REALITY CHECK, I AM NOT HILARY SWANK:
HOW AMERICAN TEACHER-CENTRIC COMMERCIAL FILMS
TRIED AND FAILED TO TEACH ME
HOW TO BE A TEACHER

by
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ABSTRACT

Over the last several decades, teachers have been the subjects of countless American commercial films. Infecting popular culture as box office hits, these teacher-centric movies have a huge influence on public perception of teachers and teaching. However, the medium of commercial film is not adequate to capture the lifestyles, roles, and responsibilities of real teachers. American Teacher Movies are often embellished, underdeveloped, and/or inaccurate in the way they conceptualize and represent teachers and teaching. As a consequence, many pre-service or new teachers enter the field with misinformation; their perceptions of the teaching profession have been distorted by what they witness in teacher-centric films. The resulting unrealistic or misguided expectations may contribute to the exodus of young teachers who leave the profession in their first few years of teaching.

This study analyzes the depictions of teachers and teaching in eight popular commercial films produced in America in the 90’s and early 2000’s and examines the implied expectations or stereotypes the films create or endorse. Each film is surveyed and evaluated through the lens and experiences of a pre-service teacher. This project will allow me chronicle my responses to the representations of teaching I witness in the films and also compare them to my own experiences. Through this narrative inquiry of American teacher-centric films, I hope to encourage teacher candidates to view Teacher Movies with a critical eye so that they may develop realistic expectations and identities as aspiring teachers.
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This work is dedicated to those courageous individuals who choose teaching.
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INTRODUCTION

I was 15 years old. I sat cross-legged on the dusky, carpeted floor of my high school library on a sunny autumn afternoon. The blinds on the windows were drawn shut to keep out the bright light filtering through the swaying oak trees; this plunged the library into a murky darkness broken only by the old, boxy television screen and the door occasionally opening to shouts of protest. We spooned Daniella’s mom’s special crawfish pasta salad onto paper plates and sat sprawled in front of the screen, our school uniforms in careless disarray. A black beret sat lopsided on each of our heads.

It was eerily quiet as Robin Williams, in the character of Mr. John Keating, leaned in and whispered so clearly: “Carpe…Carpe Diem…Seize the day, boys…Make your lives extraordinary.” Only an hour later, we looked on as Mr. Keating’s students climbed atop their wooden desks and declared, “O Captain, My Captain” as he glowed with gratitude and pride and the music built with a flourish. There were actually tears in our eyes as we teenagers sat huddled in the darkness.

At that time, I had no idea that I would soon decide to pursue a career in education. But the wit and romance of the movie Dead Poets Society (1989), which I viewed annually at the Poetry Club banquet, never failed to make a teaching career seem enchanting, noble, and inspiring. Mr. Keating loved English Literature and he loved sharing this passion with others, just like I did. He was a leader that his students adored and respected—what vocation could be more enjoyable and fulfilling?

This delusion of grandeur would continue into college as I chose my Secondary English Education major and I took my introductory courses. During my freshman year at TCU, I viewed The Ron Clark Story (2006) in one of my classes. I was in awe of
Matthew Perry’s character, especially when he drank those thirty milk cartons for his students’ amusement and attention. I sought to recognize myself in this movie as well: I decided I would do anything for my students, just as Mr. Clark did. I naively aspired to be the Hero Teacher—I would save the lost sheep, the wayward youth who only needed someone to believe in them. I would continue to plan lessons and film lectures when I was too sick to work. I would make my class a family and I would write educational raps and I would drink lots and lots of milk. I really thought it was that easy to earn students’ respect and manage a rowdy classroom!

One night during my junior year, I curled up on the sofa and watched Freedom Writers (2007). I was just as enamored with Erin Gruwell as I was with John Keating and Ron Clark, if not more so; she was a female role model I could imitate. I marveled at her heatedly lecturing about racial and religious discrimination, exposing her students to Holocaust history, and connecting the content to their turbulent lives—even when she experienced open hostility from her colleagues, had to work two extra jobs, and neglected her marriage.

I was amazed and reaped hope from this young, pretty, and educated White woman who gained respect and endeared herself so diverse youths from broken families and poverty and gang-ridden neighborhoods and helped them fight their insurmountable odds. Even when she divorced her husband, I tried to justify it. I thought: these were the sacrifices a teacher makes to help her students succeed. In my eyes, teaching meant unwavering passion and tremendous sacrifice and hard work. My spouse and family and friends would have to understand and respect that, and support me in any way I required.
As I gain more experience in the classroom and the end of my undergraduate years swiftly approach, I have reflected on these films and the impact they had on me. I now realize that teaching and being a teacher encompass much more than what is depicted in these sensationalized movies. This is one of the dangers that Teacher Movies pose: From the very beginning, my expectations for myself as a teacher were completely unrealistic. Watching them was counterproductive in that they did not prepare me to be a teacher or give me authentic insight into my future career. In many respects, they actually did the opposite. As I completed more field experiences and tried my hand at the messy and complex art of teaching, I was quickly stripped of my rosy Teacher Movie glasses.

Through research and discussions with my mentors and my fellow pre-service teachers, I have found that I am not alone. Tom Moore (2007), an author and 10th grade history teacher in the Bronx, confirmed my concerns in a New York Times article: “Every year young people enter the teaching profession hoping to emulate the teachers they’ve seen in films.” Just like me, many first-year college students or other prospective educators are infatuated with the romanticized ideal they see in the movies. Unfortunately, these movies merely showcase distorted or fragmented images of my profession. Maybe this is why so many new teachers do not continue teaching after their first few years in the classroom? It could be a result of misinformed expectations and acute disillusionment: as inexperienced novice educators, we sometimes put too much stock in what we see in the movies.

Additionally, since choosing to study education, I have found that my family, friends, and peers often attribute aspects of the Teacher Movies to me. My parents are both nurses, and my closest friends will soon graduate college with degrees in fields like
business, environmental science, marketing, finance and accounting, studio art, writing, anthropology, and acting. I do not have any family members who chose teaching as a career. Consequently, none of those close to me, aside from perhaps my professors and some of my fellow pre-service teachers, truly understand what teaching and being a classroom teacher demands.

For example, when I ask my parents what they think my job as a teacher entails, they give narrow responses. My mother describes a teacher’s job to create relationships with students, mentor them, cater to their learning styles, instill them with morals and knowledge, and help them develop personal strengths and self esteem. My father identifies teaching subject manner, presenting information from a textbook through lecturing, making the lecture engaging or interesting, distributing and grading tests, and navigating the gap between low performing and high achieving students in my class.

My mother was concerned with student-teacher rapport and my father with instruction and assessment. But there are many day to day things I do and other teachers do—lesson plans, curriculum and state standards, behavior and classroom management, parent and administrator contact, questioning and timing, student grouping and lesson logistics, IEPs and special accommodations, various meetings and e-mail conferences with students, parents, content area departments, administrators, counselors, etc.—that they did not think to include. The things they did mention coincide with the teacher activities I have seen in teacher-centric movies. They are not wrong, but their answers are incomplete and oversimplified, much like the portraits of teachers and teaching in Teacher Movies.
Teacher Movies may enable the public to project the attributes of fictional teachers onto real teachers. As a result, teachers are sometimes expected or assumed to be (among other things): noble heroes, sexual predators, cold dictators, virginal saints, devoted missionaries, boring drones, or incompetent miscreants. Many of my peers and elders believe my job will be filled with motivational monologues, gang violence, craft projects, student-teacher affair scandals, great vacation hours, grading papers, and a meager paycheck. They ask me if my students behave like the misguided youths in the movies—if they sell drugs, if they start fistfights, if they are pregnant at sixteen. They are mildly surprised that I do not wear a suit, pearls, and high heels to work every day. Let me just repeat this once more: I am not Hilary Swank.

My parents and some of my other family members have implored me to switch my major, to pick something that will pay more and “challenge me more.” It is remarkable to me that though all of them attended elementary, middle, and high school, they have little knowledge or insight into the adults with whom they interacted every day for about twelve years. Instead, common tropes from media representations of teachers come to their minds. Their misconceptions frustrate me greatly as I try to explain who I am as a teacher when I am still finding out myself.

Now, I am a senior in college and I am a few months from graduating with my undergraduate degree. In the meantime, I am student teaching in a local public high school—an immersive experience that has given me a true taste of life as a teacher. It is a demanding twelve weeks in which I must make decisions about who I am as a teacher and what this will mean for me in my adult life. Such reflections have made me more aware of and sensitive to the ways that those outside my future profession misconstrue
what it entails. When I first viewed the TV advertisement trailers for the popular 2011 film *Bad Teacher* starring Cameron Diaz. I was immediately horrified as I considered the ramifications this raunchy and dim-witted comedy would have for me. I dreaded the disrespectful comments from my peers and the incredibly foolish behavior, attire, and other features that would now be associated with my profession and, consequently, with me.

