

AN EXAMINATION OF PRESS COVERAGE AND  
PUBLIC COMMENT ON EDUCATIONAL ISSUES

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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AN EXAMINATION OF PRESS COVERAGE AND PUBLIC COMMENT  
ON EDUCATIONAL ISSUES

By

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## ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to assess the volume and nature of the treatment of education by the press and the public, as contained in the opinionated sections of daily newspapers. The researcher also sought to determine the nature of the relationship between press coverage and public comment on educational issues.

The data for the study were obtained by examining the opinionated sections - editorials, columns, letters to the editor, and articles - published in the three daily newspapers of Newfoundland and Labrador during a five-year period, from January 1, 1979 to December 31, 1983. All items concerned with primary, elementary, and secondary education were classified in order to make possible a description of the volume and nature of the treatment.

Some of the general findings which resulted from this analysis were:

1. The volume of press and public expressions directed towards education fluctuated over the period, the amount being proportionate to the degree of controversy surrounding specific issues at a particular time.
2. Although much press coverage and public comment was classified as being critical of educational decisions and practices, almost

all of these items were aimed at improving the quality of education.

3. Issues related to teachers, the curriculum, and school administration ranked among the top four issues in volume with both press coverage and public comment.
4. Student-related issues were treated favourably by the press and the public. The press were completely supportive of denominational education, while public contributors gave favourable treatment to teacher-related matters. The majority of press coverage and public comment was classified as being critical towards bussing, the curriculum, and the reorganized high school program.
5. Public contributors were more prone than members of the press to voice strong positions on issues, the former embodying more critical, more supportive, and less neutral statements than the latter.
6. Press and public responses to previously-published items were predominantly contrary to opinions voiced by the instigating writers. However, members of the press tended to agree with the instigating items more often than did public respondents.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### The Nature of the Study

Researchers<sup>1</sup> suggest that public opinion has both influenced, and been influenced by, the mass media in general and newspapers in particular. If any point of view is to be effective in influencing the opinion of others, a communication network must be present to permit an exchange of ideas to take place. The press is an especially appropriate medium for examination of the interactive process between the media and the public. Newspapers seek not only to disseminate factual information to the public through the regular reporting of events, but also to mould public opinion through sections such as editorials and columns. In addition, newspapers provide a forum -- particularly the "letters to the editor" section -- through which members of the public may express their views.

The presence of this two-way flow of information and comment makes the more opinionated pages of newspapers a

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<sup>1</sup>Charles R. Foster Jr., Editorial Treatment of Education in the American Press (New York: AMS Press, 1938), p. 9.

Mitchell E. Shapiro, Wenmouth Williams, "Agenda Setting in the 1982 Illinois Gubernatorial Campaign", Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Speech Association (Lincoln, Neb.: April 7-9, 1983).

Walter H. Worth, "An Analysis of Editorial Treatment of Education in the Alberta Press" (Unpublished Master's Thesis, University of Alberta, 1952), p. 5.

valuable source in the investigation of any area of general public concern (and interest. The educational system is an area of immediate concern to the public. Every individual has direct dealings with the school for varying periods of time, to say nothing of the many indirect associations between that institution and society at large. Hence, if there is a relationship between media coverage and public response, one would expect it to become visible in matters pertaining to education.

A recent study conducted by Shapiro and Williams concludes that "the more coverage an issue receives, the more important the public perceives that issue to be".<sup>2</sup> It found that during the 1982 Illinois Gubernatorial Campaign the issues upon which the mass media placed great emphasis were highly correlated with perceived importance by the voters. This possible "agenda setting" function of the media has implications for all social institutions -- especially the educational system, whose direction and pace of change are arguably the result of decision makers' perceptions of public opinion. This power of the press has been recognized by pressure groups who seek to influence educational decision making.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the potential of this medium can range from

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<sup>2</sup>Shapiro and Williams, loc. cit.

<sup>3</sup>Roger Baskerville, "Increasing Visibility of Rural and Small Schools: Political Organization -- An Alternative", Paper Presented to the Rural Education Conference, Manhattan, Ks.: November 16, 1981.

a strong ally to an equally powerful adversary, depending on the nature and intensity of its position.

Accepting this premise, the significance of the press as an influence on and reflection of the public will should be of acute interest to educators. To this end, the investigator sought to determine the nature and strength of the relationship between the media and public opinion with respect to educational issues. The approach utilized consisted of an examination of the three daily newspapers of Newfoundland and Labrador during the past five years. This analysis sought to ascertain the extent to which public comment (as exemplified through letters to the editor and articles) is influenced by, in response to, or the instigator of coverage by the media (as demonstrated by newspaper editorials and columns). Thus, by assessing the volume and nature of the treatment accorded education by both the public and the press, a more precise understanding of the relationship between the two components should be acquired.

Because of the possible impact of the press on the development of education, an improved understanding of the nature of the relationship between the press and the public viewpoint would be beneficial to any involved in the field. The educational system operates within the societal domain and, to a certain degree, is dependent upon governmental directive. Political decision makers, especially elected officials, are apt to place much emphasis upon public opinion.



Accordingly, if the public will is interpreted as being ultra-supportive of a certain position then that position will almost assuredly receive serious consideration by decision makers.

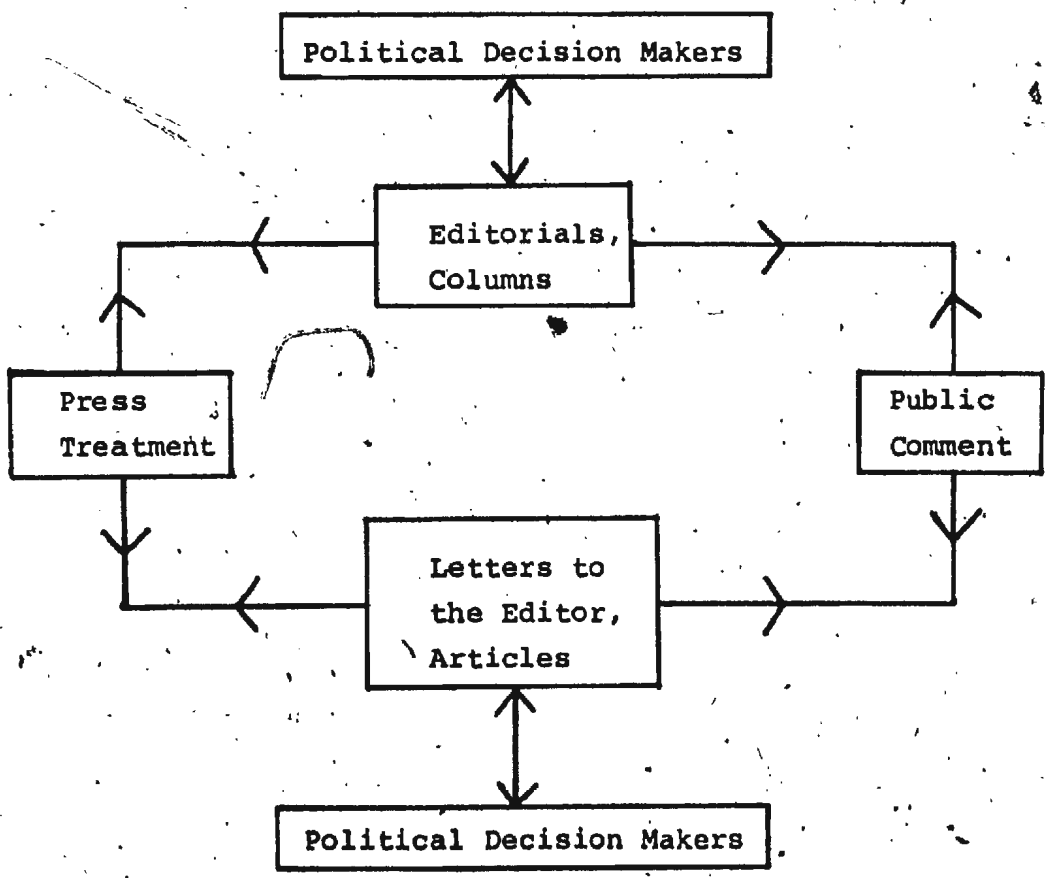
Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed by this study is twofold and may be considered in terms of the following two general questions and the more specific inquiries contained in each:

- I. What is the nature of press coverage of education?
  - What was the extent of press coverage of education over the period?
  - Which particular issues generated most coverage?
  - How did the press treat education generally and specific issues in particular? In other words, was the press supportive, neutral or critical?
  - What are the similarities/differences in treatment of education by the different newspapers?
  
- II: What is the nature of public comment and its relationship to press coverage?
  - What was the extent of public comment on educational issues?
  - What issues in education are addressed most frequently by the public?
  - Is public comment about education generally supportive, neutral or critical?
  - To what extent are positions espoused by the public compatible with those of the press?
  - To what degree does public comment result in press coverage and vice-versa?

Theoretical Framework

The investigator suspects that there is a direct relationship between press treatment of a particular issue and public opinion towards that issue. Coverage of subjects by newspaper personnel (editors, columnists, etc.) are read and sometimes responded to by members of the general public (through letters to the editor or special articles) in the newspaper. This simple model illustrates some of the various interactions between the press and the public:



According to the preceding diagram, information flows among all of the components. For example, the editor determines a position on an issue he/she deems worthy of comment. This personal opinion is then published as an editorial, which may be perused by political decision makers and the general public. If members of the paper's readership feel strongly about the issue (or another matter) they may make their views known through the letters to the editor or special article sections. Such expressions then come to the attention of political decision makers, newspaper personnel and the general public and may indeed stimulate additional comment from any of the parties involved.

The above model is based on the assumption that there are interacting influences among its various components. This study seeks to determine the direction, strength and nature of such interactions.

