



Discourse
Media

How do we talk about success
in childhood?

Changing the framework: The case for
in-depth journalism on K-12 and early
childhood education in Canada



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Executive summary

This paper highlights the results of an analysis of the public discourse in Canada about childhood success. Commissioned by Ashoka Canada, Discourse Media analyzed over 600 media sources, attended multiple national and global events and spoke to over two dozen people involved in different levels of early childhood education through higher education, including those within and outside the public system, parents and others. Our goal was to better understand how Canadian society thinks about and discusses success in growing up in order to identify opportunities to catalyze framework-changing conversations. The high-level vision of impact guiding this work is a world in which every child enjoys the opportunities and learning environments necessary to develop the skills they need to thrive and be ethical actors in the modern world.

We found that there are few national platforms for discussion about young people and their role in society. Therefore, news journalism and other media dominate discourse. Typically, discussion focuses on two mechanisms that influence children: parenting and education. Parenting is seen as being in the private realm, not a matter of national societal debate. Education, especially considering the dominance of Canada's public system, is vigorously debated. Therefore, we see education journalism as the primary entry point for a framework-changing conversation, and focused our research on this area.

Our analysis revealed that education reporting in Canada is driven by politics, crisis and conflict. Most coverage happens on a daily basis and is subject to the values of the news cycle. This means big-picture issues don't receive the nuanced coverage needed to fully inform and engage the public. Because politics is the strongest driver of the news cycle, politicians' voices drown out students, teachers, parents and researchers. As a result of prominent negative narratives and a lack of space to discuss education issues, there is a vacuum where there could be constructive discourse. In Canada, there is a lack of coverage in general. Cuts to newsrooms have meant the loss of beat reporters, and with it a loss of knowledge and expertise in education reporting. We see these challenges as opportunities.

About Discourse Media

This report and analysis was produced by Discourse Media.

Discourse Media is an independent media company that produces and enables in-depth journalism about complex issues. Our work is collaborative, inclusive and driven by intentional impact.

We leverage new media to tell stories in innovative ways and meaningfully engage partners, media outlets and the general public. Our projects range from print and digital editorial packages commissioned by major media outlets to complex, independently-funded journalism projects that involve stand-alone websites, data analysis and interactives, multimedia content, strategic partnerships and deep engagement strategies.

Our team includes award-winning reporters, editors, designers, engagement specialists, data analysts and programmers. Our work has been published in dozens of media outlets, ranging from the *Atlantic* magazine to CTV to Postmedia, Canada's largest newspaper chain. Discourse Media won the 2016 Canadian Journalism Foundation Innovation Award and was a finalist for the 2015 Data Journalism Website of the Year, awarded by the Global Editors Network, for our project Moving Forward. Our team has also been recognized for our journalism innovation work with awards from Canadian Journalists for Free Expression, Ashoka Canada, Inspirit Foundation and AmEx Emerging Innovators.

About Ashoka Canada

Ashoka is the global association of the world's leading social entrepreneurs – individuals with system-changing solutions for the world's most urgent social problems.

We are redefining the global citizen sector by creating a system of collaborative entrepreneurship. Connecting the work of individual social entrepreneurs to business, academic and public sector partners, we create a network effect driving the sector forward and developing new solutions to global problems.

To date, we have elected over 3000 social entrepreneurs as Ashoka Fellows, in 72 countries in five continents. Across Canada, we have elected 48 Fellows since 2002. By working with our network, we have identified the key principles of transformation. We are working with business entrepreneurs, corporations, government agencies and universities to create a new reality.

Dominant narratives about education in Canada

Education is a complex issue, but we want it to be simple. Reporters try to make education topics digestible for the public by simplifying the issues. The consequence is that the public is underinformed, leading to either disengagement from the conversation or a skewed perspective of the real issues.

Education news most often hinges on elections, budget releases and ongoing political clambering between opposition parties and government. Political players include [ruling government](#), [opposition critics](#), [regional school boards](#), [teachers' unions](#) and [parents' interest groups](#).

Another driver of the education news cycle is conflict. This includes [underfunded classrooms](#), [degraded facilities](#), staff shortages, overworked teachers and failing or marginalized students. More often than not, the message is that [throwing more money](#) at education is the [solution](#).