Prior to this study, I began to resent filmmakers who created these American teacher-centric films. Did they not realize that being a teacher is hard enough? It is hard to be taken seriously when there are images like *Bad Teacher* exploding in the public sphere. What would my family, my friends, and my students and their parents think after viewing this movie? Would it make them see me differently?

When I see Cameron Diaz’s too-short pencil skirt hover over her tanned, bare legs, as she clutches a red apple and strikes a sultry pose on her desk, I want to shout: “That is not me!” But on the other hand, the more optimistic teacher films also make me cringe sometimes. When I see Hilary Swank’s beaming face (no dark circles), her wrinkle-free (and no doubt sweltering) suit, her dainty pearl necklace, and perfectly smoothed back hair and make up, I want to shake my head: “That is not me either.” How can I define myself as a teacher if I am constantly confronted and surrounded by media caricatures of my profession?

Though they are the foundation of public education, teachers are rarely allowed to represent themselves to the public. National and local news coverage of unethical and/or intimate student-teacher relationships, the caricatures of teachers in comics, cartoons and sitcoms, and even the teacher characters in the commercial films I have
mentioned: these are the exaggerated or underdeveloped images that seek to portray or define my future profession. These are the flawed images of teachers that confront the American public today and either misinform or deter prospective educators. Here is the bottom line: “[I]nspirational teacher films do not offer a realistic portrait of what it’s like to be a teacher or a student in an [American] school” (Mackin, 2014). Much is magnified or exaggerated, and much is diminished or lost entirely.

Thus, I have begun a journey to explore these films and scrutinize their themes, characters, and implications. I want to anticipate and hypothesize how these films could inform the perceptions of the profession I hope to make my life-long career. What will administrators, students, parents, and the general public expect of my colleagues and me after internalizing these silver screen storylines? What should I expect of myself? “[W]hat are these films really about? And what do they teach us about teachers? Are we heroes, villains, bullies, fools?” (Moore, 2007).

Most importantly, what messages do these films send to pre-service and new teachers at that vulnerable yet critical time of training and development? This study will enable me to verbalize my responses to the faulty or confusing depictions of teachers that I have seen on the screen. I want to reconcile what I have seen with what I have heard and experienced. Perhaps by dissecting these films, their recurring tropes, and the messages they send, I will gain some answers or insights so that I can build a teacher identity that suits me and prompt others to do the same.
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Internalization and the Influence of Mass Media

In our present yet ever-changing world, we are completely engulfed in visual, auditory, and other sensory media—especially electronic or digital media. Film is a particularly potent and influential medium; commercial films are released incessantly and garner much public attention and admiration. Glamorous, annual award ceremonies like the Academy Awards and the Golden Globes are evidence of our species’ obsession with movies. Movies are not only popular, but they are also persuasive and evocative as a medium. Most people probably do not fully comprehend the profound impact that Hollywood’s productions—whether comedy, drama, thriller, or any other popular genre—can have on how we conceptualize our lives and the people in them!

In her book The Hollywood Curriculum: Teachers in the Movies, Dr. Mary M. Dalton (2004) discusses the extensive influence that the mass media, especially film, exerts:

Films transcode the discourses (the forms, figures, and representations) of social life into cinematic narrative. Rather than reflect a reality external to the film medium, films execute a transfer from one discursive field to another. As a result, films themselves become part of that broader cultural system of representations that construct social reality. The construction occurs in part through the internalization of representations. (p. 2)

In other words, films do not reflect the reality in which we reside—instead, they portray a fictional, constructed representation. Films do not represent people, places, and events as they truly occur or exist; they obscure some things and exaggerate others, as we will see
in my analyses of various Teacher Movies. Even though the films are fictional works, their form is highly persuasive and influential because they are visual narratives.

All cultures likely feature some form of narrative; from children’s books to great epics, narratives are memorable and important to human memory. Narratives often exhibit tropes: for example, many narratives include a hero, a villain, and a victim. As a result, we absorb or internalize these recurring figures and forms, and we are able to identify them and relate to them in our culture and in our every day lives.

*Internalization*, which is a prevalent component of renowned pedagogue Lev Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of cognitive development, is defined as “absorption, or taking in, of knowledge from social contexts in which it is observed, so that one can use it for oneself” (Sternberg & Williams, 2009, p. 51). Internalization is a powerful psychological process through which we absorb the ideas, values, and philosophies around us—present in our relationships, in our surroundings, and of course in the mass media. This process is very transparent in children’s development: “In essence, children recreate within themselves the kinds of interactions they observe in the world so they can profit from the interactions they have observed” (Sternberg & Williams, 2009, p. 51).

Adults also do this when they encounter and observe representations in media. We absorb the characteristics of the narrative and character tropes we see in the movies and then begin projecting them onto other people and events. In other words, “we borrow from the stories of films we see to help us create ourselves as characters and organize the plotlines of our daily lives” (Dalton, 2004, p. 2). I experienced this firsthand when I viewed *Freedom Writers* (2007); I sought to define my role and my behavior as a teacher
by emulating what I saw in the movies. The film presented me with new knowledge about teaching and I sought to apply it to my own life.

Sometimes, we consciously adopt characteristics from the films we view, but more often internalization is an unconscious process and we do not realize how much of our conception and expectations of the world are derived from fictional films. Thus, though films and other media do not portray our actual or physical reality, they do play a huge role in constructing our *social reality*.

One would think that since American students spend approximately twelve or more years in public school, they would have enough experience and interactions to have an accurate concept of teachers. However, following her extensive explication of 116 teacher-centered motion pictures (spanning 75 years), Dr. Dalton (2004) argues: “[G]eneral knowledge about the relationships between teachers and students, knowledge beyond the scope of the personal or anecdotal, is created by constructs of popular culture played out in the mass media” (p. 2). Recalling my reflections on my conversations with my mother, father, family members, and peers, I agree with Dr. Dalton—even in my personal experience as a collegiate education major, I have noticed that non-educators seem more inclined to view teachers through social constructs observed in media rather than through their own interactions with real teachers.

Thus, Teacher Movies have power—the power resides in their representations and how viewers unconsciously adopt them as their own perceptions. In this case, new teachers observe interactions involving teachers and then try to put the knowledge to use in real life—unfortunately, that knowledge may not be compatible with their reality. When movie representations of teaching and the reality of teaching are not identical, it
creates confusion and doubt for pre-service teachers—which can lead to disillusionment, cynicism, and even the end of a budding teaching career.

**The Teacher Movie Genre in America**

There are countless movies that include teachers, but how many of them can be classified as Teacher Movies? What composes this genre? When selecting films for my study and undergoing research, I noticed some basic characteristics that many American Teacher Movies have in common: teacher protagonist, material from memoirs or true stories, elements of the drama genre, and formulaic narrative arc.

Firstly, the films belonging to the Teacher Movie Genre are typically teacher-centric: they follow the daily life of a main character who is a teacher. The film may give some screen time to students or administrators or even students’ families, but the film’s plot is focused on the teacher’s emotions, experiences, or the defining role he or she plays in the lives of students.


It is important to note that just because a Teacher Movie is “based on a true story” does not mean that it tells the whole story or tells the story as it really happened. Though these films are based on true stories, scenes are often fabricated or embellished. *Stand and Deliver* (1988) is often considered as the pioneer of the American Teacher Movie
canon. This film draws from the biographical experiences of Jaime Escalante, a high school math teacher. The film catapulted Mr. Escalante to international stardom—and yet, he confesses, the movie was not an honest depiction of his real-life teaching experiences at East Los Angeles’ Garfield High School. In a 2006 interview, almost twenty years after the film’s release, Mr. Escalante reveals:

10 percent of the movie is drama. Like, at Garfield, we didn’t have a kid who was going to throw the desk like Lou Diamond [Phillips] did [in the movie]. When we had [principal Henry] Gradillas, the discipline started showing up, and the kids had respect, and we advertised hard work, so I didn’t have that kind of problem. (Jesness, p. 13)

This brings me to the third characteristic of Teacher Movies: the majority of them can fit firmly within the drama genre. Tim Dirks (2008), creator and author of American Movie Classic (AMC)’s Filmsites.org, offers a fairly comprehensive definition of drama films (which compose the largest and broadest film genre), which I have condensed into the following criteria:

- Portray realistic settings or life situations and realistic characters in conflict with themselves, others, or forces outside their control
- Depict human beings at their best and worst and in-depth development of characters’ emotions and relationships
- Often include current societal issues, including but not limited to prejudice, intolerance, substance abuse, mental illness, political upheaval, corruption of institutions, and inequality (such as sexism, racism, etc.)
Teacher Movies are dramatic—sometimes, even melodramatic—and tend to focus on the relationships and emotional trials of teachers and their students, as well as the many social issues that affect teachers and students inside and outside of the classroom. This also means that Teacher Movies may not be purely for entertaining—filmmakers may utilize the topical appeal of social problems in dramatic films to draw audiences and make some sort of statement on the issues depicted (Dirks, 2008).

