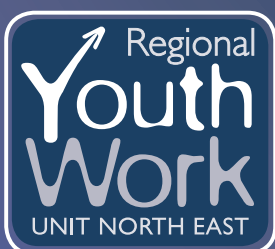




A Study of North East Regional Newspaper Coverage of Children and Young People



**Undertaken by the
Regional Youth Work Unit - North East**

Background

This study came about as a result of the Our North East regional youth summit held by Government Office North East and the Regional Youth Work Unit in August 2006. The event brought together young people and local, regional and national decision makers to debate key issues for young people. The summit discussion topics were divided into seven themes - community, culture, diversity, education, transport, health and the 'Youth Matters' white paper. During the discussion of all these themes, young people raised one concern again and again: the issue of young people's representation in the media. Young people felt that they were not portrayed in a fair and balanced way, and that stereotypes about anti-social and criminal youth were widespread in the media. As a result, Government Office for the North East commissioned the Regional Youth Work Unit to carry out this study.

The purpose of this research is to determine whether the negative perceptions among young people about their own portrayals in the region's press are borne out in the actual content.

The Study Sample

The study has charted editorial content relating to children and young people in North East Regional newspapers over one month. The timeframe ran from mid February to mid March 2007.

The sample consisted of 802 news stories and features, taken from ten regional newspapers. These were:

- The Journal
- The Evening Chronicle
- The Northern Echo
- The Sunderland Echo
- The Middlesbrough Evening Gazette
- The Newcastle Herald & Post
- The Northumberland Herald & Post
- The Middlesbrough Herald & Post
- The Sunday Sun
- The Hexham Courant

The sample includes urban, rural, daily, weekly, free and paid for titles, from different publishing companies. This broad-spectrum sample of newspapers aimed to include most potential readerships in the region.

News stories and features were collected that involved children and young people from age 0 to 25. This age range was split into further categories, which reflected how they are classified by media law. In McNae's Essential Law for Journalists (a key resource for journalists) a child is defined as a person below the age of 14. A young person is defined as a person aged 14 or above, but below the age of 18.

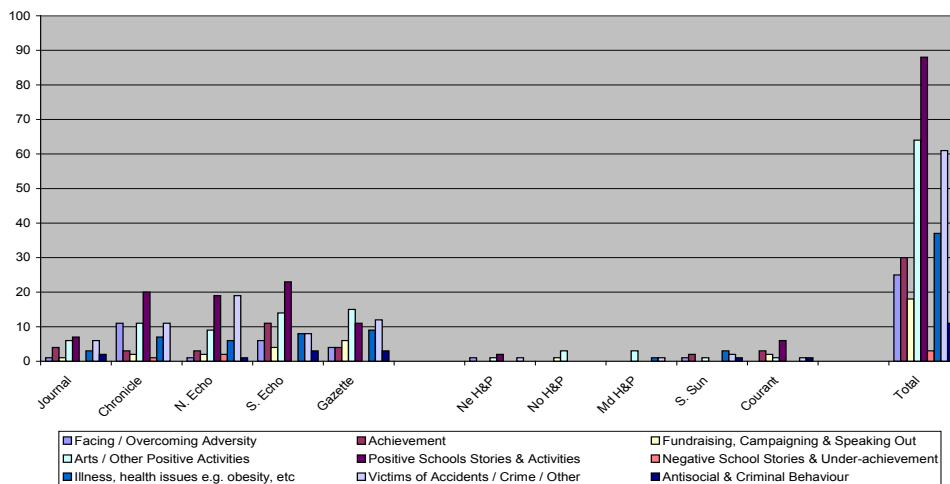
In these terms anyone over the age of 18 can be regarded by law and by journalists as an adult, but this study also included young adults up to the age of 25. Therefore the age categories are split into children (0 to 13), teenagers (14 to 18) and young adults (19 to 25). The split provides a way to compare the reporting of teenagers against their younger and older contemporaries.

Involved children or young people as important participants in the story - the story had to be about what they have done or about what has happened to them as integral figures in the story, rather than as peripheral or incidental figures.