The quest for balance in coverage sometimes has the unintended consequence of providing a platform to politicians and interest groups to spout rhetoric and not solutions. This can go [back and forth](#) for days, weeks or months at a time. An example of this is the ongoing, years-long battle over seismic upgrades and capital funding between the [Vancouver School Board](#) and the [B.C. Ministry of Education](#) which has played out in the media.

What is being missed in current coverage is the complexity and importance of education and the impact it has on society as a whole. It's often seen as an issue for parents to deal with, not the whole of society.

“We don't link the state of the country with the state of our education system. We're not incredibly proud of the fact that most of our children attend public school. This is partly because education exists in provincial silos . . . the whole public doesn't know what we're doing.”

– Annie Kidder, executive director, People for Education

Historically, the public education system was the result of a national debate about young Canada's core values and what its new citizens wanted for its young people. Today, in the absence of a national platform for dialogue, we have lacked this big-picture debate about what our children's success really means, while we churn in a cycle of petty regional and provincial politics. With the upcoming 150th anniversary of our nation's founding, we have an opportunity to revisit this debate and engage in a fundamental conversation about how our view for the future aligns with how the next generation of leaders are experiencing childhood and education.

Trend: Fewer education beat reporters

Most of the reporting on education is done by general reporters. The education beat reporter, like all reporting beats, is a thing of the past. This means that the coverage doesn't go very deep and that reporters aren't often in tune with what is relevant to the education sector beyond the stories that are valued in the daily news cycle.

However, some outlets are publishing good work. For example, *The Tyee's* education coverage is extensive and often thoughtful. But it still focuses on conflict between parents, politicians and [budget woes](#). *The Globe and Mail* publishes well-written articles on a broad range of K-12 topics, but it hasn't taken a long-form look at the ins and outs of the system. Here are some reporters in Canada that consistently follow education.

[Katie Hyslop - The Tyee](#) • [Caroline Alphonso - The Globe and Mail](#)
[Tracy Sherlock - The Vancouver Sun](#) • [Cheryl Rossi - Vancouver Courier](#) • [Nick Martin - The Winnipeg Free Press](#)
[Frances Willick - Halifax Chronicle Herald](#) • [Austin Davis - Regina Leader-Post](#)
[Kristin Rushowy - The Toronto Star](#) • [Dave Staples - The Edmonton Journal](#) • [Louise Brown - The Toronto Star](#)

It is worth noting that most of the reporters that have education expertise are covering education through a regional lens, rather than with a national perspective. This means that despite the fact that Canadians spend such significant investment on our public education system, it is not being documented.

Where is education being covered from a national perspective?

Since education is mostly covered through a regional lens, there is a huge opportunity to do impactful work on a national platform. The following are two exceptions where strong, systemic, national coverage is occurring.

The Current, CBC Radio One

As Canada's flagship current affairs radio show, *The Current* often digs deep into issues. The lead stories on *The Current*, which have included many education topics, host three guests with unique perspectives. The show rarely interviews politicians, giving voice to those most affected by the issues or the most relevant experts on a topic. At around 20 minutes dedicated to each topic, *The Current* is a long-form radio show. However, topics are still limited to current affairs and don't cover whole-systems issues in depth.

That being said, *The Current* has prioritized education coverage as a national issue. This has included [reporting on "Evergreen certificates"](#) being granted to aboriginal students at a higher rate than non-aboriginal students in B.C. as well as labour issues in Ontario.

Education issues were covered in *The Current's* ["By Design"](#) series. They looked at the design of classrooms, coding initiatives and transgender support systems. While each episode tends to cover a single topic, the show is actually really good at following up on the story when something changes or when they receive feedback from the audience.

The Walrus

The Walrus has covered pedagogy and curriculum as well as [politics and policy](#). The magazine's coverage of the Toronto District School Board politics took a regional issue and [applied it to the broader question](#) of the value and impact of school boards.

In November 2013, Zander Sherman [wrote about](#) Joe Bower's alternative pedagogical theories and practices. Sherman took a big-picture look at pedagogy, curriculum, learning outcomes and what is expected of students. Of note, there are [only 15](#) examples of education stories currently archived on *The Walrus'* website.

Gaps in the public discourse

To identify entry points in education journalism to catalyze framework changing conversation, we spoke with a number of stakeholders and experts. Here is a summary of what they think is missing in Canadian media and public discourse.