Fourthly, Teacher Movies in American cinema typically exhibit a formulaic narrative arc. This does not mean that “if you see one, you’ve seen ‘em all”; but the similarities among the different films’ respective plotlines are noticeable. In her article “Good Teachers: The Movie You Will Never See,” Colleen Gillard (2012, p. 5) composes a comprehensive summary of the typical Teacher Movie narrative plot, which I have condensed into succinct plot points below:

1. The teacher protagonist lands a new teaching job—typically a job that no one else wants. At this point, the newbie is optimistic.
2. Almost immediately, the principal and colleagues tell the rookie not to expect much and to be wary of the treacherous and ruthless students.
3. The class, filled with both aggressive and submissive personalities, completely strips the new teacher of his or her confidence. The new teacher considers abandoning this pursuit with the last of his or her pride intact.
4. Instead, the newbie bounces back and through tireless personal effort tries to win the kid’s respect and attention. He or she uses unorthodox methods such as self-deprecation, unconventional games and unauthorized field trips, house visits, and bribes, gifts, and rewards.
• The students begin responding more positively as the teacher refuses to give up on them. Specific students forge very strong bonds with the teacher, who seems to be the only adult that cares about them and their interests.

• Typically, friction is created between the teacher and other faculty or students’ families—but the teacher protagonist is depicted as the “good guy.”

• By the end of the film, all of the students in the once dysfunctional class adore and absolutely trust their champion teacher.

• The new teacher, now imbued with wisdom, grace, and confidence, 

  “discover[s] great fulfillment in doing work that ‘changes lives.’”

This narrative arc is observable in many Teacher Movies, through the 80’s, 90’s, and early 2000’s. They are tales of redemption and heroism, and almost always have a happy and satisfying ending in which all of the conflicts and perils facing the teacher and his or her students completely resolve or vanish. However, there are several teacher films that are teacher-centric, dramatic, and biopic, yet deviate from this narrative arc. These movies may approach teachers and teaching from a different angle. In this study, half of the subject films will follow the narrative arc described above, while the remaining four will deviate in notable ways.

Heroes and Villains

All movies in the Teacher Movie genre are related in that they offer some portrayal of teachers or teaching. Though these portrayals differ tremendously, the teacher characters in the films often seem to fall on either end of a polarized spectrum because “Hollywood has an insatiable appetite for heroes and villains” (Walsh 1999). At
one end, there are the alleged “Good” Teachers; at the other end reside the “Bad” Teachers. Furthermore, the teacher protagonist is almost always a “good” teacher. But, what makes a good teacher? Conversely, what makes a bad teacher? There are difficult questions that would elicit numerous and diverse responses. Even though we have been studying to be teachers for four years, my fellow pre-service teachers and I are still developing our own philosophies of what makes an effective or poor teacher. Though the terms “good” and “bad” denote an alarming amount of ambiguity, Hollywood has developed its own conceptualizations of “good” and “bad” in its films.

**Hollywood’s “Good” Teacher**

In the Teacher Movie genre, a “good” teacher is not often classified by how well he or she can plan a lesson, design an assessment, or provide quality instruction for a diverse array of learning styles. Instead, a “good” teacher must possess a heroic status—he or she is unfailingly idealistic, resilient, noble, and makes self-crippling sacrifices for the good of his or her students. The heroic teacher is “presented as a ‘good’ force in the movies, painted against a backdrop of institutional and societal woe, and positioned as markedly different from most of the other teachers and virtually all of the administrators in the respective films” (Dalton, 2004, p. 22).

In order to be a “good” teacher, an educator must be “able to ‘connect’ with the most ‘difficult’ students” and earn the respect of the kids everyone else has doubted or abandoned (Dalton, 2004, p. 23). In the Teacher Movie genre, this is usually the one trait used to measure a teacher’s success. A “good” teacher defies the odds, breaks rules and codes of ethics, and oversteps boundaries in order to help students succeed academically, socially, in other areas of their lives. Sometimes, a “good” teacher may graduate from
hero status to scapegoat, victim, or martyr status—the bigger the personal sacrifice in the name of teaching, the more esteem the teacher garners.

In fact, the “good” teacher often willingly takes on the role of savior: “[T]hese movies put teachers and schools in the position of saving children from drugs, violence, their families, and even themselves” (Dalton, 2004, p. 23). Hollywood’s interpretation of a “good” teacher is essentially a superhero—he or she puts his or herself in harm’s way in order to “save” the students.

**Hollywood’s “Bad” Teacher**

Though the “good” teacher mold has been solidified throughout many Teacher Movies, the “bad” teacher archetype is not as comprehensive. This is mostly due to the fact that a “bad” teacher is rarely the protagonist is an American teacher-centric movie. In fact, many of the secondary character teachers in the Teacher Movies examined in this study could be classified as “bad” teachers, especially when they disagree with the protagonist teacher, the “good” teacher.

Hollywood’s “bad” teacher is a character who is contemptible at worst and inflexible at best. While the “good” teacher seeks to build relationships with students, a “bad” teacher is “typically bored by students, afraid of students, or eager to dominate students,” which makes one question why they entered the profession in the first place (Dalton, 2004, p. 61). The “bad” teacher is usually an accomplice of cruel or domineering administrators and follows the standardized curriculum despite student disinterest because he or she wishes to avoid personal contact or interactions with students (Dalton, 2004, p. 61). Unlike the good teacher, the bad teacher does not earn the respect of
students, but instead endures their dislike or indifference. He or she gives the minimum effort when it comes to teaching.

Other depictions associated with the “bad” teacher may be inappropriate or unethical conduct; but, unlike the “good” teacher, who breaks the rules for the good of the students, the “bad” teacher only has personal gain in mind. A “bad” teacher may behave in ways that are considered unethical or indecent for an educator—this includes intimate adult relationships with students or providing adolescents with controlled substances. But more often, a “bad” teacher is not equated with a “lousy role model”—a “bad” teacher simply “fails to teach” (Gillard, 2012, p. 4). That is, “bad” teachers are considered incompetent at connecting with students, which is the ultimate strength of Hollywood’s “good” teachers.

**Important Newsflash: Teaching is Not Star Wars**

Films can be black and white in more ways than one. Throughout the history of cinema, there have been tales of heroes and villains, good and evil, superheroes and monsters, Jedi and Sith. The danger of this severe split between the “good” (heroic teachers) and the “bad” (incompetent, helpless, or vindictive teachers) is that there is no allowance for other interpretations. Thus, Teacher Movies and their extreme stereotypes present real teachers, especially novice teachers, with a difficult ultimatum: either an educator adopts the role of “good” teacher, becoming a tragic hero or martyr and making great personal and professional sacrifices, or conversely that educator is considered a “bad teacher” and perceived as incompetent or deceitful. As a pre-service teacher, I do not care for either of those choices. Hollywood’s “good teacher” and “bad teacher”
stereotypes limit and victimize real teachers because they set unrealistic social standards for teacher success.

**Give Me the Facts**

When I watch a Teacher Movie or see other representations of teachers and teaching in popular culture, I cannot help but ask: Is that really what people think of us? As a pre-service teacher, with only my own experiences to guide me, I hear many different testimonies from in-service and veteran teachers about their teaching experiences, both uplifting and disheartening. There are some stories that make one’s mouth go dry, and others that inspire bouts of deep laughter. Much of my knowledge about being a teacher is anecdotal, experiential, or qualitative in nature. To begin my “reality check,” I scrutinized quantitative opinion research conducted by Public Agenda to gain broader insight into the current state of teachers in America. I compiled what I found to be the most relevant results and findings into the sections below.

Public Agenda is a non-profit organization that specializes in opinion research. Since 1975, Public Agenda has published numerous articles compiled findings from popular public survey polls like Gallup as well as findings from its own public surveys. I also browsed 5-year reports from the National Education Association, a prominent teachers’ union in the United States. Both included statistics and survey results expressing the attitudes of principals, students, parents, teachers, and others towards present day American teachers. These results provide pre-service teachers, including myself, with a base knowledge about the public reception of teachers—and help us to discern fact from fiction.
The Teachers

The following statistics and key findings reflect real teachers’ attitudes towards their profession:

• 92% of teachers say they are satisfied or very satisfied with their job (Public Agenda, 2003a, p. 20).