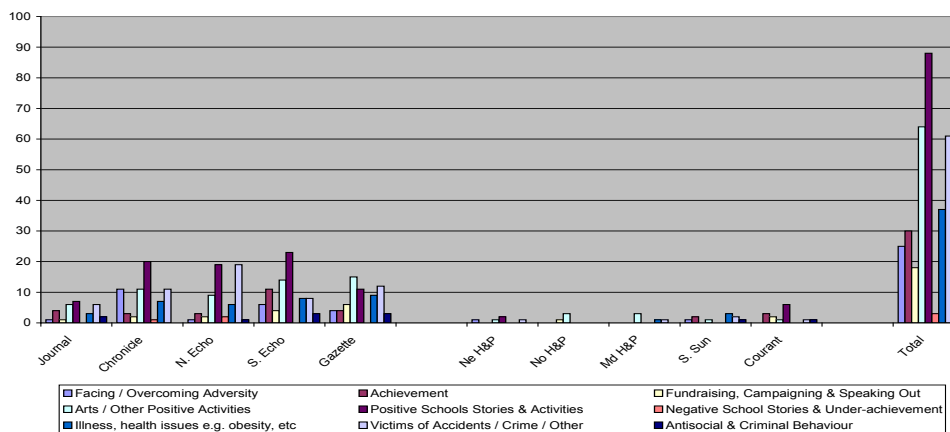
The categories for classifying the stories were: facing and/or overcoming adversity, achievement, fundraising and campaigning, arts or other positive stories, positive schools stories, negative schools stories and/or underachievement, health issues and illness, victims of accidents and crime, antisocial and criminal behaviour.

Results

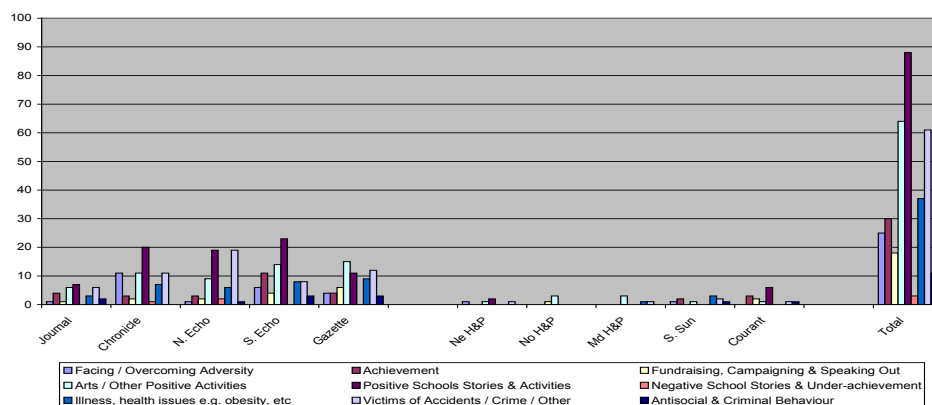
Age Range 0 - 13



Age Range 0 - 13



Age Range 0 - 13



A brief analysis of the data to identify clearly the percentage of positive vs. negative stories linked to newspapers:

- In the 0 to 13 age group, The Northern Echo had the largest proportion of positive stories at 16%.

The Northumberland Herald and Post had the fewest positive stories – 0% of the sample. Discounting weekly titles, The Evening Chronicle and the Sunderland Echo had the smallest proportion of positive stories in this age group at 11% each.

- In the 0 to 13 age group, The Northern Echo and The Evening Gazette jointly had the largest proportion of negative stories at 8%.

The Newcastle Herald and Post and the Northumberland Herald and Post both had the fewest negative stories at 0%. Discounting weekly titles, The Journal had the smallest proportion of negative stories in this age group at 4%.

- In the 14 to 18 age group, The Evening Chronicle had the largest proportion of positive stories at 10%.

The Middlesbrough Herald and Post had the least positive stories at 0%. Discounting weekly titles, the Sunderland Echo had the least positive stories at 4%.

- In the 14 to 18 age group, The Evening Chronicle had the largest proportion of Negative Stories at 17%.

The Sunday Sun and the Middlesbrough Herald and Post had the smallest proportion of negative stories at 0%. Discounting weekly titles, the Middlesbrough Evening Gazette had the smallest proportion, at 7%.

- In the 19 to 25 age group, The Evening Chronicle had the largest proportion of positive stories at 7%.

The Northumberland Herald and Post and the Middlesbrough Herald and Post have the smallest proportion of positive stories at 0%. Disregarding the weekly titles, The Evening Gazette, The Sunderland Echo and the Northern Echo jointly have the least positive stories at 4% each.

