacher quality is acknowledged as being highly political and, in a study by Mockler (2020), the theme of "crisis" was identified, with a focus on 'blaming teachers' being

highlighted within the media coverage. These findings on the negative portrayal of teachers in the media echo teacher union members' beliefs, with 53% of Education International teacher union members reporting that the media promotes a negative attitude towards the teaching unions, and 39% a negative attitude towards teachers (Stromquist, 2018).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, studies found that teachers in England felt that the media was portraying their profession in a negative way and that this was contributing to their perception of a lack of value and support for teachers within the wider society. Specifically, some teachers highlighted that the perception of the profession in the media was that teachers were not working, which was in sharp contrast to the increase in workload they reported experiencing (Kim et al., 2021). Moreover, teachers in England reported the negative media representations of teachers' attitudes around returning to school, reporting that they felt their legitimate safety concerns were being framed in a way that made it seem they did not want to work (Johnson & Coleman, 2021). Teachers identified the media as a source of anxiety for their profession arising from a concern that the media would create a culture of blame, aimed at teachers, following the issues with teacher assessed grades in 2020 (Johnson & Coleman, 2021). This study addresses a gap in the literature by examining the extent to which teachers' perception of the media's negative portrayal of the teaching profession is supported by evidence.

Influence of Media Headlines

Newspapers play a key role in influencing public perceptions of an issue or group (Lodhi et al., 2019), and headlines are particularly important in the way that the reader makes sense of the news (Lee, 2022). In this study, we focus on the way in which the headlines may shape the public perception of the teaching profession, as noted in

previous studies (e.g., Mockler, 2020). The frontpage headlines were specifically chosen for this analysis as they have been shown to have powerful framing effects on people's adopted attitudes (Andrew, 2016). Around 25% of headlines have been found to include intention markers, which are textual means by which news practitioners mediate statements via which the reader makes sense of the social world (Schreiber & Kampf, 2022). This gives a level of power to newspapers, in terms of shaping people's beliefs about whether teaching is a valuable occupation in society or not. Negative portrayals of the profession may have an impact on teachers' mental health and wellbeing (Kim et al., 2021; Johnson & Coleman, 2021), and thus is worthy of examination, particularly in a sensitive time such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This is especially pertinent given that there is currently a sustained teacher retention crisis in many countries around the world, including the UK. Supporting teacher wellbeing has been identified as an essential element of tackling this recruitment crisis (Jerrim et al., 2021; Kidger et al., 2016).

Aims of the Study

While there have been studies exploring teachers' perceptions of the way their profession is valued in society during the COVID-19 pandemic, there are currently no studies examining to what extent this perception is evidenced in media publications. Therefore, this paper aims to explore how teachers were portrayed in the frontpage headlines of national newspapers in England during the COVID-19 pandemic, from the first school closures in March 2020 through the ongoing pandemic at the time of the study in January 2022. Specifically, the research question (RQ) is: *How did national newspapers in England portray teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

Methods

We selected eight UK daily national newspapers, with a range of circulation figures, for inclusion in the study. These publications were selected from the twelve most popular newspapers read by adults, as reported in the Ofcom (2019) survey. Eight were selected from these twelve due to ease of online accessibility of past frontpages; namely, Daily Express, Daily Mail, Daily Mirror, Daily Star, The Guardian, The Independent, The Observer, and The Telegraph. The frontpages of the eight newspapers were viewed online, via the website Paperboy.com, for each day from 1 March 2020 to 3 January 2022.

The eight papers were divided using a typology used in previous studies (e.g., Hilton et al., 2010; Williams et al., 2008) in order to describe a broad sample of newspapers with a range of readership profiles and political orientations. The eight selected newspapers were ranked in terms of their position on the political spectrum, as identified by a YouGov survey (Smith, 2017). This is the same approach used in previous similar studies that conducted newspaper content analysis on different topics (e.g., Bryson et al., 2019). That is, based on the results of this survey, four of the newspapers (i.e., Daily Mirror, Daily Star, The Guardian, and The Observer,) were identified as left wing or left of centre. The Independent was identified as broadly centrist. The other three newspapers (i.e., Daily Express, Daily Mail, and The Telegraph) were identified as right wing or right of centre. Thus, the analysed headlines were from a wide range of the political spectrum.

The main headline on the frontpage, identified by the largest size of text and prominence in position on the page, was chosen as the unit of analysis (Elo et al., 2014). Frontpage headlines were recorded when they were identified by the author as meeting the following inclusion criteria: a) related to the COVID-19 pandemic; and b) related to

schools, teachers, or other aspects of pre-16 education, such as assessment. The headlines were recorded by date and by newspaper. The frequency of the relevant headlines was recorded by month, by individual paper, and according to the political stance of the paper (as identified via Smith, 2017). These data were examined alongside a timeline of key pandemic-related events, for example, when the schools were closed to most pupils and when they fully re-opened to different year groups.

A sample of 156 frontpage headlines were identified from the eight selected newspapers, as meeting the inclusion criteria. A frequency analysis was carried out to examine how frequently relevant headlines appeared each month during the time period included in this study. This also explored whether there were any significant differences in the average number of headlines between the newspapers identified as left wing or left of centre, those identified as broadly centrist, and those identified as right wing or right of centre.