Annie Kidder

Toronto, Ontario

Executive Director, People for Education

The biggest issue facing public education is the growth of private school enrolment, according to Annie Kidder. “It took 200 years to build this public education system and only 20 years to destroy it,” she says. She sees this trend as a symptom of the fact that Canada has lacked a fundamental national conversation about the point of school and what we want our young people to achieve. She adds that education professionals tend to speak only to each other. “There’s a real need to disseminate the missions and objectives of educators to the public.” Annie also points out – as does this tool – that educational jargon is a major barrier to informing the general public.

Charles Ungerleider

Vancouver, B.C.

Professor of sociology of education (UBC), author: *Failing Our Kids: How we are ruining our public schools*

Charles Ungerleider says the system is not failing as a whole, but it is failing in pockets, leaving behind vulnerable and marginalized students. “The promise of a public education in a democratic society is that who you are and where you live shouldn’t affect the outcomes you derive from the system.” Again, this was seen as a result of the lack of a clear vision of the central purpose of our education system.

Also of importance, says Ungerleider, is what he found when he crunched the data to show that outcomes between kids who attend public school are not worse than those who attend private school. “So it’s really a bad investment,” he says.

Stephen Hurley

Milton, Ontario

Teacher for 30 years, curriculum consultant, education expert and writer

The narrative of the teacher is often forgotten by the media, according to Stephen Hurley. At some point we stopped trusting our teachers, he says. “We need to rebuild that trust. To do this, we need to create spaces for conversation. This is applicable to the media, because we write a story and that’s the end of the line – nothing happens with the story. People are going to the comments section to talk about education, and that’s not the right place for that to happen. We need to foster conversation on the issues big and small. And we need to be having grassroots conversations with parents, teachers and administrators.

“This means talking about things as mundane as assessments and grading and ratings. But it also means talking about resiliency, risk-taking, race, empathy, diversity. Leadership needs to create the spaces to have these conversations.”

Doug Strachan

Surrey, B.C.

Manager, communications, Surrey School Districts

Doug’s perspective as communications expert in one of Canada’s largest and fastest-growing school districts is that many of the good-news stories and successes of our kids are being ignored. “One of the things that strikes me is how important the schools are to the community. Kids are driving projects involving the homeless, the elderly and international issues. They’re volunteering, fundraising and trying to be involved. But this is not making its way into the

discourse.”

He says he generally receives calls from journalists who are following negative stories. “I’m the crisis guy.” The perception of outsiders looking in, he says, is that the schools are in crisis mode. “That’s all that gets reported on, but that’s not who we are.”

Tatiana Fraser

Montreal, Quebec

Systems change entrepreneur, Ashoka fellow

Tatiana’s focus on gender inequality lends transferable lessons in storytelling best practices and whole-systems change.

“A big opportunity in education journalism is to diversify the stories that are being told so they’re not just focused on white, middle-class kids and panicking about their outcomes. But we shouldn’t just focus on that narrative – we should tell the stories of success and innovation that illustrate how change can happen.”

Mary Gordon

Toronto, Ontario

Founder, president, Roots of Empathy and Seeds of Empathy

Mary Gordon says fostering citizenship is still the primary goal of education in Canada, but in most provinces there’s a disconnect between that well-articulated philosophical goal and the actual implementation of it. The biggest issue at hand is the well-being of our children, says Gordon, “because they are not a part of the future, they are 100 per cent of the future.

“It’s easy to talk about it, but how do we know if they feel included, if they feel taken care of? How do we know that our teacher training, classroom funding, anti-bullying campaigns are all working together to give us a system that functions? And for people who don’t have children now or may never have children, they need to be paying attention; the quality of the leadership of our country will depend on the quality of leaders and their capacity to feel empathy and human emotion.”

Data opportunities

One of the challenges of reporting on education and childhood in Canada is that each province collects and measures outcomes data differently. There’s a lack of national data, and that is an opportunity for our team to step in with our expertise in applying data models, case studies and research analysis to the stories of youth success in Canada.

Because the data hasn’t been readily available to anyone in the past, finding meaningful ways to tell data-driven stories about education is an opportunity to stand out with exclusive and meaningful data journalism work, drive significant traffic digitally and attract media partners that lack capacity to do data journalism work.

There is a wealth of demographic information publicly available and no shortage of relevant research work being done. Collaborating with changemakers, thought leaders, researchers and institutions who have access to rich mines of data is a priority for Discourse Media.