#### Significance of the Study

The findings of this study should be of importance to educators, political action groups, and indeed any individual or group interested in the systems of communication and influence through the news media. The data will serve to enhance the existing body of theoretical knowledge related to the media and public opinion. In addition, this research should be of practical benefit to those who wish to avail of the media or whose fortunes are somehow connected with public

opinion. With improved insight into the press as an influence on and reflection of public opinion, individuals would be in a superior position in determining whether and how to utilize the media.

Historical research, such as the present study, is of value to the entire field of education. "It is necessary to know and understand educational accomplishments and trends of the past in order to gain perspective of present and future directions."<sup>4</sup> Determining the nature of the treatment of education by the press and the public will provide the educator with the rare opportunity of looking at his/her "working world" through the eyes of outsiders. Consequently, such information can be beneficial to educators because "... an awareness of how people perceive education is important to all those who have to respond to current pressures".<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, an analysis of the relationship between the press and public comment should assist the educator in recognizing the media as a force which cannot affordably be overlooked in the socio-political framework in which the educational enterprise must operate.

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<sup>4</sup>Fred N. Kerlinger, Foundations of Behavioral Research (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), p. 702.

<sup>5</sup>P.J. Warren, Public Attitudes Towards Education in Newfoundland and Labrador, 1983 (Department of Educational Administration, Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1983), p. 2.

### Definition of Terms

Media. A channel of public communication, such as the press.

Press. Newspapers and those connected with their publication, such as editors and columnists.

Press Coverage. Discussion of topics by newspaper personnel in sections such as editorials and columns.

Public Comment. Publication in newspapers of expressions by members of the general public. This would usually be revealed through letters to the editor, but sometimes in special articles as well.

Supportive. Favourable or commendatory in nature. Essentially declarations of beliefs in the value of education, or in praise of the work of the educational system.

Neutral. Comment/coverage which discusses issues or topics in the field of education, without clearly taking sides.

Critical. Attacks on the system. Questioning the value of quality education, or urging changes from present practices.

### Review of Related Literature and Research

Attempts to survey existing writings related to this study were hampered by an apparent scarcity of references to research of this nature. However, a number of sources were located which substantiated the utility and legitimacy of newspapers as a basis for empirical study.

The present research study relied upon historical methodology as the predominant technique. It may be argued that historiography has a necessary relevance to all the social sciences and to the formulation of public and private policies for these reasons:

1. All the data used in the social sciences ... and in the formulation of public and private policies are drawn from records of, experience in, or writing about the past.

2. All policies respecting human affairs, public or private ... involve interpretations of or assumptions about the past.<sup>6</sup>

In the social sciences and humanities, press coverage has been documented in various studies. For example, Grusky wanted "to investigate the relationship between administrative succession and subsequent change in group performance".<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Social Science Research Council, Theory and Practice in Historical Study: A Report of the Committee on Historiography (New York, 1946), pp. 134-5.

<sup>7</sup>O. Grusky, "Managerial Succession and Organizational Effectiveness", American Journal of Sociology, LXIX, 1963, pp. 21-31.

That study analyzed sports pages and associated records to determine the performance of various professional football and baseball teams, with respect to the timing of changes in coaches and managers. In a similar vein, Coleman and Neugarten resorted to newspapers (and particularly reports of social events) as a useful source of information in studying the upper class.<sup>8</sup>

In 1937, Foster completed a thesis entitled Editorial Treatment of Education in the American Press. His analysis of twenty-five selected newspapers was the first in-depth attempt to examine the press in terms of the nature and volume of its treatment of education. Foster concluded that the majority of editorials were favourable towards education, and that much of the editors' attention centered on school finance and college football.<sup>9</sup>

Research similar to the Foster project, and most useful in the selection and organization of the present study, was conducted by Worth in 1952. His examination of editorial treatment in Alberta utilized an instrument of data collection which was modified for use in the present research. Worth concentrated on six Alberta daily newspapers over a five-year period (1945-50). His study identified issues perceived as important by the editors and found that,

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<sup>8</sup>Eugene Webb, Unobtrusive Measures (Chicago: Rand, McNally and Company, 1966), p. 77.

<sup>9</sup>Foster, op. cit., p. 37.

in general, the editorials tended to look favourably upon most educational issues.<sup>10</sup>

The past two decades have witnessed a growing emphasis upon the study of the press and its treatment of education.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, Dickson found that a majority of the publishers and editors were "satisfied with present coverage of education and did not consider it desirable or feasible to publish a regional weekly education news supplement".<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, a 1981 survey of newspaper editors on trends in educational news coverage indicated that many newspapers are expanding and improving their coverage and are covering a variety of educational activities.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Worth, op. cit., pp. 6-7.

<sup>11</sup>During the period 1963 to 1972 at least seven doctoral dissertations were completed on various aspects of the press and education. A minimum of six additional theses have been written in this general area since 1972.

<sup>12</sup>James P. Dickson, "A Study of the Perceptions of Publishers, Editors and Education Reporters Related to the Desirability and Feasibility of Three Approaches to Increasing Newspaper Coverage of American Education" (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Ohio University, 1975).

<sup>13</sup>Ernest C. Hynds, "Newspaper Education Coverage Has Been Expanded, Improved", Newspaper Research Journal, Vol. 2, No. 3, (April, 1981).



The significance of newspapers as a tool of communication is further attested to by Buffett in Developing a School-Community Communications Program, which designates the press as having "a major role in the school-community program".<sup>14</sup> It is somewhat ironic that in spite of apparent unanimity within the literature as to the significance of the press to education, little effort has been expended in seeking to assess its significance. Research designed to investigate the nature of the relationship between the media and public opinion on educational matters is practically non-existent. It appears as though researchers to date have omitted consideration of the role of the public -- the component which, of necessity, determines the degree to which the press is an influence on or a reflection of public opinion on educational issues.

The foregoing review of related literature and research exposes an existing lack of evidence of the nature of the relationship between the press and public comment, thus reinforcing the legitimacy and necessity for this undertaking.

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<sup>14</sup> Fred Buffett (Ed.), Developing a School-Community Communications Program (Committee on Publications, Department of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1976), p. 20.

### ▼ Overview of the Study

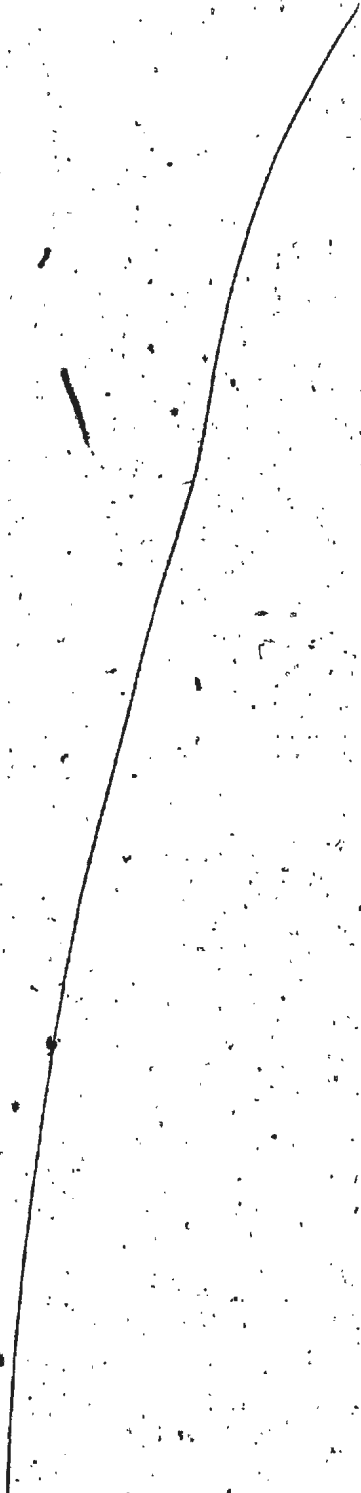
This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter I describes the nature of the problem addressed, the theoretical framework, and the significance of the study. It also contains a definition of key terms and a review of the relatively limited amount of related literature and research.

Chapter II outlines the research methodology utilized. The chapter describes the research approach, the time period involved, and the results of a pilot study conducted earlier. It also documents the procedures used in collecting, recording, and analyzing data.

The first major component of the study -- Press Treatment of Education -- is the focus of Chapter III. Analysis of data will determine the extent of press coverage of education, particular issues which generate most coverage, the nature of treatment of education in general, and a comparison of treatment by different newspapers.

Chapter IV concentrates upon the second major focus of the study -- Public Comment on Education and its Relationship to Press Coverage. This segment examines the extent and nature of public comment and the relationship between that comment and the press coverage described in Chapter III.

Chapter V contains a summary of the study, a discussion of the findings, and a statement of implications arising from the results.



## CHAPTER II

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### The General Approach

As previously mentioned, this investigation of the nature of press coverage and public comment and their relationship, if any, was of an historical nature. The data for the study were collected through an in-depth examination of various sections (editorials, columns, letters to the editor, and articles) appearing in the Province's three daily newspapers -- The Daily News and The Evening Telegram in St. John's and The Western Star in Corner Brook -- over a five-year period from January 1, 1979 to December 31, 1983.

These newspapers were selected because of their circulation, geographical distribution, and volume of content in specific sections under study. In the Fall of 1983, the Evening Telegram had a daily Monday-to-Friday circulation of approximately 36,000, and a weekend circulation of nearly 50,000 distributed throughout the Province. The Daily News had a daily circulation of approximately 9,500 and the Western Star 11,500. The inclusion of all three dailies minimized the possibility of any extraneous biases or prejudices of a particular publication having undue influence over the results. The several weekly newspapers of the Province were not included because they would have made the study unmanageable. Also, the weekly publications had a relatively

small circulation, had localized distribution areas, and were not readily available for examination.