• 71% of teachers chose teaching as their original career because they had a desire to work with young people; other frequently cited reasons included value of education in society (42%), interest in subject matter (39%), and influence of a past teacher (31%) (NEA, 2010, p. 83).

• 79% of teachers strongly agree with the statement: “I am passionate about teaching” (Public Agenda, 2003a, p. 14).

• Only 15% of secondary teachers describe their faculty as having high morale (Public Agenda, 2003a, p. 14).

• Teachers identified the following as the top hindrances that obstructed them from providing their best service: “Heavy workload,” “testing demands,” “discipline and negative attitudes of students,” “incompetent/uncooperative administrators,” and “lack of preparation/ planning time, materials, resources, and facilities” (NEA, 2010, p. 93).

• 76% of teachers say they feel teacher are made the scapegoats for the all the problems facing education (Public Agenda, 2003a, p. 14).

• 83% of teachers say that parental involvement and cooperation is a serious problem they encounter (Public Agenda, 2003a, p. 14).
• 43% of teachers agree that they spend more time trying to manage the classroom than actually teaching (Public Agenda, 2003a, p. 15).

• Today’s educators may fall into three categories: Idealist, Contended, and Disheartened; 54% of idealist teachers believe all of their students with individualized support can go to college, as opposed to 30% of contended teachers and 39% of disheartened teachers (Public Agenda, 2009, p. 22).

The Students

The following statistics and key findings reflect real students’ attitudes towards their teachers:

• 44% of high school students say that “all” or “almost all” of their teachers take a personal interest in students and really get to know them (Public Agenda, 2003a, p. 9).

• Students listed the following qualities when asked to describe an ideal teacher: “care about them personally,” push them to “do their best,” “are demanding and consistent” (Public Agenda, 1997, p. 25).

• 78% of students say they would learn more from a teacher to tries to give “fun and interesting lessons” (Public Agenda, 1997, p. 25).

• 71% of students say they would learn more from a teacher who is “enthusiastic and excited” about his or her subject or who knows his subject very well (Public Agenda, 1997, p. 25).

• 67% of students say a teacher who uses “hands-on learning and class discussion” would be effective (Public Agenda, 1997, p. 25).
• 81% of students say they would prefer an interesting teacher who demands more work than a dull teacher who has an easy class (Public Agenda, 1997, p. 25).

• 69% of students say they would learn more from a teacher who treats them with respect or takes the time to provide individual help (Public Agenda, 1997, p. 25).

• About 64-66% of students respond well to a teacher who challenges them to do better and learn more, explains lessons very carefully, or cares personally about them (Public Agenda, 1997, p. 25).

• Students complain about pointless and toothless threats, meaningful or tedious assignments, and, worst of all, the message that, “You can’t learn and you don’t matter” (Public Agenda, 1997, p. 26).

The Parents, Administrators, and the General Public

The following statistics and key findings reflect the attitudes of school administrators, students’ parents, and other Americans towards American teachers:

• 70% of Americans consider teaching to be an occupation of prestige (Public Agenda, 2003a, p. 9).

• 62% of the American public consider teachers to be honest and ethical (Public Agenda, 2003a, p. 9).

• 98% of principals and superintendents are pleased with the quality of their faculty (Public Agenda, 2003a, p. 12).

• 75% of parents believe that their child’s teachers know their subject matter well (Public Agenda, 2003a, p. 9).

• 85% of parents agree that most of the teachers in their child’s school are committed and truly care about students (Public Agenda, 2003a, p. 9).
• 53% of parents believe that teachers tend to be “just average” compared to other college graduates—as opposed to “better than average” (31%) and “the cream of the crop” (6%) (Public Agenda, 2003a, p. 9).

• 47% cite poor or lacking teaching contributes to students’ academic failure and 60% of Americans think teacher quality is a problem (Public Agenda, 2003a, p. 9-10).

• 62% of the general public view teachers as part of the solution to improving public education (as opposed to part of the problem) (Public Agenda, 2003a, p. 11).

The Newbies

The following statistics and key findings reflect new (i.e. less than five years’ experience) teachers’ attitudes towards their profession:

• Only 12% of new teachers say they entered the teaching profession by chance; 52% new teachers say teaching was a long-term career goal, and 34% made the decision to teach in college (Public Agenda, 2003a, p. 19).

• 75% of new teachers agree: “I am seriously underpaid” (Public Agenda, 2003a, p. 15).

• 42% of new teachers believe student achievement is determined by parental involvement and socioeconomic status, as opposed to quality teaching (Public Agenda, 2003a, p. 17).

• 57-63% of new teachers comment that teacher training programs do a fair or poor job preparing them for the stress of teaching and disciplining students (Public Agenda, 2003a, p. 29).

• 56% of new teachers feel their pre-service preparation included too much theory and not enough practical or hands-on opportunities (Public Agenda, 2003a, p. 29).
• 96% of new teachers say they love their job and 80% say that they would choose teaching again (Public Agenda, 2003a, p. 14).

**METHOD**

**Procedures for Selecting Films for Study**

There are countless teacher films in the world today. They are not only large in quantity but also varied in origin and in content. The Teacher Movie genre encompasses a wide array of storylines, character tropes, cultural perspectives, audiences, and content. This is due to the fact that the word “teacher” can describe many different professions.

When sorting through teacher-centric films, there were many questions to consider, for diversity’s sake:

- What kind of institution or environment does the teacher character inhabit? Public, private, independent, or charter? Local or foreign? Small or large? Affluent or underprivileged? Diverse or homogenous? Urban or rural?
- What is the teacher’s professional or pedagogical experience? Is he or she a veteran, a new teacher, a substitute?
- What age level or grade level does that teacher character teach? Early childhood, elementary, middle, or high school? College or university? Honors, AP, or “general ed?”
- What if the teacher does not teach in a school at all, but rather in a non-school or even non-academic setting?
• In what subject or content area does the teacher character specialize? English, math, history, the arts? Or does the character’s discipline evade a certain subject or field?
• What if he or she is a special education professional or another specialist such as a tutor, a mentor, a counselor, a coach, or tradesperson taking on an apprentice?
• Geographically, where does the teacher live and work? In the Americas? In Europe or Asia? On an exotic island? In the middle of “nowhere?”
• Additionally, there is the key question of when—when is the movie’s plotline set? Within what kind of historical time and constraints is that teacher operating or struggling to operate?
• Perhaps most importantly, is the teacher the main character of the film, or is he or she a pivotal secondary or even minor character? What is his or her attitude toward his or her profession and role as a teacher?

These are only some of the pertinent inquiries that drove me in my decision-making as I painstakingly selected the subjects for my analysis, with the counsel of my thesis committee.

I was presented with pages and pages of options; it was not easy, as it was a somewhat subjective process. The desired result was to amass an elite group of films that were a balanced assortment of older and newer, wildly popular and average, and optimistic and pessimistic. From the beginning, I found it prudent to pick fewer than ten films. I wanted approximately half of the films to exemplify the alleged “classics” of the Teacher Movie genre and the remaining films to be the latest representations of teachers
in popular film; a mixture of these two groups would provide an appropriately diverse collection of subjects.

Initially, I set some additional preliminary criteria. I only chose films produced in the United States, which eliminated several popular British films—but it was fitting to analyze depictions of the American education system in which I reside. Preferably, each film had to feature a depiction of a classroom teacher as a main character, preferably in a co-ed American public school. This eliminated several films so that I could focus on the movies that are relevant to me in my specific profession. In order to include the “classics” of the genre, I did make a few exceptions, as was the case with Dead Poets Society (1989), which takes place in a private, single-gender school.

A major factor that I had to consider was the age of the movies. I decided to focus on more recent films—films that have or will “educate” and inform the opinions and attitudes of the public sphere that I inhabit as a future teacher. I limited the span of my subjects to films released between 1990 and 2014. These are the Teacher Movies that have been released and viewed within my lifetime; they are more relevant to my personal inquiry. I did make one exception—I chose to begin my study with Dead Poets Society (1989) despite its age, because it was the Teacher Movie that first influenced me to consider becoming a teacher. I desired to look at it more closely.

Left with a list of about twenty films, I began researching each individually and strategically picked several films that have been influential or “popular.” Popularity can be a difficult attribute to measure. However, it made sense to seek out the films that have gained the most attention and exposure in the general public. These included some of the “classics” of the genre, such as Dead Poets Society (1989) and Mr. Holland’s Opus
Most influenced me during my pre-service teacher degree plan and training. My quest for popular films also drew me to the most recent films; some of them have garnered so much attention that even my students, peers, and elders know them by name. *Bad Teacher* (2011), for example, aired many trailers on commercial television before its release and because it was so recently produced, many people have heard of or viewed it. This particular film was released the year I began college and decided to major in education.