In parallel, a qualitative content analysis was carried out on the headline data, whereby patterns of words or phrases were identified to indicate themes within the data, to further investigate the overall representations portrayed by the headlines. The lead author identified the headlines; a process, which was repeated 11 months after the initial coding (initial coding: January 2022, repetition of coding: December 2022) to ensure that the results are robust (Bryson et al., 2019). Elo et al. (2014) suggest that inductive qualitative content analysis is often conducted by one researcher and that, whilst time consuming, returning to the data is an unavoidable task to corroborate the interpretation. These interpretations of the data are presented in the Results section of the paper, illustrated with representative examples of the headlines to show a connection between the data and results (as per Elo et al., 2014).

Results

There were 156 frontpage headlines identified from the eight selected UK national daily newspapers in England from 1 March 2020 to 3 January 2022, that related to both the COVID-19 pandemic and either schools, teachers or other aspects of pre-16 education.

Frequency Analysis

The frequency of relevant headlines peaked at key points in the timeline of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the initial reopening of schools (May 2020: 14 headlines [8.97%], and June 2020: 12 headlines [7.69%]), the period of exam results controversy (August 2020: 48 headlines [30.77%]), and the partial closure of schools for the second time (January 2021: 22 headlines [14.10%]).

When cross-referencing time points with the longitudinal interview data of teachers in England from Kim et al.'s (2021) study, it was found that the frequency of relevant headlines did indeed correspond with the decline of teachers' mental health and wellbeing. Kim et al.'s (2021) study showed a decline in teachers' mental health and wellbeing across the time points, consistent with the increase in frequency of relevant headlines across the time points.

There were minimal differences between the number of relevant headlines in the four newspapers that were identified as left wing or left of centre (74 headlines [47.44%]; average per newspaper=11.86%) and the three newspapers identified as right wing or right of centre (65 headlines [41.67%]; averaged per newspaper=13.89%). There were 17 relevant headlines (10.90%) from the one newspaper identified as broadly centrist.

Qualitative Content Analysis

The qualitative analysis identified the following groups as being held responsible for the challenging situation schools were in during the pandemic: *Government; Teachers; Teaching Unions; and Medical Professionals*. Two other prominent themes consisted of headlines related to: *Exam Concerns; and Safety Concerns for Pupils*.

There were several headlines ($n = 27$; 17.31%) which pointed blame towards the Government for the schools being closed and the challenging situation of the pandemic. Two headlines described teachers as heroes, one from a right wing and one from a left-wing newspaper. However, there were also some headlines ($n = 12$; 7.69%) which implied that teachers were responsible for the schools being, or remaining, closed. Other headlines ($n = 6$; 3.85%) explicitly sought to point blame at the teaching unions for schools being closed. There were also three examples of headlines (1.92%) which pointed the blame towards medical professionals for the school closures. (See Table 1 for examples of headlines casting blame on different groups.)

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Exam Concerns

There were 30 headlines in the sample which focussed on concerns about students' exams (19.23%). Qualitative analysis of the headlines suggests that many of the headlines during August 2020 were related to the controversy over assessment and exam grades that occurred during this time (e.g., "Exam grades pulled hours before results day", *The Independent*, 20/08/20). Specifically, many of these headlines tended to point the blame for the difficulties at the government and the then Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson, in particular (e.g., "Gavin Williamson is the man who won't take the blame", *Daily Mail*, 19/08/20).

Safety Concerns for Pupils

Several headlines in August 2020 were speculating about the possibility of schools not being able to fully re-open due to a second wave of infections (e.g., “Close pubs and shops to reopen schools”, The Telegraph, 05/08/20) and, towards the end of the same month, headlines reporting on the requirement for pupils to wear masks in school (e.g., “PM forced to backtrack on face masks in schools”, The Guardian, 26/08/20). Throughout the period focussed on for this study, there were 25 headlines (16.03%) which focussed on concerns for student safety and mitigating measures for this.

Other Headlines

The remaining headlines not covered by the above areas ($n=51$; 32.69%) were related to a number of different topics, which did not fit within a coherent theme. For example, some headlines reported factual events (e.g., “Primary schools to go back in June”, The Telegraph, 03/05/20); others reported on the restrictions (e.g., “School chaos as 21m more people face toughest curbs”, The Guardian, 31/12/20); and others reported on the impact of the school closures on children’s physical and mental health (e.g., “School closures will trigger UK child mental health crisis”, The Observer, 21/06/20; “Closed schools obesity crisis”, Daily Mail, 15/06/20).

Discussion

The media plays an important role in shaping the perceptions of the general public. Studies have reported teachers’ beliefs on a negative portrayal of the profession during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was a contributing factor to a decline in teacher mental health and wellbeing (Johnson & Coleman, 2021; Kim et al., 2021). This current study aimed to examine whether the media did indeed portray teachers in a negative light by conducting a content analysis on the national frontpage headlines in England.