#### The Time Period Involved

The time period eventually selected for the study commenced January 1, 1979 and concluded December 31, 1983. It is felt that this five-year analysis is extensive enough to assure that policies and attitudes observed are of a substantial, rather than sporadic, nature. An additional advantage of this time span is its currency, which should provide valuable insights in determining immediate and future directions to any individuals involved in any aspect of public relations. Nevertheless, the period should be of sufficient duration to enable identification of any significant developmental trends in the treatment of education by the press and the public.

#### The Pilot Study

Serious consideration was given to the adoption of appropriate measures to ensure procedural efficiency in the research methodology for this study. The fact that little research of a similar nature had been done anywhere (and one involving the Newfoundland press) meant that this research would be travelling in "unchartered waters". Some major concerns at that point were questions such as: Was coverage of educational issues of sufficient volume for such

in-depth study?; How many years should be encompassed?; Which newspapers ought to be examined?; What classifications would be appropriate? and so on. Prior to entering these "waters", wisdom dictated the use of a pilot.

The pilot study concentrated upon a detailed examination of editorials and letters to the editor of the three daily newspapers for 1981. While this is neither the time nor the place for an intensive discussion of the information acquired, some of the more significant observations should be noted. Between January 1 and December 31 of that year, the three daily newspapers printed a total of 53 editorials and 62 letters to the editor dealing with education. The number of editorials ranged from 13 to 22, and the number of letters printed varied from 16 to 29. Tables containing more specific results of the pilot study are attached in Appendices A and B.

On the basis of these and other results obtained from the preliminary investigation, it was decided to have the study examine editorials, columns, letters to the editor, and articles of the three Newfoundland daily newspapers over the most recent five-year period. An additional result of this examination was the deletion of one and the substitution of another classification in the data-recording instrument.

The pilot experience was certainly of benefit, not only for identifying specific areas that required some modification, but more importantly for helping establish

the parameters, the breadth, and the scope of the proposed research activity.

### Data Collection and Recording

The somewhat unique nature of this study necessitated the use of an organizational framework to efficiently examine the information to be gathered. The following steps outline the procedures devised for the collection and classification of data:

1. Read all editorials, columns, letters to the editor, and articles in the three daily newspapers specified;

2. Survey the mass of comment in order to make possible a description of the nature of the treatment on various issues;

3. To facilitate the sorting of this material, the following ten categories - each designated by an appropriate capital letter - were utilized:

- A - Administration
- B - Bussing
- C - Curriculum
- D - Denominational Education System
- E - Education in General
- F - Finance
- O - Other Issues
- R - Revised High School
- S - Students
- T - Teachers

4. Under these main headings, sub-topics were recorded by combining the capital letter of the main heading with a small letter or letters denoting the sub-topic. As each item was read, a notation with the appropriate letter headings was made on an index card and then placed in a corresponding file.

5. With respect to quotations and footnotes, sources will be acknowledged by the capitalized first letter of each word in the newspaper's name. Dates will appear in this order: Month, Date, Year. For example, an item appearing in The Evening Telegram on August 22, 1980 will be footnoted as E.T. 08/22/80.

When the data gathering was thus completed, the file cards were grouped repeatedly in various combinations to permit ready analysis of the information from different perspectives.

#### Analysis of Data

Data compiled from the above procedures will be analyzed and illustrated in Chapters III and IV in order that the general and specific questions originally posed are properly addressed. In these chapters, attention is paid not only to the frequency of a particular issue being the subject of press/public comment, but also to assess its force and meaning. Emanating from these findings will be an effort to identify and explore the significance and possible implications of information acquired and data assembled, as far as the scope of the study will permit.

As already noted, the study is delimited to an examination of the three daily newspapers in Newfoundland and Labrador during a five-year period (January 1, 1979 to December 31, 1983). A further delimitation arises from the concentration of this study upon only four sections of these dailies, even though it is probable that readers are



influenced by all that they read in newspapers, not only the sections under analysis. A third delimitation of this research project is that only letters to the editor and articles which were published are included as reflections of public comment. No attempt was made to ascertain how many letters were screened out prior to publication. Finally, this study is delimited to press coverage and public comment on primary, elementary, and secondary education. Thus, references to pre-school and post-secondary education were not included in the analysis.

As with all research relying in part on qualitative, in addition to quantitative, analysis there are certain limitations which should not be overlooked when considering conclusions and recommendations arising from the results of this study. These include:

1. The general applicability of the findings will be limited by the nature of the study. Since the three daily newspapers under analysis have circulations heavily concentrated in the areas surrounding St. John's and Corner Brook, the results may not be generalizable to all regions of the Province.
2. Despite the investigator's quest for objectivity, the nature of the data collection method implies that to some extent the researcher's own personal beliefs may be projected into the material examined and conclusions drawn therefrom.
3. The present study is concerned with only newspaper coverage and public comment as expressed in that medium, thus excluding all other types of mass media such as radio and television.

## CHAPTER III

### PRESS TREATMENT OF EDUCATION

The first major component of the study, Press Treatment of Education, is the focus of this chapter. Descriptive and analytical information will be provided to determine the extent of press coverage, which particular issues generated most coverage, the nature of the treatment accorded education in general, and a comparison of the treatment of education by the different newspapers.

#### The Extent of Press Coverage of Educational Issues

The extent of press coverage over the period was calculated by combining the total number of editorials with columns that appeared in the three Newfoundland dailies between January 1, 1979 and December 31, 1983. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 1.

Total press coverage for the five-year period was 233 items appearing in 4381 editions, or 5.3 percent of all publications. Of this 233, 195 (4.4 percent) were editorials and 38 (0.9 percent) were columns. By paper, the Daily News had 81 editorials and 20 columns for a total of 101 devoted to education out of 1391 (7.3 percent), the Evening Telegram had 71 editorials and four columns for a total of 75/1495

TABLE 1

Extent of Press Coverage of Education  
By Paper, Between January 1, 1979, and December 31, 1983

Paper	Editorials		Columns		Total	
	Number	Percent of Publications	Number	Percent of Publications	Number	Percent of Publications
Daily News	81	5.8	20	1.4	101	7.3
Evening Telegram	71	4.8	4	0.3	75	5.0
Western Star	43	2.9	14	0.9	57	3.8
Total	195	4.4	38	0.9	233	5.3

(five percent), and the Western Star had 43 editorials and 14 columns for a total of 57/1495 (3.8 percent).

Table 2 contains data showing the amount of coverage given education during each of the five years in question. The period commenced with a great deal of coverage - 52 editorials and five columns. In 1982, however, the comparable numbers were 26 editorials and five columns, or slightly more than half the 1979 total. During the concluding year of the period, press coverage reached its highest level, with 61 items dealing with education.

#### Issues Generating Press Coverage

To determine how much attention the press paid to individual aspects of education, editorials and columns were categorized according to the 10 classifications developed as a result of the pilot study. These data are presented in Table 3. The issue receiving most attention was "students". They were the subject of 35 editorials and eight columns, for a total of 43 or 18.5 percent of all press coverage of education. Teacher-centered issues followed closely, with 35 editorials and three columns for a total of 38 or 16.3 percent. Curriculum rated third with 19 editorials and 10 columns, for a 29 total or 12.5 percent.

The press paid relatively little attention to such issues as the revised high school (15 editorials, one column) and Finance (13 editorials; three columns), each accounting

TABLE 2

Extent of Press Coverage of Education  
By Year

Section	Number of Items				
	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983
Editorials	52	34	31	26	52
Columns	5	12	7	5	9
Total	57	46	38	31	61

TABLE 3

Issues Generating Press Coverage  
Ranked By Frequency of Appearance

Issue	Editorials	Columns	Total	Percent of Total
Students	35	8	43	18.5
Teachers	35	3	38	16.3
Curriculum	19	10	29	12.5
Administration	20	4	24	10.3
Bussing	22	1	23	9.8
Education in General	16	4	20	8.6
Finance	13	3	16	6.9
Revised High School	15	1	16	6.9
Other Issues	12	2	14	6.0
Denominational Education	8	2	10	4.3
Total	195	38	233	100.0

\*Due to rounding procedures, percentages may not always total 100 percent.

for 6.9 percent of all items. Only eight editorials and two columns (4.3 percent) dealt with the Denominational System.

As illustrated in Table 1, the volume of press coverage of educational issues was 5.3 percent of the total. The Daily News had the highest percentage at 7.3, the Evening Telegram the next highest at five percent, and the Western Star had the lowest percentage at 3.8. Table 4 presents a comparison of the frequency with which the various issues were the subject of editorials or columns.

Teachers' issues were dealt with most frequently by both the Daily News and the Evening Telegram, and third by the Western Star. Curriculum-related issues were also very prominent, and ranked among the top three on all three newspapers.

The Denominational Education System drew least coverage in both the Evening Telegram and the Western Star, while the revised high school program rated low in the Western Star (9th) and the Daily News (10th). None of the papers paid much attention to school finance.

TABLE 4  
Comparison of Press Emphasis By Paper

Issue	Daily News		Evening Telegram		Western Star	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Students	11	10.9	8	10.7	24	42.1
Teachers	22	21.8	13	17.3	4	7.0
Curriculum	15	14.9	9	12.0	5	8.8
Administration	12	11.9	7	9.3	4	7.0
Bussing	10	9.9	9	12.0	4	7.0
Education in General	7	6.9	9	12.0	4	7.0
Finance	6	5.9	6	8.0	4	7.0
Revised High School	3	3.0	10	13.3	3	5.3
Other Issues	7	6.9	3	4.0	4	7.0
Denominational Education	8	7.9	1	1.3	1	1.8



The Nature of Press Treatment  
of Education

Statistical Analysis

The nature of press coverage was assessed by categorizing each editorial and column as being either supportive, neutral, or critical of education. Classification of particular comments to a definite position was not always easy, for being critical of educational decision-makers and/or decisions did not necessarily mean the opinion was "anti-education". On the contrary, the writer may have been an ardent supporter of improved education, albeit an opposing force to the established view. Consequently, to facilitate this aspect of the study, the three classifications were assigned particular attributes. "Supportive" refers to items which are commendatory in nature, contain declarations of beliefs in the value of education, or praise the work of the educational system. The "Neutral" category includes comments which discuss issues or topics in the field of education, without clearly taking sides. "Critical" items contain attacks on the system, calls for decreased funding, and suggestions for changing current practices.