The remaining films in my study, *Detachment* (2011) and *A Teacher* (2013), are more obscure compared to the aforementioned box office sensations. However, I believe they still provide important tropes that cannot be ignored or overlooked in this study. *Detachment* (2011) presents teaching through the eyes of a substitute teacher, whereas *A Teacher* (2013) details an inappropriate teacher-student relationship. I chose them for their unique perspectives, which deviate from the typical Teacher Movie narrative.

**Procedures for Viewing and Analyzing Films**

Before viewing each film, I would access the Internet Movie Database to collect general information on the film and its success—its rating, domestic and international revenues (if available), accrued major awards and nominations (Academy Awards, Oscars, or Emmy’s), directors and producers, plot synopsis, and DVD cover art.
Prior to this project, I had only viewed three of the films on previous occasions. When I began my project, I watched the eight films in chorological order—but towards the end, I swapped Bad Teacher (2011) and A Teacher (2013) because I felt that Bad Teacher, which could be considered a satire of the other films in the genre, should come last. I would watch two films each 7-day week. After my first viewing of all eight films was completed, I repeated the same order a second time for the second viewing, again beginning with Dead Poets Society (1989) and ending with Bad Teacher (2011).

Each film was viewed twice in its entirety, and both viewings were completed in one sitting in a quiet environment. I viewed these films alone on my personal laptop computer and with audio headphones in order to avoid distractions and develop my own interpretations and notes. While viewing each film, I recorded notes in an adjacent word document—this allowed me to keep my thinking and note taking fluid. Sometimes my notes would amount to five pages, single-spaced, for one film.

After reflecting on my notes, I would use the audio recorder on my cellular phone to record myself simply talking about and freely reflecting on the film. Review of my typed notes and my recorded reflections would aid me in identifying important issues in each film that I felt, as pre-service teacher, I needed to address. Finally, I would compose my final reflection of each film. Each film was extrapolated individually before I began comparing them, drawing collective conclusions, and noting recurring themes for my discussion. All of the viewings of the films were completed over the course of eight weeks, while the individual film reflections and collective analyses spanned many additional weeks.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To examine the representations of teachers and teachings in the following eight films, I have referred to external research, my own experiences as a pre-service teacher, as well as the films themselves. Below, I offer reflections on aspects of the films’ representations that conflicted with or deviated from my perceptions and real-life experiences.

**John Keating, portrayed by Robin Williams in Dead Poets Society (1989)**

Directed by Peter Weir and starring Robin Williams, *Dead Poets Society* (1989) is an American drama film about a male teacher who seeks to inspire freethinking in his adolescent students through sharing and discussing poetry. The film was rated PG. *Dead Poets Society* grossed approximately $96,000,000 domestically and $140,000,000 internationally (Needham, 1990). In the year of its release, the film won an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay, and was nominated for Academy Awards for Best Director, Best Film/Motion Picture, and Best Actor in a Leading Role (Needham, 1990).

The plot of the film unfolds in 1959 at Welton Academy, an all-male and all-White private preparatory school in the Northeast of the U.S. The film’s teacher protagonist is John Keating, an esteemed alumna of Welton Academy and an English literature teacher who has previously taught in London. Mr. Keating, who looks to be in his 30’s, replaces a faculty retiree at the beginning of the film. He is a lover of classical poetry and his teaching philosophies and styles conflict with the traditional instruction practiced at Welton.

The DVD cover art of the film (See Appendix, Figure 1) features Welton students in red blazers carrying a beaming Keating on their shoulders. The students’ faces are
indiscernible and many of their backs are turned to the viewer—which is odd considering more than four student characters are named and developed throughout the film. The group is depicted in front of a green hedge—not in a classroom or in an academic setting. This cover art communicates little about the film except for Mr. Keating’s central role and his rapport with his male students. Viewing the cover art, I would expect this to be an upbeat film featuring a triumphant protagonist—a striking image when juxtaposed with Neil Perry’s devastating suicide at the close of the film.

**Public vs. Private**

I first watched *Dead Poet Society* early in high school, at the age of fifteen. It was the first memorable teacher-centric movie I had ever seen and it quickly became one of my favorite films. At that time, I was only in eighth grade and I did not know what I wanted to do with my life. But Robin Williams made teaching seem like an extremely attractive option.

I related strongly to this film because it was set in a single-sex, private institution, much like my own high school, the oldest all-girls Catholic school in the United States. I identified with the students in the film—their studiousness, their discipline, their involvement, and the pressure they felt from parents and others to perform well in academic areas. In Mr. Keating’s classes, I see certain elements of my life in a private school—especially the familiar, witty banter between a teacher and a small class of high-performing students. Overall, *Dead Poets Society* aligned with my perception of school life. It made teaching seem like a comfortable job.

When I decided upon entering college to pursue education, this film was my model. I mistakenly thought that my lifestyle and typical workday would resemble those
of Mr. Keating and my own high school teachers—and, by extension, I supposed that my students would resemble the students in the film or my own high school peers. I assumed a co-ed class would run just as smoothly as a single-sex class. I thought that being a teacher would be easy and within my comfort zone; like Mr. Keating, I would simply lead discussions and teach what I wanted to teach and how I wanted to teach it, with very little technical planning involved. If I wanted to, I could take the students outdoors, or we could merely sit, casually discuss poetry, or commiserate about the many confining rules and regulations of the school administration. Through my own teaching experiences, I have come to find that this is not so.

In the film, Mr. Keating teaches in a heavily homogenous, private institution set almost sixty years in the past. Reflecting on the film and my own experiences, I have realized that this portrait of teaching could not possibly resemble my own profession as a public school teacher serving a highly diverse population of Millennials in the digital age. Welton Academy and other private schools like it are not the norm—there are far more teachers teaching in public schools today. Currently in the United States, there are approximately 437,410 private school teachers in 33,370 private schools as compared to a staggering total of 3,099,095 public school teachers in the nation’s 98,917 public schools (The Center for Education Reform, 2014). Statistically, it seems more likely that pre-service teachers like myself will be preparing to enter the public school system as opposed to small private schools like my high school alma mater and Welton Academy.

But while viewing the film, I noticed the stark difference between the private school life that Mr. Keating inhabits and the public school life that I am currently trying to navigate through my student teaching experience. The culture is extremely different
and the change of setting has certain implications for teachers—including, but not limited to, resources, class sizes, discipline and violence problems, and school policies.

According to research by Public Agenda, teens attending both private and public schools repeatedly remarked that private schools have “higher standards” and “clear, set rules” and they believed this was the foremost contributor to the difference in climate between the two types of schools (1996, p. 16).

*Dead Poets Society*, my student teaching experience, and my research instilled in me that a public school, where I currently plan to start my career, cannot operate like a private school. Now, I am forced to question not only what I see in this familiar film and what it will mean for me as a public school teacher, but also question my entire high school experience and whether my students have high school experiences and culture similar to mine.

A Basket of Eggs

Another pressing distinction between *Dead Poets Society* and real world teaching is the striking homogeneity of his population of students. As per the social conventions of 1959, Welton students in the film are *exclusively* academically high achieving Caucasian, Christian males from affluent families—they are like a basket of pristine, docile eggs. Looking at my own class rosters and seating chart for student teaching, I can firmly conclude that my classes bear no resemblance to Keating’s. My students come from a vast array of cultural backgrounds and all of them exhibit different levels of achievement, different socioeconomic statuses, different religions and faiths, and different ethnicities—not to mention learning differences, special needs and accommodations, and language differences!
Imagine my first field experiences and how shocked I was when students were diverse—and far different than my high school peers and I. *Dead Poets Society* did not prepare me for the population of students I would have to learn to teach. I was left feeling like an ignorant, well-off White girl and worried that I would have trouble delivering culturally responsive teaching that is needed in today’s schools.

Apparently, I am not alone in this. According to a report released by the UCLA Civil Rights Project in 2008, “white teachers and teachers in schools with higher percentages of white and middle-class students were less likely to have preparation for racial diversity in the classroom” (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, p. 5). It is crucial for all teachers to be well-versed in different cultures and design instruction with students’ diverse backgrounds in mind, especially because the same report revealed: “[I]n schools with homogeneous student enrollments, multicultural lessons are usually the only opportunity to try to educate students about the country’s diversity and the contributions of diverse groups to our society” (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2008, p. 5).