- In the 19 to 25 age group, The Northern Echo has the largest proportion of negative stories – 25%.

The Middlesbrough Herald and Post and the Sunday Sun share the smallest proportion of negative / stories at 0%. Discounting weeklies, The Sunderland Echo has the smallest share of negative stories in this age range at 7%.

- When the age groups are combined, The Evening Chronicle has the largest proportion of positive stories at 10% of the whole sample. Overall the Northern Echo has the largest share of negative stories at 14%.

Key Observations

Newspapers write mostly positive stories about young children, but the proportion of negative stories increases as young people get older.

Most stories about young adults are negative.

Newspapers write slightly more stories about children than about teenagers, and write far less stories about young adults than about teens – the likelihood of being written about seems to decrease with age.

Most stories about children and teenagers are linked to activities in schools – schools are a readily available resource of stories for journalists.

Features and 'soft' human interest stories tend to be positive. Hard news is often negative – about accidents or crime.

Stories are black and white – relatively easily categorised as positive and negative.

The hundreds of stories counted can all be categorised into just nine main types – newspaper stories tend to follow conventions.

Schools stories

Schools are a great resource for journalists and newspapers – they often hold events involving the arts or prize-giving and local dignitaries or celebrities, provide great photo opportunities and provide a reason for the featured children's parents to buy a copy. Whereas these events provide positive stories involving young people, there were only a few negative schools stories – about underachievement or bad behaviour. Most schools stories are about some sort of upbeat learning event. It should be noted that these events are organised by adults at the school, and young people (especially younger children) do not have much choice about how they participate. In situations where older teenagers or university students are featured in the story it might be more likely that they 'owned' or organised the event, but stories are not usually specific about this.

Health issues

Stories about health issues were often negative because they were alarming stories about problems with obesity or sexual health. Stories about children and young people with illnesses were only positive when the young person involved was recovering from illness or doing something to campaign against it.

Victims of accidents and crime

Although these stories do not paint young people in a necessarily bad light, they involve children and young people in often tragic circumstances. The stories are therefore often distressing and reflect the convention of children or young people as helpless victims.

Antisocial and criminal behaviour

These stories involve young people as the perpetrators of very bad behaviour, and are

therefore clearly negative representations. These stories rarely approached the young people involved for their side of the story or quoted them directly. One significant exception was the story of Colleen McDonald. Having had her ASBO lifted, the newspaper warned that she was back and putting her community 'in fear'. However, the newspaper used a box-out to put her 'vow to start afresh' (see fig.1).

In some news reports about young people and bad behaviour, the language used was significant. In a minority of stories words such as 'yobs' and 'kids' were used interchangeably (see fig.2)

Fig.1

Fig.2

Some Context to the Study

Newspapers that include magistrate's court reports coincide with a far higher result of negative stories. The magistrate's reports often include older young people on minor charges of drunken and disorderly behaviour, but are usually very short one-paragraph summaries. However they still count as one story, and this bumps up the number of negative stories. These one paragraph reports are not high-profile or particularly memorable, and it is important to highlight that not every negative story about a young person is an imposing page-lead.

There are some examples of very good practice in engaging young people in the region's press. The Evening Chronicle won Young People Now's Positive Images Award for the best local press coverage of young people. The newspaper also launched Young Achiever Awards, now in their fifth year, to highlight young people who achieve success, and runs the Young Reviewers competition, which enables young people to write arts reviews for publication every week in the newspaper's 'What's On' section.

The Northern Echo has taken part in a meeting with young people and Durham County Council youth workers, where representations of young people in the newspaper were discussed. As a result of this meeting the newspaper has looked into setting up a young people's scrutiny group to help inform their working practices on young people's perception of their news coverage.

The Sunderland Echo publishes 'On Campus', which is an opportunity for students from Sunderland University to get their own stories about campus life in print (see fig.3)

NCJ Media Ltd and Gazette Media Company offer the 'Education Newsroom' in Newcastle and Middlesbrough – a project where young people can learn how to use industry standard software to produce their own publications.

This has led to the creation of two publications, Nerd World and The Kron, written and produced by young people. Nerd World was short listed for the 2006 World Young Reader Prizes held in Washington DC.

The Hexham Courant has examples of local arts reviews written by young people.

Fig. 3