Table 5 summarizes the results of applying these classifications to each item of press coverage concerned with education. Over half of all the newspaper editorials and columns (51.9 percent) could be classified as "critical". A further 35.6 percent were supportive, while the remaining

TABLE 5

## The Nature of Press Coverage By Paper

Paper	Supportive		Neutral		Critical		Total	
	Number	Percent of Total	Number	Percent of Total	Number	Percent of Total	Number	Percent
Daily News	34	33.7	14	13.9	53	52.4	101	100
Evening Telegram	26	34.7	7	9.3	42	56.0	75	100
Western Star	23	40.4	8	14.0	26	45.6	57	100
Total	83	35.6	29	12.5	121	51.9	233	100

12.5 percent could be classified as neutral. There was little variation among the three newspapers, although items in the Western Star were slightly more supportive of education, and those in the Evening Telegram slightly more critical than items in other papers.

The overall nature of press treatment of education was further delineated by examining the particular issues which attracted the attention of the press. The resulting data are contained in Table 6.

As noted previously, there were few items that could be classified as neutral. Actually, with the exception of teachers more than 50 percent of press treatment on every issue was categorized as being supportive or critical. The press appeared most supportive of denominational education (100 percent), education in general (65 percent), and issues related to the welfare of students (51.2 percent). Issues about which the press was especially critical included curriculum (75.8 percent), revised high school and administration (75 percent each), and bussing (73.9 percent).

#### Content Analysis

Education was covered by the press in just over five percent of all editions of the Province's three dailies. A large proportion of this coverage was directed towards the issues of students, teachers, and curriculum - which together accounted for more than 47 percent of the total press coverage.

TABLE 6

## The Nature of Press Treatment By Issue

Issue	Supportive		Neutral		Critical		Total	
	Number	Percent of Total	Number	Percent of Total	Number	Percent of Total	Number	Percent
Students	22	51.2	10	23.3	11	25.6	43	100
Teachers	9	23.7	12	31.6	17	44.7	38	100
Curriculum	6	20.7	1	3.5	22	75.8	29	100
Administration	4	16.7	2	8.3	18	75.0	24	100
Bussing	6	26.1	0	0.0	17	73.9	23	100
Education in General	13	65.0	0	0.0	7	35.0	20	100
Finance	7	43.8	0	0.0	9	56.2	16	100
Revised High School	1	6.3	3	18.7	12	75.0	16	100
Other Issues	5	35.7	1	7.1	8	57.2	14	100
Denominational Education	10	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	10	100
Totals	83	35.6	29	12.5	121	51.9	233	100

Press concern for students included praising student achievement, urging employers to find summer jobs for students, stressing the importance of student safety, and sympathizing with students during the teachers' contract dispute. The editors and columnists of all three dailies appeared genuinely concerned for the well-being of students, and consistently supported efforts aimed at "improving the lot" of students. The nature of press coverage towards students is typified in the following statement on homework:

Homework is certainly necessary, but it must be given for the right reason and made an enjoyable extension of the school day, rather than a burden for the children. (Editorial, W.S. 3/26/81)

Much of press attention directed towards teachers related to the collective bargaining process. Each round of teachers' contract talks drew renewed concern from the press, which without exception implored teachers not to take strike action. The press generally supported teachers' positions on non-monetary issues, but on salary increases felt that "teachers must realize that when it comes to wage hikes in, these difficult economic times, half a loaf is better than none" (Editorial, E.T. 11/02/82).

Curriculum coverage ranged from support for some school subjects to strong criticism of others, and even offered suggestions for the inclusion of new courses into the school curriculum. In particular, the press criticized the teaching of evolution, lamented the lack of attention

given to art, music, and poetry, and felt that conservation of natural resources and wildlife should be stressed in the schools. The press also reiterated the school system's purpose of preparing people for the workplace as evidenced by the contention that:

The relevance of education in the... primary and secondary education systems is certainly of paramount importance if we are to be able to seize the work opportunities that will suddenly present themselves. (Editorial, E.T. 9/01/79)

Issues receiving the least attention from the press included the revised high school, finance, and denominational education. On the revised high school, the press tended to rely more on the views expounded by university professors (particularly Drs. Warren, Sullivan, and Parsons), than putting forward original opinions. The apparent consensus was that Grade 12 should be delayed to enable adequate planning for implementation to take place as smoothly as possible. In addition, the press argued that government should be placing increased emphasis on the primary and elementary grades (rather than senior high school), since "it is in those early grades that work habits and learning attitudes are formed and nurtured - or not" (Column, D.N. 2/08/80). Nutbeam felt that this would solve many of the problems, and then Grade 12 would be "icing on a very edible cake" (Ibid.).

With respect to finance, press coverage was divided on the use of a school tax to help finance education. The Daily News questioned whether there should be any school tax

at all (Editorial, D.N. 11/26/83). The other two newspapers, while not completely satisfied, supported the continued existence of School Tax Authorities for:

With the existing system beefed up, inequities eliminated, and responsible people running the authorities, there would be no need for a new structure. (Column, W.S. 11/27/79)

If any issue served as a unifying force among the press, it was denominational education. All three dailies expressed complete support for the existing system of education, with one editor stating that if there was a danger to the denominational system, he "... would not hesitate for one moment to recommend that Newfoundland get out of this confederation without delay" (Editorial, D.N. 10/22/80).

More than half of total press coverage was classified as being "critical" in nature. However, one must bear in mind that much of this criticism was directed at particular educational programs, practices, or decisions, and was not adversely critical of "education itself" or the value of a good educational system to society and the individual. A possible indicator of the overall disposition of the press towards education is its treatment of education in general. Notwithstanding the press assertion that Newfoundland education is presently at a somewhat precarious stage, the esteem in which education was held by the press is aptly illustrated by the statement that:

No previous generation has been faced with so much new information and such opportunities; people have to be able to adapt, have to be enabled to learn new skills, new methods, and the learning process must be continuous; under such a system, maximum benefit accrues to all. (Editorial, E.T. 3/10/82)

### Summary

This chapter analyzed press treatment of education by the three daily newspapers of Newfoundland. Over five percent of all editions included coverage of educational issues in the editorial and column sections. The bulk of this treatment centered on issues related to students, teachers, and curriculum, with little attention devoted to the revised high school, finance, and denominational education.

Overall press treatment of education was classified as being more critical than supportive. The press tended to be supportive of denominational education and students, but critical of curriculum, the revised high school, school administration, and bussing.

The percentage of total coverage devoted to education was highest with the Daily News and lowest with the Western Star. Generally speaking, the three dailies were similar in the proportion and nature of their treatment of particular issues.



## CHAPTER IV

### PUBLIC COMMENT CONCERNING EDUCATION AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO PRESS COVERAGE

The second component of newspaper treatment of education examined in this study has been labelled "Public Comment". Public comment has been defined here as publication in newspapers of expressions by members of the general public. This would usually be revealed through letters to the editor, but sometimes in special articles as well. This chapter reports first on the extent of public comment; second, the issues generating public comment; and third, the nature of such comment. The chapter will conclude with an analysis of the relationship between public comment and press coverage on educational issues.

#### The Extent of Public Comment on Educational Issues

The extent of public comment over the period was determined by combining the total number of letters to the editor and general news articles. Table 7 contains the results of this analysis.

Public comment on education totalled 495 items appearing in 4381 editions, or 11.3 percent of all publications. Of this 495, 444 were letters and 51 were articles. By newspaper, the Evening Telegram published

TABLE 7

Extent of Public Comment on Educational  
Issues By Paper Between January 1, 1979,  
and December 31, 1983

Paper	Number of Publications	Percent of Publications	Number of Publications	Percent of Publications	Number of Publications	Percent of Publications
Daily News	101	7.3	7	0.5	108	7.8
Evening Telegram	260	17.4	37	2.5	297	19.9
Western Star	83	5.6	7	0.5	90	6.0
Total	444	10.1	51	1.2	495	11.3

most public comment devoted to education, having 260 letters to the editor and 37 articles for a total of 297 items in 1495 editions, or nearly 20 percent. The Daily News carried 101 letters and seven articles (7.8 percent), while the Western Star contained 83 letters and seven articles (six percent).

The volume of public comment on education was also considered in terms of the number of items appearing during each of the five years under study. Table 8 contains this breakdown. During 1979, there were 85 items of public comment in the press, but this number dropped to the lowest level of the period the following year with 75. From 1981 onward, the amount of public comment on education continued to increase, culminating in the highest total of the period in 1983, when 170 items were contributed to the three newspapers.

#### Issues Generating Public Comment

Letters to the editor and articles were divided according to 10 classifications to detect how much attention the public paid to individual issues. Table 9 shows these results.

Public comment was very concerned about teacher-related issues, with 169 letters to the editor and three articles for a total of 172 or 34.8 percent of all public comment on education. Curriculum was a distant second, being the subject of 68 letters and 13 articles for a total of 81 (16.4 percent).