Unfortunately, many teachers believe that treating all students the same is the best course of action. I shared this notion before I took courses on student diversity. However, this approach assumes that all students will respond similarly to the same methods. However, the UCLA Civil Rights Project report found that “many teachers come from segregated white backgrounds where they have not been trained to understand and deal with other cultures effectively” (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2008, p. 3). As a prospective teacher, *Dead Poets Society* did me a disservice. It kept me within my little niche of single-sex, private school traditions and gave me no inkling of the public school
culture so many teachers inhabit and the diverse student population so many teachers serve.

**Teaching ≠ Talking**

My recent viewings of *Dead Poets Society* have revealed yet another shortcoming of the film: though he is considered one of the most popular and beloved teachers in contemporary film, Mr. Keating’s teaching leaves much to be desired.

Mr. Keating’s intentions are admirable. He seeks to promote student agency, freethinking, and creativity. In class, he speaks to students as individuals, not inferiors, and he encourages them to offer their thoughts, no matter how misguided or honest. To keep his students engaged during class, Mr. Keating (read: Robin Williams) employs his talent for humor and performance, such as cracking jokes and reciting Shakespearean works in clever accents and dialects. There is no denying that he is able to keep his students entertained, which is a powerful advantage for a teacher to have. But truly, he makes it look deceptively easy. Most days, it is like pulling teeth to get my high school students to verbalize a single comment during an hour-long period—not to mention how many times I must ask them to put their cell phones away!

There are many ways in which *Dead Poets Society* did not prepare me to plan or implement instruction. Most of Mr. Keating’s class periods include him lecturing to his students—a practice common in the 1960s, but no longer popular in present day education. As Colleen Gillard (2012) mentions in her article “Good Teachers: The Movie You Will Never See,” teacher-led lectures are no longer considered to be best teaching practice: “Nobody likes being talked at, and kids learn best as active participants in their own learning” (p. 6). Many of his lectures are inspirational monologues (a common
occurrence in Teacher Movies) that express his enthusiasm for poetry and writing. The students, perhaps starved for romance in their straight-laced lives, hang on to his every word.

Now that I have been in a classroom and tried to lecture to and manage thirty adolescents while simultaneously covering learning objective in less than an hour, I know that this is not the norm. Most students, even the highest achieving kids and the kids who love to read and write, sometimes get off task and have to be redirected. Many of them lack intrinsic motivations, and sometimes even extrinsic motivations and rewards are not attractive to them. Dead Poets Society gave me the impression that students’ attention would come naturally—which was a foolish notion considering how many times I have buried myself in a novel and tuned out my own teachers! Mr. Keating does not have to prepare a seating chart, a classroom management plan, or a classroom discipline policy. He also does not have to interrupt class to redirect off-task students or deal with unruly or benign disruptions.

When I began my teacher training, I found that teaching is not just composed of lecturing and engaging students. There is a huge amount of planning, assessment, and reflection that goes into what educators today consider effective teaching—and these things are painfully absent in Dead Poets Society. In Mr. Keating’s class, there were no grades at stake and not once do viewers see him grading student work or monitoring students’ progress. Despite being a movie about teaching at the center of traditional academia, Dead Poets Society does not include much academics!

Additionally, though Mr. Keating clearly loves his subject matter, the movie shows very little of he and his students studying English literature and poetry. The most
reading students seem to do is listening to and reciting quotes from different classical works. Not once does Mr. Keating have students explicate a poem in class or diagram a rhyme scheme or define a sonnet or other literary terms. Mr. Keating does not design rubrics for projects or tests to assess students’ understanding.

These are all activities I must plan every day, in detail and with precision; it is not customary for me to merely talk at my students for the entire period—if I did, they would all be asleep or texting! Though his ability to invigorate his students is commendable, Mr. Keating is not a teacher in the way teaching and education are defined today, and his instruction left much to be desired for me. I realize now that many of the every day aspects of teaching are omitted from this film.

Get a Life

This was an aspect of Dead Poets Society that did not cross my mind in high school—but it really bugs me now! When asked to describe Mr. Keating, I could only describe him in his capacity as a teacher. This disturbs me. Though he is the protagonist of the movie, I know so little about him as a person. Viewers witness very little of Mr. Keating’s life outside of the classroom. His students learn from the Welton yearbook that in his youth Keating was a varsity soccer player, editor of Welton’s yearbook, studied at Cambridge, and was voted “Man Most Likely to Do Anything.” He is sometimes seen strolling around the lawns of Welton, whistling Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture. While watching the film, I did not see him preparing for class or engaging in other activities aside from coaching the men’s soccer team. I can assume he does a great deal of reading in his spare time—but probably not a grade deal of grading.
Though Mr. Keating’s deep commitment to his students may be viewed as venerable, the makers of *Dead Poets Society* unwittingly perpetuate the misconception that teachers do not (or cannot) have personal lives. Mr. Keating is an idealized figure—not a real person who has a career, a home, a family, friends, hobbies, etc. Mr. Keating does not even have his own residence—he lives on campus among his students. It seems that the only thing he truly values and prioritizes in his life is his job as a teacher, his students, and their needs; his life is not complex, stressful, or multifaceted. Unlike most teachers, he does not have different areas of his life competing for his attention, nor does he have noteworthy relationships with other adults.

I have seen *Dead Poets Society* many times in the last several years, and I always assumed that his wife—captured in the portrait on his desk in his small, cramped office—was tragically deceased. However, imagine my surprise when I viewed the movie closely and discovered she actually resides in London where Keating previously taught. When Neil Perry questions Keating about the strain caused by the long distance, Mr. Keating merely replies: “I love teaching, I don’t want to be anywhere else.” Even at the close of the movie, we know nothing about Mrs. Keating—the singular shred of evidence of Mr. Keating’s personal life.

As a teacher, this insults me; teacher is just one of the identities I embrace in my life, and though it is an involved identity, I do have other priorities and values outside of teaching. To define me only in my role as teacher would dehumanize me and deny me a full and happy life outside of my day job. In this respect, *Dead Poets Society* falls immensely short of accurately portraying a teacher’s life, roles, and responsibilities—which undeniably derive from both the teacher’s professional and personal life.
The Shy Kid

Mr. Keating’s greatest strength as a teacher is his ability to connect with and influence his students. I can say from experience that cultivating that relationship of trust with a student is quite a feat and it can be emotionally exhausting for a teacher who truly cares. Mr. Keating has an obvious impact on the personalities and behaviors of Charlie Dalton, Knox Overstreet, and Neil Perry—all fairly outspoken and confident students in the film. But Mr. Keating’s relationship with Todd Anderson is the one I find most intriguing.

Todd is what I simply call “the shy kid.” He begins his first year at Welton as a painfully shy and awkward youth—like many of his classmates, he is under immense pressure from his parents to perform well at Welton. Todd typically shies away from anything emotional and becomes easily embarrassed when others give him sustained attention. Neil repeatedly tries to befriend and include Todd, but Todd resists, wanting to keep his head down. Todd would be a student I would approach with gentleness and kindness in order to gain his confidence—I would try to avoid making him anxious.

Mr. Keating, however, takes a different approach. He often calls out Todd in front of his peers with statements such as, “Anderson, don’t think that I don’t know this assignment scares the hell out of you, you mole!” When Todd fails to complete a poetry composition assignment, Mr. Keating attempts to thrust Todd out of his shell by summoning him to the front of the room to improvise a poem. He then proceeds to circle him like a predator, barking questions; he even covers Todd’s eyes and ears and forcibly spins him around as he interrogates him. As a result, Todd sputters out a poem that leaves his classmates speechless and Keating delighted.
I had mixed feelings about this scene. I have had multiple interactions with the shy kids in my classes. As I was not a shy student growing up, it can be very difficult for me to relate to these students and open a connection and dialogue with them. Part of me wants to be firm with them and force them to speak up and challenge their shy nature in class. Another part of me worries that I will push them too hard and it will only push them further away; maybe they are more receptive to learning if I do not put them under a magnifying glass.

*Dead Poets Society* offers a portrayal of the shy kid and his teacher that I find questionable. I do not think I could handle a student like Todd the way Mr. Keating did—and I am not sure if that makes me a lesser teacher or not. But I know many teachers that would not engage in these sorts of methods because they are considered unethical: it is unethical to touch a student and manipulate his or her body, and it is unethical to intimidate or humiliate students who are less outgoing or socially acclimated than their peers.

But, Todd responds very well to these methods—he gains confidence and loses some of his self-loathing, instead adopting a healthier self-image. Additionally, Todd’s peers have greater esteem for him. But what if Todd had not responded well and he came to resent Keating for humiliating him? I think there has probably been a teacher in each individual’s life that had a positive impact—but what about that teacher who left a negative impression and embarrassed or hurt a kid with a comment or behavior? Mr. Keating’s aggressive approach may not work well with every shy kid. Every teacher has their own boundaries to keep, and though those boundaries are not always clear, they are there somewhere. Teachers may constantly question the decisions they make; they cannot
all throw caution to the wind, as is Mr. Keating’s recurring habit. More than anything, I think this scene demonstrates that in teaching, there is always some risk involved—and it makes the job simultaneously intimidating and exciting.

