This study examines how UK newspapers communicate certain perspectives on education while overlooking or silencing others, and the implications this poses for public understanding of education and wider social issues. Newspapers occupy a powerful position in the UK. The Leveson (2012) Inquiry into the press reminds us that in contrast to television and radio broadcasting which is required to be impartial, printed news media are entitled to be partisan. According to Leveson (2012, p.684), a fusion of fact and comment is inevitable, referred to as ‘agenda journalism’. However, Leveson does criticise the tendency among sections of the press to prioritise the worldview of a newspaper to the detriment of the accuracy of a news story.

Building on previous research into newspaper representations of domestic violence (Lloyd and Ramon, 2015), this present study examines how education is portrayed in sections of the national press since the formation of the coalition government in 2010. In line with discourse analytical approaches the study applies discourse analysis to both online and hardcopy newspaper articles to examine how article content is foregrounded and backgrounded according to a newspaper’s discursive representation of the teaching profession, state education system and academic selection. Coding frameworks for analysing data emerged inductively during the process of researching the newspapers, and also deductively through being theoretically informed by existing literature.

The study provides new insights into how educational events are used as a conduit for commentating on broader topics such as poverty, whereby the narrative of individual deficit tends to receive greater news prominence than structural inequalities resonant of neo-liberalism; and conversely, how wider news events are used as a medium for holding the education system responsible for contributing to perceived social problems.

When depictions of education in sections of the press are analysed, findings indicate that reporting is commonly mediated through journalists’ politically motivated narratives; teachers are often represented in stereotyped forms, their unions characterised as the ‘enemies of learning’, while ‘a generation’ of young people are adjudged to ‘lack education because they have no will to learn’. The paper discusses the implications of agenda journalism for framing popular understanding of education and wider social issues.

References