TABLE 8

Extent of Public Comment on Education By Year

Section	Number of Items Per Year				
	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983
Letters to the Editor	59	64	70	83	168
Articles	26	11	6	6	2
Total	85	75	76	89	170

TABLE 9

Issues Generating Public Comment,  
Ranked By Frequency of Appearance

Issue	Letters to the Editor	Articles	Total	Percent of Total
Teachers	169	3	172	34.8
Curriculum	68	13	81	16.4
Administration	44	4	48	9.7
Revised High School	34	9	43	8.7
Finance	34	6	40	8.1
Denominational Education	32	1	33	6.7
Education in General	11	10	21	4.2
Other Issues	20	1	21	4.2
Students	19	2	21	4.2
Bussing	13	2	15	3.0
Total	444	51	495	

Administration came next with 44 letters to the editor and four articles, for 48 items or 9.7 percent.

The public paid relatively little attention to students, with only 19 letters and two articles (4.2 percent). Bussing drew the least comment, being the subject of only 13 letters to the editor and two articles, for a total of 15 or three percent of all public comment during the period.

Although in some cases letters to the editor of one newspaper were sent to other papers for publication, the volume was not large enough to prevent meaningful comparison of public treatment of education as it appeared in each of the three dailies. Table 10 permits a comparison of the amount of public comment among the different newspapers.

Teachers' issues attracted most public comment in both the Daily News and the Evening Telegram, and was a close second in the Western Star. Curriculum rated first in the Western Star, second in the Evening Telegram, and fourth in the Daily News. Administration ranked second in the Daily News, fifth in the Evening Telegram, and tied for sixth in the Western Star.

Bussing drew least comment from the public in both the Daily News and the Evening Telegram, and tied for sixth place out of the ten classifications in the Western Star.

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Great differences were evident in the volume of public comment towards the denominational system, ranging from third in the Daily News, to sixth in the Evening Telegram, to ninth in the Western Star.

TABLE 10

## Comparison of Public Comment Foci By Paper

Issue	Daily News		Evening Telegram		Western Star	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Teachers	29	26.9	122	41.1	21	23.3
Curriculum	14	13.0	40	13.5	27	30.0
Administration	19	17.6	24	8.1	5	5.6
Revised High School	9	8.3	31	10.4	3	3.3
Finance	7	6.5	27	9.1	6	6.7
Denominational Education	15	13.9	14	4.7	4	4.4
Education in General	4	3.7	9	3.0	8	8.9
Other Issues	4	3.7	11	3.7	6	6.7
Students	5	4.6	11	3.7	5	5.6
Bussing	2	1.9	8	2.7	5	5.6

The Nature of Public Comment  
on Education

Statistical Analysis

To assess the nature of public comment, each letter to the editor and article was classified as being either supportive, neutral, or critical of education. To paraphrase the original definitions given in Chapter I, "supportive" refers to items which were in agreement with present practices; "neutral" includes discussion of issues without clearly taking sides; and "critical" encompasses expressions of dissatisfaction with current practices. Table 11 contains findings derived from the application of these general classifications, for each of the three newspapers.

Overall public comment towards education was very opinionated, with 208 (42 percent) supportive, 261 (52.7 percent) critical, and only 26 (5.3 percent) of the items classified as neutral. Writers to each of the newspapers seemed to vary little in their overall opinions. The percentage of comments falling in each of the three classifications revealed almost no variation, the largest difference being between the supportive elements of the Daily News (46.3 percent) and the Western Star (38.9 percent) - a gap of 7.4 percentage points.

The overall nature of public comment was also broken down according to specific issues. Table 12 demonstrates that for each issue, public comment tended to be either very



TABLE 11

## The Nature of Public Comment By Paper

Paper	Supportive		Neutral		Critical		Total	
	Number	Percent of Total	Number	Percent of Total	Number	Percent of Total	Number	Percent
Daily News	50	46.3	4	3.7	54	50.0	108	100
Evening Telegram	123	41.4	15	5.1	159	53.5	297	100
Western Star	35	38.9	7	7.8	48	53.3	90	100
Total	208	42.0	26	5.3	261	52.7	495	100

TABLE 12

## The Nature of Public Comment By Issue

Issue	Supportive		Neutral		Critical		Total	
	Number	Percent of Total	Number	Percent of Total	Number	Percent of Total	Number	Percent
Teachers	95	55.2	8	4.7	69	40.1	172	100
Curriculum	27	33.3	2	2.5	52	64.2	81	100
Administration	19	39.6	2	4.2	27	56.3	48	100
Revised High School	10	23.3	1	2.3	32	74.4	43	100
Finance	11	27.5	2	5.0	27	67.5	40	100
Denominational Education	16	48.5	0	0.0	17	51.5	33	100
Education in General	7	33.3	3	14.3	11	52.4	21	100
Other Issues	7	33.3	2	9.5	12	57.1	21	100
Students	12	57.1	5	23.8	4	19.1	21	100
Bussing	4	26.7	1	6.7	10	66.7	15	100
Total	208	42.0	26	5.3	261	52.7	495	100

critical or very supportive. In fact, a clear majority was evidenced on every issue as being either critical or supportive. Public comment was overwhelmingly critical of the issues of the revised high school (74.4 percent), finance (67.5), bussing (66.7 percent), and the curriculum (64.2 percent)..

Public comment tended to be supportive of only two issues - students (57.1 percent) and teachers (55.2 percent). Comment on the denominational system was most evenly balanced, with 48.5 percent of the items being classified as supportive, and 51.5 percent deemed critical.

#### Content Analysis

Public comment towards education was contained in 11.3 percent of all publications. Issues stimulating the largest amount of attention were teachers, the curriculum, and school administration which together accounted for almost 59 percent of all public comment.

As with press coverage, public comment towards teachers revolved almost exclusively around the collective bargaining process in general and the accompanying closure of the Province's schools in 1983 in particular. Being members of the general public, teachers had access to the letters to the editor section of the press, and many utilized the opportunity to the fullest. Although many writers identified themselves as teachers, one cannot help

but suspect that others contributed opinions without being so revealing. Bearing this observation in mind, over 55 percent of the total public comment on teachers' concerns were classified as supportive. For example, one "student" wrote that teachers were:

...more than willing to sacrifice their spare time in supervising after school activities, and there is no reason why this should change - unless government goes through with its threat to invade the social lives of our teachers. (Letter to the Editor, E.T. 2/08/83)

Included in the 40 percent of public comment classified as critical of teachers were such views as:

The teachers' strike has caused a distinction between teachers and the public that will last for years to come - the teaching profession has been reduced to another union-organized bunch who are never satisfied. (Letter to the Editor, W.S. 5/07/83)

According to the comments on matters pertaining to the curriculum, the public is demanding more from the educational system. Some writers feared that French was not being adequately stressed; suggested that the teaching of such units as poetry and the metric system be given a higher priority; praised scientific experiments at a particular school; and urged that the curriculum be geared more towards preparing students for the workplace. The most extensive debate raged over whether or not sex education should be taught in the schools. Although the curriculum was given very "critical" treatment by the public overall, sex

education itself was favoured by slightly more than half of the comments. The public had some reservations, however, since the majority of this support contained stipulations such as:

The sex education program should provide information and stress responsibility within the context of cultural, moral, and religious values. (Letter to the Editor, W.S. 4/01/82)

Public treatment of school administration was of a critical nature overall. Comments ranged from attacks on district superintendents, to the pros and cons of centralization. The public also offered free evaluations of the competency level of the Minister of Education. One item was somewhat revealing of the public perception of school boards, their significance, and the desire on the part of the public to be kept abreast of that body's decision-making process. It called for increased press coverage of all school board meetings because:

...school boards operate with large budgets, employ many people, and make far-reaching decisions on the educational development of our children, and their well-being. (Letter to the Editor, W.S. 12/13/83)

Public contributors to the press allotted the least amount of their treatment to education in general, students, and bussing. One might expect the public to devote little coverage towards education in general, instead choosing to direct attention towards particular items of immediate concern. Interestingly, articles accounted for almost half

of total public comment towards education generally - by far the largest proportion of all issues. One such article urged the Newfoundland public to become more involved in education. It advised the Riggs and Crocker task force to:

...acquaint themselves with public concerns for education in the province, and the additional responsibility to make known to the political element what the public wants for its youth.  
(Article, W.S. 3/08/79)

While the investigator anticipated a small amount of public comment on education in general, the lack of attention paid to students was completely unexpected. However, students were treated in the most favourable manner of all issues identified in this analysis. For instance, a parent, who had supervised the Grade 11 public examinations at a particular school, commented on how "...well-mannered and excellently behaved" (Letter to the Editor, E.T. 7/01/80) the students were.

Bussing received just over three percent of public comment on education, the least of all. The majority of this treatment was in reaction to two student fatalities in bus-related incidents. Two-thirds of the comments were of a critical nature, including the accusation that the authorities were "...playing Russian roulette with the lives of school children" (Letter to the Editor, E.T. 11/17/79).

The Relationship Between Public  
Comment and Press Coverage

To ascertain the relationship between public comment and press coverage of educational issues, the two groups of contributors were compared with respect to the extent and nature of their treatment. In addition, public comment and press coverage were analyzed to assess the degree to which each of these components instigated further discussion of the issues raised.

The Extent of Press Coverage and Public Comment

Press coverage and public comment were compared by tabulating the total number of items classified as being press/public viewpoints by newspaper, and overall. Table 13 contains these data.