**Glenn Holland, portrayed by Richard Dreyfuss in Mr. Holland’s Opus (1995)**

Directed by Stephen Herek and starring Richard Dreyfuss, *Mr. Holland’s Opus* (1995), is an American drama film that follows the thirty-year teaching career of a music composer-turned-teacher. The film was rated PG. *Mr. Holland’s Opus* grossed approximately $83,000,000 domestically and $37,000,000 internationally (Needham, 1990). In the year of its release, it was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actor (Needham, 1990). It was also nominated for Golden Globes for Best Screenplay and Best Actor in a Motion Picture or Drama (Needham, 1990).

The film spans the 1960s to the 1990s and is set at the fictional John F. Kennedy co-ed public high school in Portland, Oregon. The film’s teacher protagonist, Glenn Holland, first begins teaching as a temporary job so that he can support his wife, Iris, and compose music in his spare time; over time, teaching becomes his career and priority over his family and his music.

The DVD cover art of the film (See Appendix, Figure 2) features youthful Mr. Holland surrounded by students in blue graduation garb as they applaud him. The students’ faces are indiscernible and generic. A small conductor at the top indicates that Mr. Holland is a music teacher. The cover art tells us little about the plot other than that Mr. Holland’s students adore him. Upon first viewing this cover, I would predict that the film would be upbeat and centered on Mr. Holland and his accomplishments with these graduates.
**A Dream Deferred**

I had never viewed *Mr. Holland’s Opus* before this study—and I was surprised by how much the filmmakers “got right.” The film gives what I consider to be a fairly credible depiction of a teacher’s career: Mr. Holland starts out as a bumbling novice teacher with no idea how to reach his students. He gradually figures out methods that work and he becomes very involved in school life with extracurricular activities like marching band and musical drama productions. He forges bonds with fellow faculty members while estranging himself from others; he seeks help from his principal and collaborates on school initiatives. Due to budget cuts, he is dismissed from JFK High School after thirty years teaching there. I also enjoyed the fact that the film sought to place Mr. Holland’ career within a historical context rather than merely encasing it in a generic school bubble.

But there are a few aspects of the film that concern me. The first has to do with the portrayal of the teaching profession as a sponge. Mr. Holland is a gifted musical composer who takes on a teaching job merely to create free time to compose. However, viewers quickly realize the irony of his situation. His job as a teacher completely overwhelms all his other interests and priorities. He teaches multiple courses, meets with struggling students one on one, instructs and marshals the school marching band, casts and conducts the school’s musical plays—and on top of all of this, teaches drivers education courses in the summer to make ends meet financially. So, despite his personal desires and aspirations, he has no free time to compose; instead, he works on his musical opus every now and then.
This aspect of Mr. Holland’s story reminded me acutely of Langston Hughes’ poem “Harlem,” which I studied with my students just a few weeks ago. The poem muses about the consequences of deferring dreams and personal goals. Mr. Holland clearly loves music—but his enjoyment for it is poured into teaching it, not writing it as he first intended. His dreams are deferred for decades. I wonder, now, if this is the fate that is likely to befall all teachers?

Sitting down to dinner with my father one evening, we discussed the prospect that by this time next year, I will secure a teaching job at a local high school. My dad commented that once college was over and I entered the work world, I would have plenty of free time. He suggested that I consider a part time job or other projects I want to pursue. I almost laughed at him as I pictured the long, grueling school days, the assignments that needed grades, the meetings to attend, and all of the other things that would need my attention as a first year teacher. Mr. Holland had little time for his own interests or for his friends and family—his entire day-to-day life was teaching or school related. Though I have not yet entered the work world or experienced my first independent teaching job, I think that *Mr. Holland’s Opus* may make a teaching lifestyle look more dissatisfactory than it is.

Yes, teachers do have to make their job a priority sometimes; there are times when work comes first. But family and friends are also a priority. Personal happiness, hobbies, and creative outlets are important. If people do view teaching in light of Mr. Holland’s tragic neglect of his dream, they only perpetuate the teacher-martyr stereotype. “Poor Lizzie, she never got to become a great painter or successful writer because she was always planning lessons or grading papers”—this is not something I want to hear
several years down the line. I do not desire pity or for people to underestimate me. I deeply enjoy the work I do as a teacher, but a good teacher aspires to manage all the competing interests in his or her life. A teacher is no different from a lawyer or a doctor or any other profession in this respect: Teaching should not be a sponge that sucks up and consumes all other pursuits and goals. After all, how can I as a teacher encourage my students to set goals for themselves, proactively prioritize, and chase their creative desires if I do not model these behaviors for them?

**Your Kids vs. Your Kids**

In *Mr. Holland’s Opus*, viewers witness a certain friction between Mr. Holland’s role as a teacher and his role as a father. This becomes a serious hurdle for him in his career. In his time at JFK High School, he works with some incredible students—Gertrude Lang, Louis Russ, and most notably Rowena Morgan, to name a few. All of these students share his love and affinity for music and they each excel at it under his guidance and coaching. He forges very strong bonds with many cohorts of students—in his classes, in marching band, and in the drama program.

There is one kid, however, with whom Mr. Holland cannot seem to build a healthy relationship—his son, Cole. Cole, who was born deaf, cannot share Mr. Holland’s passion for music in the way his father would like. Mr. Holland experiences deep depression at this development and he throws himself into teaching rather than confronts Cole’s disability or learns American Sign Language to communicate with Cole. As a result, Mr. Holland’s family life is reduced to arguing and resentment among Cole, Mr. Holland, and Iris, Mr. Holland’s wife. Iris frequently complains about Mr. Holland’s involvement at school: “Why is every other child more important than your child?” Cole
experiences anguish at his father’s neglect and as a teenager he confronts Mr. Holland:
"You care more about teaching other people than you do about me."

In this film, a teacher’s school relationships begin to replace his family and personal relationships. I would imagine that this sort of jealousy and resentment does occur—and it is present in other Teacher Movies I will examine later, such as Freedom Writers. But I think it is important for pre-service teachers to realize that a career in teaching will have long-term implications for family life; teachers who are parents must not only serve their students and prepare them for their future, but also parent their own children.

As a pre-service teacher, I often wonder what sorts of sacrifices I will have to make in the long term. Will I be able to be able to be present in my biological kids’ lives in the way I desire—or will I be absorbed with helping my current students pass? Will I be able to provide for them on a teacher’s salary? Though these questions are not immediate issues, it is important for prospective teachers to recognize early on that teaching requires some navigating and juggling—and also a great talent for prioritizing time and attention to the things that matter.

**Choose a Different Muse**

In the film, Mr. Holland has one major tragic flaw. He experiences the slippery slope of ethical teacher-student relationships. From the very first scene featuring Mr. Holland with Rowena Morgan, I was uncomfortable. At first, Mr. Holland was completely oblivious to the sort of attention he was receiving from Rowena—poor guy, he was just trying to be a good teacher. But as the film progresses, it is clear that Mr. Holland begins to overstep some major ethical boundaries.
Mr. Holland provides Rowena with private music lessons to assist her with developing her singing—this may be for his own enjoyment as much as her benefit, because it is clear he loves having a talented music pupil to coach. In many cases, teachers are hesitant to be alone with a student at any time in the school day—this is due to allegations of inappropriate conduct and fear of litigation. I myself have been encouraged to always leave the classroom door open when offering one to one tutoring before, during, or after school. But in the domain of music education, I am sure it is acceptable for a teacher and pupil to rehearse one on one.

Mr. Holland teaches multiple one-to-one sessions with different students throughout the film. However, he rehearses with Rowena until dusk; at this point, he drops his usual professional persona. He calls her by her first name instead of Miss Morgan and he shares his personal composition with her. Rowena misconstrues the signals Mr. Holland sends her, and decides she will run away to New York to pursue singing and he should come with her to write his music.

Now, this is a huge scandal waiting to be uncovered, but no one seems to notice or question it. Instead of contacting Rowena’s parents or encouraging her to talk to her family about her life goals, Mr. Holland arranges for Rowena to stay with his friend in New York; and after Mr. Holland kisses her and she departs, viewers never hear about her again. I was incredulous at how this portion of the movie unfolded. What sort of message is this sending to the public about teachers? That we entertain romantic feelings for students, that we write songs about them in our spare time? As a musician, Mr. Holland is inspired by Rowena and her passion for singing—she is his muse. But as a teacher, he risks her emotional wellbeing and her physical safety by allowing her to
leave. He is never found out, and she never returns to JFK High School during the film. I am shocked that the school never heard from her parents when she disappeared! This sort of behavior is unacceptable and unethical—a teacher could lose his or her job over such actions.