There is also value in using OECD data and PISA rankings in a meaningful way. While these measures are often seen as distracting from more progressive measurements in education, they still hold weight and can be used in conjunction with multiple data points to tell interesting and important stories in a visually accessible format. These rankings drive the news cycle, and present an opportunity to open the big framework-change conversations discussed

throughout this paper.

Some jurisdictions in Canada have been working on whole-systems change for many years. In Manitoba, for example, [Healthy Child Manitoba](#) saw the adoption of Roots of Empathy into the education system there in the year 2001. Fifteen years into this experiment, approximately 35,000 youth have been through the programming. This is just one example of the unique data stories we can use to guide our reporting and create [interactive data journalism](#).

Summary

Public education in Canada was created to bolster and support the values deemed central to the characteristics of Canadian society at the time of confederation: “Peace, order and good governance.” But what role does the powerful institution of education play in modern society and how do we define the success of young Canadians now?

Much of how we view the success of our youth is dependent upon how we view the success of public education. Our perceptions of the education system are largely shaped by the mainstream media in Canada and that has a major impact on how we think about and value our public education system and the well-being of Canadian youth.

The daily news cycle is the main depository for education journalism. The news cycle is episodic and conflict-driven. It more often than not pits provincial bureaucrats against regional bureaucrats, teachers against the province, parents against teachers. Stories are triggered by funding shortages, violent incidents in schools, dramatic reports or political events. And importantly, this is not only what drives the discourse in our country, but also provides the space for it.

“People are going to the comments section (of news stories) to talk about education.”

– Stephen Hurley, teacher for 30 years, curriculum consultant, education expert and writer

There are very few neutral spaces where parents, students, teachers, administrators and experts can come together to discuss the future of one of the most powerful institutions in Canada. Media can play a role in filling this gap, as demonstrated through [The Seattle Times Education Lab](#).

“I think the family is the most important institution for almost any aspect of the developmental health and wealth of any nation. But that’s private domain, so education is the second most influential institution. Really, education has more to do with forming citizenry than any other institution.”

– Mary Gordon, founder, president, Roots of Empathy and Seeds of Empathy

For real change to happen, discourse needs to be fostered on the heels of in-depth reporting. This means breaking away from the usual life cycle of a news story.

“A journalist spends weeks researching and developing the story, days writing it. As soon as the story is published – at the exact moment the community starts getting excited about the topic – the reporter moves on to next story.”

– Sharon Pian Chan, director of journalistic initiatives, *The Seattle Times*

There are important stories that are not being told: issues of inequality stemming from race and class; the devaluation of public schools and a shift toward private education; the need for a space that fosters constructive discourse on education topics; the effect of a lack of learning supports on quality-of-life indicators such as mental health.

There are many threads that need to be pulled to get at the overall story of public education in Canada. Discourse Media’s model of reporting addresses the holes and needs identified in this landscape analysis. A long-form, data-driven and nuanced reporting process coupled with an aggressive community engagement strategy is essential to any successful whole-systems change. While it is clear that the education system is not in crisis in Canada, there are

hugely important issues the public should be informed of to ensure that the impact the public education system has on Canadian society, values and democracy are supported by an engaged citizenry.

Key recommendations

- Create a dedicated platform to host in-depth, multidimensional reporting and national discussion among various stakeholders and influencers on early childhood and education issues in one navigable place. This platform clearly represents both the complex issues of whole-system change in the education sector and the relationships between societal well-being and the well-being of Canadian youth.
- Drive interest and traffic with data-driven and interactive storytelling that communicates regional stories on a national scale. Do this through geographical and visual representations of data and evidence that show both the challenges and successes of different approaches to these problems. Take a “platform-agnostic” approach to maximize reach and impact through syndication through media partners and strategic use of social media.
- Ensure diversity in our reporting by reaching out to all corners of the system, giving equal weight to voices often left out of the discourse and prioritizing underrepresented perspectives.
- Create a community engagement strategy that comes to life as the story is published, bringing journalists and members of the public together and informing future reporting.
- Collaborate with education journalists and mainstream media partners. One strategy will be a central database that multiple media can use to localize reporting. Marquee partnership for credibility but home platform that we control. Design collaborative strategy to address media outlet capacity challenges.