As one might expect, the volume of public comment (495 items) exceeded press coverage (233 items) by better than two to one. Public comment in the Daily News surpassed press coverage of education only slightly, 108 to 101 items or 7.8 to 7.3 percent of total editions respectively. The Western Star published 90 items (6 percent) of public comment compared with 57 (3.8 percent) press initiated opinions. The Evening Telegram, although having only 75 (five percent) press items on education, drew almost four times that amount in public comment, with 297 (19.9 percent). That most public comment was contributed to this newspaper may be due

TABLE 13

Comparison of the Extent of Press and  
Public Treatment of Education

Paper	Press Coverage		Public Comment	
	Number	Percent of Publications	Number	Percent of Publications
Daily News	101	7.3	108	7.8
Evening Telegram	75	5.0	297	19.9
Western Star	57	3.8	90	6.0
Overall	233	5.3	495	11.3



to the fact that the Evening Telegram had the largest circulation of the three dailies throughout this period.

The extent of press coverage and public comment are compared for each year of the period in Table 14. The first year of the period saw considerable educational coverage by both the press and the public. This was due in large part to the debate over the planned reorganization of the senior high school program, including the addition of Grade 12. The volume of press coverage declined in each of the succeeding years, reaching its lowest level in 1982. The public paid least attention to education in 1980, but increasing amounts thereafter until a high was reached in 1983. The high level of both press coverage and public comment in that year may be largely attributable to the teachers' contract dispute and the closure of the Province's schools.

#### Issues Generating Press Coverage and Public Comment

Issues perceived as worthy of comment by the press and the public had some similarities, with the most popular issues of both groups varying little. Table 15 presents the rankings of issues, according to the percentage of total coverage of each group.

From the table, it can be seen that teachers, the curriculum, and administration placed among the top four on both lists, accounting for a total of 39.1 percent of all

TABLE 14

Comparison of Press/Public Treatment By Year

	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983
Press Coverage	57	46	38	31	61
Public Comment	85	75	76	89	170
Total	142	121	114	120	231

TABLE 15

Comparison of Issues Generating  
Press Coverage and Public Comment

Issue	Press Coverage		Public Comment	
	Percentage of Total	Rank	Percentage of Total	Rank
Students	18.5	1	4.2	7
Teachers	16.3	2	34.8	1
Curriculum	12.5	3	16.4	2
Administration	10.3	4	9.7	3
Bussing	9.9	5	3.0	10
Education in General	8.6	6	4.2	7
Finance	6.9	7	8.1	5
Revised High School	6.9	7	8.7	4
Other Issues	6.0	9	4.2	7
Denominational Education	4.3	10	6.7	6

press coverage, and 60.9 percent of all public comment. A marked difference in emphasis is evident between press and public treatment of student- and teacher-related issues. The press concentrated more upon students (18.5 percent) than any other issue, while public comment on this issue rated second last (4.2 percent). The public directed more than one-third (34.8 percent) of its comment towards teachers' issues, while the press allotted 16.3 percent of its educational coverage towards teachers. Bussing was also treated differently, accounting for almost 10 percent of press coverage but only three percent of public comment.

However, apart from the issues of teachers, curriculum, and administration, the extent of press coverage and public comment were almost indistinguishable from each other. In fact, the difference in the percentage of total coverage between them was less than two percent on administration, curriculum, finance, and the revised high school. The volume of coverage and comment varied less than three percent on denominational education.

#### The Nature of Press Coverage and Public Comment

The nature of press coverage and public comment towards education has much to contribute to an understanding of the overall relationship between the opinions expressed by these two groups in the three daily newspapers of Newfoundland. Consequently, this section of the study seeks to compare and contrast the nature of the overall treatment

afforded education by newspaper, and by issue. The reader is again reminded of the inherent subjectivity involved in the classification of items as being supportive, neutral, or critical. For precise explanation of the criteria utilized in determining the nature of opinions, please refer to the Definition of Terms in Chapter I.

The nature of press coverage and public comment is summarized by paper in Table 16, and by issue in Table 17. By newspaper, the views of the press and the public were for the most part very compatible. The greatest difference surfaced in the Daily News, with 12.6 percentage points separating the supportive positions of the press (33.7) and the public (46.3). The neutral column of this paper saw a marked difference as well, with the press having 13.9 percent and the public 3.7 percent. The Evening Telegram staff presented 4.2 percent more neutral, 2.5 percent more critical, and 6.7 percent less supportive items than its contributing public. Press coverage in the Western Star was slightly more supportive, more neutral, and less critical towards educational issues than public comment contained therein.

The variation between the nature of press coverage and public comment was slight overall, although press coverage embodied more neutral expressions than did public comment. As well, the public tended to be more supportive of education than the press.

TABLE 16

The Nature of Press Coverage and  
Public Comment By Paper

Paper	Supportive		Neutral		Critical		Total	
	Press	Public	Press	Public	Press	Public	Press	Public
Daily News	33.7	46.3	13.9	3.7	52.5	50.0	100	100
Evening Telegram	34.7	41.4	9.3	5.1	56.0	53.5	100	100
Western Star	40.4	38.9	14.0	7.8	45.6	53.3	100	100
Overall	35.6	42.0	12.5	5.3	51.9	52.7	100	100

The immediately preceding paragraphs presented a comparison of press coverage and public comment with respect to overall treatment by newspaper. In examining the nature of the treatment by issue, the total (rather than particular newspaper) coverage and public comment were analyzed. Table 17 presents this information.

Press coverage and public comment treated the issues of bussing, curriculum, and students in a very similar manner throughout. On bussing, the public suggested that "school buses should have seatbelts" (Letter to the Editor, E.T. 3/08/80) and the press proposed that government 'enact seat belt legislation for school buses' (Editorial, E.T. 11/24/83) to make the wearing of them mandatory. Regarding curriculum matters, a Western Star contributor argued that "for most students, a practical and experience training approach would be much more suitable and beneficial" (Letter to the Editor, W.S. 3/24/82) than the present emphasis on academics. Likewise, an editorial supported a move towards manual training, and criticized the school system for students coming out of schools:

...either as products or dropouts with a painfully weak knowledge of their academic subjects, and also completely ignorant of the practical kind of knowledge which can become so useful in conditioning a student for a career in technical work or useful in his everyday life. (Editorial, E.T. 4/30/79).

The support given students is evidenced in a press item which stated that "...a child is entitled to his or her education,

TABLE 17

The Nature of Press Coverage and  
Public Comment By Issue

Issue	Supportive		Neutral		Critical		Total	
	Press	Public	Press	Public	Press	Public	Press	Public
Students	51.2	57.1	23.3	23.8	25.6	19.1	100	100
Teachers	23.7	55.2	31.6	4.7	44.7	40.1	100	100
Curriculum	20.7	33.3	3.5	2.5	75.9	64.2	100	100
Administration	16.7	39.6	8.3	4.2	75.0	56.3	100	100
Bussing	26.1	26.7	0	6.7	73.9	66.7	100	100
Education in General	65.0	33.3	0	14.3	35.0	52.4	100	100
Finance	43.8	27.5	0	5.0	56.3	67.5	100	100
Revised High School	6.3	23.3	18.8	2.3	75.0	74.4	100	100
Other Issues	35.7	33.3	7.1	9.5	57.1	57.1	100	100
Denominational Education	100	48.5	0	0	0	51.5	100	100



and they should not be used as pawns in any labor dispute" (Editorial, E.T. 7/30/79). Similarly, a parent blamed both the NTA and the Provincial government during the dispute for showing "...no consideration for the children - the real losers" (Letter to the Editor, E.T. 4/9/83).

As can be seen in Table 17, public comment was more supportive than press coverage towards the issues of administration, teachers, and the revised high school. For example, one public comment supported the administrative policy of centralization because "the programs and the quality of instruction would suffer" (Article, E.T. 8/23/79) under a system of neighborhood schools. The press, however, contended that in large centralized schools, "teachers depend too much on facilities and equipment to do their work for them, resulting in a loss of personal contact" (Article, D.N. 10/3/80).

The percentage of public items on teachers classified as supportive more than doubled that of the press. According to one public writer:

Teachers are...to transmit moral and spiritual energy through the medium of enlightened instruction and personal influence. Therefore, the powers that be should arm the teachers with adequate power to deal appropriately with cases of juvenile discipline, and stand by the teacher at all costs. (Letter to the Editor, D.N. 8/19/81)

Press coverage has described teachers as being

...reasonably well-paid, and they have advantages many other workers don't enjoy. Their recent actions leave people wondering about their commitment to the profession, as compared to the commitment to money and working benefits. (Editorial, W.S. 4/13/83)

The revised high school was a hotly-debated issue in the Province's newspapers. Although the public and the press were generally critical of the timing and manner of introduction, the former contained a much larger portion of supportive comments than the latter. For instance, one public comment viewed the introduction as "...a wise decision which will broaden the base of learning" (Article, W.S. 3/6/79), while the editor of the Western Star felt that 'the implementation of Grade 12 should be delayed' (Editorial, W.S. 9/12/79).

On the other hand, the press tended to be more supportive than the public towards denominational education and school finance. All press coverage towards denominational education was of a strongly supportive nature. Typical press comments were:

...that the responsibility for the education of children is where it should be, with the churches - far and away the best educational system in this part of the world. (Editorial, D.N. 11/27/81) and

Anytime government starts to fool around with anything as important as the Schools Act, which among other things has to do with our denominational system of education, [the Minister of Education] can expect some people will react and question what is being done. (Editorial, D.N. 6/10/83)

Many of the public writers felt differently, however, with comments such as "the denominational system has retarded the educational growth in Newfoundland for years, and is still doing so" (Letter to the Editor, E.T. 10/17/81) and calls to 'bridle this dormant demon denominationalism before it's too late' (Letter to the Editor, W.S. 2/15/79).

Regarding school finance, one editor felt that "education is everybody's business, therefore there should be few complaints because we all must pay a school tax" (Editorial, E.T. 8/17/83). One public comment urged that "the outrageously costly and apparently unsatisfactory process of education is due for a radical change" (Letter to the Editor, W.S. 5/22/81), while another complained about "...the practically everyday ringing of my doorbell by kids, soliciting for their various schools" (Letter to the Editor, D.N. 11/21/80).