Indeed, whilst there was a level of negativity towards teachers to a limited extent, there were also other groups, outside the teaching profession, who were held responsible for the challenges faced by the schools and education sector during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Negative Portrayal of Teachers in the Media

To some extent, the findings from this study support previous studies' findings on teachers' experiences during the pandemic on the negative role media had played in portraying the teaching profession during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kim et al., 2021; Johnson & Coleman, 2021). There were some headlines that explicitly held teachers responsible for the schools being closed. In context, the National Education Union initiated an appeal to the government to delay school reopenings when the UK Prime Minister announced on 24 May 2020 that primary and secondary schools were reopening for certain year groups on 1 June 2020 — an appeal which led to the profession being widely denigrated as “lazy” and “scaremongers” (Whittaker, 2020). This type of rhetoric, which was also found in the headlines, could potentially have encouraged families to see the teaching profession as the reason for the high-stress situation of trying to home-school children whilst working from home and paved the way for a lack of value for the teaching profession within the wider society. The information could have been framed in a different way to create a culture of support for the profession. For example, by emphasising the work that teachers were doing to support children's online learning while the schools remained closed.

Casting Blame Also on Other Groups

Teachers were not the only group who were held responsible for the school closures. There were also headlines which pointed the blame at teaching unions and doctors. These headlines were still potentially problematic for teachers, as there was the

implication that if teachers agreed with the teaching unions' position or the advice of the medical professionals, then they did not want the schools to reopen. This finding was consistent with reports that teachers felt criticised for questioning whether it was safe and responsible for schools to reopen for in-person teaching for all pupils (Asbury & Kim, 2020). This issue was potentially compounded by the headlines which depicted teachers as heroes. It could be argued that these headlines created the impression that any teachers who questioned the return to school premises were not doing their jobs.

There were headlines which held the government and the then Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson, responsible for the challenging school situation. However, these tended to have been focussed on the exam grade controversy rather than on the actual decisions about whether schools should be open. Johnson and Coleman (2021) found that teachers in their study felt that the media created a culture of blaming teachers for the difficulties with the exam results, as they were teacher assessed grades. This was not supported by the analysis of the headlines, which tended towards blaming the government for this issue.

Headlines and Teachers' Mental Health and Wellbeing

The frequency of the relevant headlines was found to correspond with the decline in teachers' mental health and wellbeing found at the time points of Kim et al.'s (2021) study. At times when there were more relevant headlines, this was also a time when teachers' mental health and wellbeing were shown to decline in the corresponding study time points. However, the rise in relevant headline frequency and the decline in teachers' mental health and wellbeing also corresponds with the rise in COVID-related restrictions. It is unlikely that the rise in frequency of relevant headlines is the sole cause of the decline in teachers' mental health and wellbeing. In fact, it appears to be more likely that the rise in COVID-related restrictions meant changes in schools. These

changes were reported by the newspapers and also caused additional stress and challenges for teachers.

However, it is possible that the rise in the frequency of relevant headlines could also have been a contributing factor to the decline in teachers' mental health and wellbeing. Kim et al. (2021) and Johnson and Coleman (2021) both found that the negative perception of the teaching profession in the media had a negative impact on teachers' mental health and wellbeing. A rise in the media attention being directed at the profession could reasonably be assumed to have perhaps contributed to this negative impact.

Limitations and Future Directions

The study has only examined the frontpage headlines of eight selected UK national daily newspapers in England. It does not take account of the details of the article, consider articles or headlines within the newspapers. This could be an important avenue for further research as the headlines of an article can show a considerable difference to the actual content of the article in terms of emphasis and the salience of the issues covered (Andrew, 2016).

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that teachers' experiences of the media portraying their profession in a negative way are supported, to some extent, by a content analysis of frontpage headlines in a selection of UK national daily newspapers. It is important that the potential impact of the media narrative on teachers is carefully considered. Foster et al. (2018) draw attention to how news reports actively shape individual's understanding of events, by creating a story which simplifies and explains the situation. Individuals then combine their own personal experience with this knowledge in order to create a shared reality. Through the media framing teachers in a

negative light, this leads to a critical perception of teachers being absorbed by the public and by teachers themselves. As teachers' perceptions of the media portrayal of their profession during the pandemic has been linked to teachers' wellbeing (Kim et al, 2021; Johnson & Coleman, 2021), further research into the origins and impact of the portrayal of teachers in the media could be beneficial to prevent this issue from being exacerbated. This is especially pertinent in the current time, as the school system starts to recover from the impact of the pandemic and the challenges that are still ongoing.

Data Availability Statement: The data that support the findings of this study are available on reasonable request from the corresponding author.

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Table 1: Frequency and examples of headlines casting blame on different groups

Group	Frequency of headlines	Headline example
Government	n = 27 (17.31%)	“Confidence in Williamson drains away as schools prepare to reopen”, The Guardian, 19/02/20
Teachers	n = 12 (7.69%)	“Teachers demand all schools stay closed”, The Telegraph, 02/01/21
Teaching Unions	n = 6 (3.85%)	“Squabbling unions told to get back into school”, The Telegraph, 16/05/20
Medical Professionals	n = 3 (1.92%)	“Now it’s doctors at war on schools”, Daily Mail, 17/05/20