#### Press Coverage and Public Comment as Instigators

It was hypothesized in Chapter I of this study that press coverage and public comment both acted as instigators of further comment. This section, therefore examines in a very preliminary way the extent and nature of this interaction. The reader is advised that only items referring "directly and explicitly to previously published opinions" were included in this analysis.

Press coverage and public comment as instigators were grouped according to the sections stimulating additional contributions by newspaper. Table 18 presents these data.

Overall, a total of 125 items of press coverage and public comment were directly referred/responded to by subsequent published opinions. Of this total, the vast majority (96) fell within the public realm, while only 29 press instigators were identified. Press coverage resulting in further comment was divided fairly evenly between editorials (15) and columns (14), whereas public comment-generating additional contributions saw letters to the editor (82) exceed articles (14) by a wide margin.

By newspaper, the Daily News press coverage generated the greatest response (13), followed by the Evening Telegram (11), and the Western Star a distant third (5). Incidentally, this proportion of further comment generated as a result of press coverage closely resembles the extent of press coverage devoted to education by each of the three dailies. Public comment in the Daily News and the Western Star were almost identical (22 and 23 items respectively) in instigating additional comment. However, in terms of stimulating further responses, public comment in the Evening Telegram was highest, accounting for more than 40 percent of the overall total, with 51 items. Such a high number could have been expected in view of the fact that there were many more items of public comment in the Evening Telegram than in the other newspapers.

TABLE 18

## Volume of Instigating Items By Paper

Paper	A	B	C	D	E	F	Totals (C + F)
Daily News	4	9	13	20	2	22	35
Evening Telegram	9	2	11	42	9	51	62
Western Star	2	3	5	20	3	23	28
Total	15	14	29	82	14	96	125

## Key:

A - Editorials

B - Columns

C - Total Press Instigators

D - Letters to the Editor

E - Articles

F - Total Public Instigators

One specific aim of this study was to examine the degree to which press coverage and public comment incited further comments from each other. Table 19 addresses this question.

Press coverage did not serve to directly instigate any further press coverage, but public comment did result in a significant number (80) of additional comments from the public. With regards to one group influencing the other, press coverage generated 29 (28 letters to the editor, one column) responses from the public. For example, a Daily News editorial of March 31, 1981 warned of a possible teachers' strike, which would be a struggle for public support. On April 18th, the Minister of Labor and Manpower wrote that the editorial in question was irresponsible, and he accused the editor of "...fostering labor strife and showing your political bias" (Letter to the Editor, D.N. 4/18/81).

Public comment, on the other hand, drew answering coverage from the press on 16 (14 editorials, two columns) occasions. The January 15, 1982 edition of the Daily News printed a letter which attacked creationism as being "...outright fantasy and nonsense" (Letter to the Editor, D.N. 1/15/82). The writer felt that the State should be able to decide what is taught in the schools. In perhaps the fastest response to any letter to the editor, the editorial of the same day voiced strong disagreement with that writer, and gave "Thanks to God for the denominational system of education we have in this province" (Editorial, D.N. 1/15/82).

TABLE 19

Comparison of Instigating Items By Section

RESPONSES	Section	INSTIGATORS		Totals
		Press Coverage	Public Comment	
	Editorials	0	14	14
	Columns	0	2	2
	Letters to the Editor	28	78	106
	Articles	1	2	3
	Totals	29	96	125

To determine the nature of responses to items previously published in these newspapers, each of the 125 responses were classified as being either in agreement, or disagreement with the instigating item to which it referred. There was little difficulty in performing this aspect of the analysis, for when writers explicitly referred to previously published items, they had no qualms about stating the nature of their position in relation to that of the earlier writer.

Table 20 presents these data.

In this instance, the nature of responses by the press and the public varied considerably. Press coverage, in response to previous writings tended to be very much in agreement with the instigating items, with 10 out of 16 or 62.5 percent of the responses clearly concurring with the previous opinion. These two examples are typical of such interactions. Dr. Linegar wrote a letter to the editor voicing opposition to an NTA resolution regarding a program of family planning and sex education (Letter to the Editor, D.N. 3/05/82). The next edition's editorial agreed with Dr. Linegar's position, and claimed that "there is no moral sex outside of marriage" (Editorial, D.N. 3/06/82). On August 7, 1979 an article published in the Western Star proposed a shorter summer holiday with more breaks throughout the year because "students forget on vacation" (Article, W.S. 8/07/79). The editor of that daily was quick to respond to the article, and even went further in suggesting "a two week break after



TABLE 20

The Nature of Responses to Initial Items

	Agree	Disagree	Total
Editorials	9 } 10	5 } 6	14
Columns	1 } 2	1 } 2	2
Letters to the Editor	25 } 27	81 } 82	106
Articles	2 } 3	1 } 3	3
Totals	37 (29.6%)	88 (70.4%)	125

every three months of school" (Editorial, W.S. 8/08/79). The editor felt this new schedule would help prevent "unlearning" by students.

Responses by the public, however, were overwhelmingly in disagreement with the instigator. In fact, 82 out of 109 or 75.2 percent of the responding public voiced disagreement with the initial opinion. An Evening Telegram editorial entitled "Pushing the Panic Button" criticized the closing of schools in anticipation of a forecasted storm that never came (Editorial, 3/01/80). On March 12th a letter to the editor disagreed with that editorial, and defended the decision to close the schools because "it's better to be safe than sorry" (Letter to the Editor, 3/12/80).

During the 1983 teachers' contract negotiations a substitute teacher from Fortune wrote (regarding government's intention to reduce the salaries of substitute teachers) that "...a trained person is required, and surely a trained salary should be paid, not a portion" (Letter to the Editor, D.N. 4/04/83). This statement drew a response from the Premier himself, who wrote in a letter to the editor published three days later; that "...in no province is the rate of pay [for substitute teachers] as high as in Newfoundland" (Letter to the Editor, D.N. 4/07/83). Comprised of a large number of similar interactions through the press, more than 70 percent of the total responding comments were critical of the instigator's opinion.

### Summary

This chapter focused on public comment on education and its relationship to press coverage. Letters to the editor and articles dealing with educational matters were contained in 11.3 percent of all publications. Public comment directed most of its attention towards teachers, the curriculum, and school administration, and least towards education in general, students and bussing. Overall public comment was classified as being more critical than supportive. The public tended to be supportive of students and teachers, but critical of the revised high school, finance, bussing, and the curriculum. The Evening Telegram contained more than half of all public comment, followed by the Daily News and the Western Star. The nature of this treatment varied little among the contributors of the different newspapers.

The volume of public comment more than doubled the total press coverage on education. Both groups were quite comparable in the proportion of coverage directed towards particular issues. Although the overall nature of the treatment was very similar by the press and the public, the former tended to be more neutral, less critical and less supportive than the latter. More than 17 percent of total items were found to be clearly instigative of further comment. More than three-quarters of these were public, as opposed to press contributions, although press coverage resulted in more responses from the public than vice-versa. Press

responses tended to be much more in agreement with the instigating items than public responses. Generally speaking, responding contributors predominantly voiced opinions that were contrary to those expressed by the instigators.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

#### Purposes and Procedures

The problem addressed by this study was two-fold, and was considered in terms of the following two general questions and the more specific inquiries contained in each:

1. What is the nature of press coverage of education?
  - What was the extent of press coverage of education over the period?
  - Which particular issues generated most coverage?
  - How did the press treat education generally and specific issues in particular?
  - What are the similarities/differences in treatment of education by the different newspapers?
2. What is the nature of public comment about education and what is the relationship between public comment and press coverage?
  - What was the extent of public comment on educational issues?
  - What issues in education were addressed most frequently by the public?
  - Was public comment about education generally supportive, neutral, or critical?
  - To what extent are positions espoused by the public compatible with those of the press?
  - To what degree does press coverage result in public comment and vice-versa?

To answer these questions, the opinionated sections (editorials, columns, letters to the editor, and general news articles) were read in all 4381 issues of the three daily newspapers of Newfoundland and Labrador - The Daily News, The Evening Telegram, and The Western Star - during the five-year period commencing January 1, 1979 and concluding December 31, 1983. This mass of comment was surveyed in order to describe the nature of the treatment on various educational issues. To facilitate the sorting of this material, each item was placed into one of these 10 categories: administration, bussing, curriculum, denominational education, education in general, finance, the revised high school, students, teachers, and other issues. This procedure enabled the data to be grouped repeatedly in various combinations to permit ready analysis of the information from different perspectives.

### The Findings

#### Press Treatment of Education

Chapter III provided an analysis of data gathered concerning the nature of press coverage of education. A total of 233 items appeared in the 4381 editions, for 5.3 percent of all publications. This included 195 editorials and 38 columns. The volume of educational coverage also varied from year to year. The period commenced with a great deal of press coverage (52 editorials and five columns)

concerned with education. In 1982 there were 26 editorials and five columns, or slightly more than half the 1979 total. During the concluding year of the period, press coverage reached its highest level, with 61 items dealing with education.

The bulk of press treatment was directed towards the issues of students (18.5 percent), teachers (16.3 percent) and the curriculum (12.5 percent). Educational issues stimulating least press attention included the revised high school (6.9 percent), finance (6.9 percent) and denominational education (4.3 percent).

Overall press treatment of education was of a critical (51.9 percent), rather than a supportive (35.6 percent) nature. Coverage was especially supportive of denominational education (100 percent), education in general (65 percent), and students (51.2 percent). Press treatment was most critical of the curriculum (75.8 percent), the revised high school (75 percent), administration (75 percent), and bussing (73.9 percent).

The percentage of total coverage devoted to education was highest in the Daily News (7.3 percent), followed by the Evening Telegram (five percent), and the Western Star (3.8 percent). Generally speaking, each of the three newspapers allotted a comparable amount of attention to the various issues. Issues related to teachers and the curriculum rated at or near the top of all

three lists, while denominational education, Grade 12, and finance tended to receive little attention. The three dailies were similar in their criticism of administration and the curriculum, and in their support of denominational education. The remaining issues lacked any clear consensus, with various combinations of support/criticism among the three.

#### Public Comment and Press Coverage

Chapter IV examined the nature of public comment on education, and the relationship between public comment and press coverage. To this end, the extent and nature of public comment (as expressed in letters to the editor and general news articles) were analyzed, followed by a comparison of these results with corresponding data gathered in Chapter III.

Public comment on education totalled 495 items appearing in 4381 editions, or 11.3 percent of all publications. The volume of public comment fluctuated somewhat over the five-year period. There were 85 items of public comment on education during 1979, but the number dropped to the lowest level of the period the following year, with 75. From 1981 onward, the amount increased annually, culminating in the highest total of the period in 1983, when 170 items were contributed to the three newspapers.



Public comment directed most of its attention towards teachers (34.8 percent), the curriculum (16.4 percent), and school administration (9.7 percent). Issues receiving least comment included education in general (4.2 percent), students (4.2 percent), and bussing (three percent).

Overall public comment was classified as 42 percent supportive, 52.7 percent critical, and 5.3 percent neutral. Educational issues treated most critically included the revised high school (74.4 percent), finance (67.5 percent), bussing (66.7 percent), and the curriculum (64.2 percent). Public contributors tended to be supportive of students (57.1 percent) and teachers (55.2 percent).

The Evening Telegram contained more than half of all public comment on education, followed by the Daily News and the Western Star. On the whole, the proportion of public comment directed towards particular issues did not vary greatly from one newspaper to another. One notable exception was denominational education, which ranked third in the Daily News, sixth in the Evening Telegram, and ninth in the Western Star. Likewise, there was no significant variation in the nature of public comments contained in the different newspapers.

The volume of public comment (495 items) more than doubled the total press coverage (233 items) on education. The Daily News contained the greatest amount of press coverage, while the Evening Telegram drew the largest number of public comments. By issue, both the press and the public placed much emphasis upon teachers, the curriculum, and school administration. The greatest contrast related to students' issues, rated first by the press (18.5 percent) and second last by the public (4.2 percent). On most issues, however, the amounts of press coverage and public comment were quite comparable.

The nature of the treatment of education was very similar by both groups. Nevertheless, press coverage tended to be more neutral and less supportive than public comment. By issue, the press was more critical of school administration, teachers, and the revised high school, but more supportive of denominational education, education in general, and finance than was public comment. Remaining issues were treated in a very compatible fashion by both groups.

Of the 728 items of press coverage and public comment identified in the three daily newspapers during the period, 125 were found to be clearly instigative of further comment. More than three-quarters of these were public contributions. Press coverage resulted in more responses from the public (29) than vice-versa (16). In addition, press responses tended to be more in agreement with the instigating items (62.5 percent) than were public responses (24.8 percent).

Overall, more than 70 percent of the responding items were critical of the instigating opinion.

#### Discussion of the Findings

Changing conditions of the late 1970's and the early 1980's had, and are continuing to have, a profound impact upon education in Newfoundland and Labrador. First, there was the economic recession with resulting government restraint policies. There was also the Canadian Constitution debate, which some interpreted as posing a threat to Newfoundland's denominational system of education. In addition, there were changes in education itself, including the Provincial Government's decision to reorganize the senior high school program with the implementation of Grade 12, the declining student population, and the closing of the Province's schools due to a teachers' contract dispute. Each of these factors played a role in raising education to the forefront of public consciousness. It is within this context that the press coverage and public comment on education, which was analyzed in the present study, were published in Newfoundland's daily newspapers.

### Press Treatment of Education

Education was covered by the press in just over five percent of all editions of the Province's three dailies. While it is beyond the scope of this study to assess this level of coverage as being little or great, it may be safe to say that (in view of the extraordinary issues and forces prevalent during the period) this amount was not indicative of "normal" press coverage. In fact, this period may have witnessed the highest volume of press coverage of educational issues in Newfoundland's history.

Press coverage was mostly concerned with students, teachers, and the curriculum. Since these are arguably the main components of any educational system, such emphasis is to be expected. There were indications that members of the press did not feel sufficiently informed to take firm positions in their treatment of some issues. Consequently, the press devoted relatively little coverage to the revised high school and school finance. The press tended to be critical of most issues raised, and this may account for the small number of items directed towards denominational education. Whenever the denominational system was addressed by the press, the coverage was entirely supportive.

The Daily News had the greatest percentage of press coverage devoted to education, followed by the Evening Telegram and the Western Star. The writer discovered no

apparent reason for this disparity, other than the fact that the latter two dailies were part of a newspaper chain (with access to syndicated press coverage), while the Daily News was a locally-owned, independent publication. Although the volume varied, the three daily newspapers exhibited much similarity in the distribution of their coverage over the various issues, as well as in the nature of such treatment.

#### Public Comment and Press Coverage

People contribute to the opinionated sections of newspapers for a variety of reasons. Most feel strongly about a particular issue and wish to "put in their two-cents worth". Political decision-makers sometimes avail of an opportunity to publicly justify their positions, and certain interest groups contribute numerous items and sometimes create a false show of strength on particular issues. Although these considerations cast some doubt as to the extent to which public comment is representative of overall public opinion, the source remains valuable. Public comment, as expressed in letters to the editor and articles, serves to bring issues into the public forum, and the views contained therein provide some insight as to how and why certain people feel as they do towards certain things. In addition, members of the general public read, and are influenced by, the opinions expressed in the daily newspapers.

Public comments on education, contained in over 11 percent of all publications, were made within the same context as press coverage. Accordingly, the volume may have been uncharacteristically high due to the particular attributes of the five-year period selected for this study.

The volume and nature of public comment closely resembled that of the press. The majority of public comment was directed towards teachers, the curriculum, and administration, with comparatively little attention being paid to students and bussing. The most glaring difference in emphasis between press coverage and public comment concerned students - ranked first in volume with press coverage, but second last with public comment.

The opinionated sections of these daily newspapers served as a forum in which ideas, information, and points of view concerning educational issues were addressed by the two groups. Investigation of these sections revealed that public comment and press coverage are intimately and inextricably connected, as demonstrated by the near-parallel treatment of education, in both volume and nature, by the two divisions of contributors. The interactive relationship between the press and the public was further exemplified by the large number of instances in which each group directly instigated additional responses in subsequent publications.

### Implications for Educators

The findings of this study have serious implications for all involved in the educational process. In particular, educators should:

1. Seek to cultivate an awareness of the public viewpoint, for no one whose responsibilities are to the public can afford to be ignorant of what the public thinks. Constant examination of newspaper coverage would be one way of achieving such awareness.

2. Be willing to study and evaluate all forms of criticism, with conscious effort to put aside bias and self-interest in order that the full implication of the criticism may be realized.

3. Recognize the successful implementation of innovations (new educational policies, new courses of study, new methods, etc.) depend to a certain extent on public support. This calls for including in every new project a plan for obtaining the necessary supporting public opinion.

4. Set up information bureaus, press conferences, and other means whereby valid information about school activities are more accurately disseminated to the general public.

5. Encourage and assist the press in an attempt to increase and improve the volume and nature of its coverage of educational issues.

### Implications for Further Research

This study was an endeavour to break new ground in educational research. As in any pioneering venture, the methodology and data analysis may be refined in further undertakings.

As a result of this research, it is suggested that any additional, related investigation be directed at an examination of press coverage and public comment concerning specific educational issues, rather than an overall analysis.

Researchers seeking to utilize radio open-line talk shows as a forum of public debate are advised of the standard policy of destroying tapes of such discussions at the end of each 30-day period.



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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

PILOT RESULTS  
EDITORIAL COVERAGE OF EDUCATION (1981)

Issue	Daily News		Evening Telegram		Western Star		Totals	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Administration	3	13.6	0	-	2	11.1	5	9.4
Boundary Changes	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-
Curriculum	4	18.2	1	7.6	3	16.7	8	15.1
Denominational Education	0	-	2	15.4	0	-	2	3.7
Finance	1	4.5	2	15.4	1	5.5	4	7.5
Higher Education	3	13.6	5	38.4	5	27.8	13	24.5
School Bussing	2	9.0	1	7.6	1	5.5	4	7.5
Teachers	7	31.8	1	7.6	0	-	8	15.1
Education in General	1	4.5	0	-	0	-	1	1.2
Other Issues	1	4.5	1	7.6	6	33.3	8	15.1
Totals	22	100.0	13	100.0	18	100.0	53	100.0

APPENDIX B

PILOT RESULTS  
- LETTERS TO THE EDITOR (1981) -

Issue	Daily News		Evening Telegram		Western Star		Totals	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Administration	3	17.6	4	13.8	1	6.2	8	12.9
Boundary Changes	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-
Curriculum	2	11.7	2	6.8	3	18.7	7	11.3
Denominational Education	1	5.8	4	13.8	1	6.2	6	9.6
Finance	3	17.6	2	6.8	1	6.2	6	9.6
Higher Education	3	17.6	2	6.8	1	6.2	6	9.6
School Bussing	0	-	0	-	2	12.5	2	3.2
Teachers	1	5.8	8	27.5	4	25.0	13	20.9
Education in General	0	-	4	13.8	1	6.2	5	8.1
Other Issues	4	23.5	3	10.3	2	12.5	9	14.5
Totals	17	100.0	29	100.0	16	100.0	62	100.0