This aspect of *Mr. Holland’s Opus* is a warning to pre-service teachers. Sometimes, innocent situations can become incriminating and it can happen rapidly; this has become especially prevalent given the new social media culture and students attempting to contact teachers online. Many new teachers enter the professional straight out of college and they are only four or five years older than their students. Sometimes, I even feel odd interacting with my current students, who are my younger brother’s age—I was only in their shoes a few short years ago. Thus, it is easy to become too friendly or casual with students when the age gap is almost nonexistent. This portion of *Mr. Holland’s Opus* made me consider what sort of behaviors I will need to practice or avoid in order to maintain a professional relationship with students and I encourage other pre-service teachers to do the same.

**We May Never Know**

The ending of this film caused me to reflect on the imbalance of doubt and closure in a teacher’s life. When Mr. Holland is dismissed from JFK High School, he feels bitter and possibly even regretful. He laments to his closest friend, Coach Bill Meister: “I got dragged into [the teaching profession] kicking and screaming and now it’s the only thing I want to do. You work your whole life. You work for thirty years because you think that what you will make a difference. You think it matters to people. But you wake up one day and realize that you are expendable.” Mr. Holland’s doubt is, I think, a
common emotion among teachers. A teacher probably experiences doubt more frequently than the typical person—for it is hard to gauge what sort of impact he or she has had on students.

Pre-service teachers should not expect a send-off party or a tribute from their students for a job well done. In my experience, it is not customary for teachers to receive this kind of affirmation and closure at the end of a school year. Teaching is rough—and it is not always affirming or satisfying. More often, the teacher is left wondering: Did I reach those kids? What did they learn from me? How have my course and I affected them? How have they affected each other? Where will they end up? So many unanswered questions linger at the end of a school year or at the end of a career.

I received a letter recently from one of my high school teachers—he was my first English teacher in high school, and it was his first year teaching. It was a response to a letter I sent him several months ago. In my letter, I thanked him and acknowledged him for his setting a good example for me as a new teacher, and for being there for me throughout my school years. He replied that it was deeply satisfying to know that his teaching made a difference in my life. But I do not think all teachers know that satisfaction firsthand—and I wish they did. As in Mr. Holland’s Opus, it may take many years for a teacher to see his or her impact on those he or she taught. Or he or she may never know—Rowena Morgan, for example, did not return to Portland to celebrate Mr. Holland with his other former students at the end of the film. For many teachers, the party may never come.

While the ending of this film was uplifting and sent a good message—“Mr. Holland, we are your opus”—I think it is important for pre-service teachers to know that
teaching is a humble profession: it is not concerned with showiness and narcissism, but rather in individual relationships that impart wisdom and confidence. If you are a person who wants constant praise and applause for the work you do every day, do not become a teacher. You must find satisfaction and meaning in the work you do, even in times of doubt and insecurity.

**Ron Clark, portrayed by Matthew Perry in *The Ron Clark Story* (2006)**

Directed by Randa Haines and starring Matthew Perry, *The Ron Clark Story* (2006) is an American drama television film about a male elementary school teacher who aspires to help a class of rowdy, low-performing minority students in Harlem to pass the seventh grade and score high on state exams. The film was rated TV PG. In the year of its premiere, it was nominated for a Golden Globe for Best Actor in a Miniseries or TV Motion Picture, and nominated for Emmys for Outstanding Casting in a Miniseries, Movie, or a Special, Outstanding Lead Actor in a Miniseries or Movie, and Outstanding Made for Television Movie (Needham, 1990). Since this film was aired on television, it did not collect any revenues at the box office.

The film takes place in Harlem, NY at the co-ed public Inner Harlem Elementary, a troubled school in which poverty, crime, and violence are serious problems. The setting of the film is likely the early 2000’s. The teacher protagonist is Ron Clark, an idealistic teacher from a small town with four years of teaching experience. Mr. Clark moves to Harlem, New York, in order to teacher minority students who are in dire need of an educational role model; he voluntarily takes on the lowest performing class in the school and struggles to earn their respect and trust.

The DVD cover art of the film (See Appendix, Figure 3) includes a large portrait of
Matthew Perry as Mr. Clark; the background features Mr. Clark skipping rope with his students—the only identifiable student character is Shemeika Wallace, Mr. Clark’s most disruptive and gifted student. The cover is captioned: “No one believed in them. Except him” and “Based on a true story of a teacher.”

Mr. Clark’s large portrait, which takes up half of the cover art, indicates that he will be the central figure. The jumping rope image indicates that he is committed to building close relationships with students. The graffiti, “street” (hip-hop styled) clothes, and throng of ethnically-diverse students suggests that Mr. Clark works in a diverse school. The images on the cover and the caption “No one believed in them. Except him.” leads me to believe that Mr. Clark works with underappreciated, neglected, or tough students and helps them turn their achievement around.

**Rule #1: Stay Alive**

The first time I viewed *The Ron Clark Story*, I was a freshman in college and the movie was shown during my first education course. The course, titled Critical Investigations, is an introductory course that provides a survey of the education field. Looking back, I am surprised that *The Ron Clark Story* was the film that our professor selected to give us a glimpse into life as a teacher. The film is dramatic, idealistic, and unrealistic—however, as a pre-service teacher just starting my degree plan, I responded strongly to the film. I admired Mr. Clark’s dogged determination, his kindness and consideration for each student, and his classroom management techniques, and his creative way of presenting content, such as the Presidents Rap. But despite having some great qualities as an educator, there are a few things Mr. Clark does that I do not agree with at all.
Mr. Clark loves rules—throughout the film, he introduces and develops more than fifty simple classroom rules that govern his classroom procedures and his students’ behaviors. But as a teacher, Mr. Clark breaks rule number of teaching: Take care of yourself. I cannot overstate how many veteran teachers, mentors, and professors in my teacher-training program have emphasized the importance of healthy living habits in the teaching profession. In the film, Mr. Clark gradually falls ill because of his professional habits: he makes house visits in the rain to conference with students or their parents, he works on classroom décor or grading assignments late into the night, and he works a part-time job at a theatrical restaurant. Viewers do not see him exercising, cooking, or taking personal time for a hobby.

Mr. Clark’s life is consumed by responsibilities he creates for himself as a teacher and he does not bother to take care of himself. This results in him fainting in class, traveling to the ER in an ambulance, and being diagnosed with pneumonia. As a pre-service teacher, I am disturbed by his stubbornness, for there is a high chance that his elementary school students could have caught the illness from sharing a closed environment with him!

As if his behavior was not self-destructive or irresponsible enough, Mr. Clark goes against his doctor’s advise to take two weeks of bed rest. He films four full hours of instruction a day for two weeks in order to keep his students on track. On one hand, I understand his concern: two weeks with a substitute teacher is a severe setback for any class preparing for a big exam. However, Mr. Clark seems to be under the impression that he is the only teacher fit to teach his students and insists on filming himself teaching and having Principal Turner supervise his classes. First of all, a school principal would
not have the time to personally supervise a classroom for two weeks of full school days. Secondly, if Mr. Clark was an effective teacher with effective classroom procedures in place, he could compose lessons for an experienced substitute teacher to implement with the kids. In this respect, Mr. Clark comes off as foolish and narcissistic.

As a teacher, missing school is not easy. Students may skip or miss class from time to time and make up the few assignments they missed. However, if a teacher is sick or has to miss school for some reason, he or she can fall behind and work can pile up to overwhelming heights. Strict attendance is one of the more demanding parts of the teaching profession. Therefore, teachers have to take the time to care for themselves and keep themselves healthy physically, emotionally, mentally, and socially. Teachers like Mr. Clark who put teaching responsibilities before their own well-being only succeed in running themselves into the ground.

The portrayal of Mr. Clark as a self-destructive workaholic is an image of teaching that sets a bad example. It perpetuates the myth that teachers do not have personal lives and it also suggests that it is acceptable or expected for a teacher to sacrifice their health and happiness in order to keep teaching. When I first viewed this film, I thought his behavior and drive were admirable—but now I would caution preservice teachers against forsaking their health and happiness for the sake of their job. How can a teacher possibly reach his or her full potential if he or she is burned out, sick, and constantly exhausted?

**Losing Your Cool**

Everyone has bad days. In this film, Mr. Clark exhibits great resilience as his rowdy students taunt him, disrespect him, and try to intimidate him into quitting. But, he
is determined to stand his ground and be consistent and patient with them. When the
students take bets that he will quit his job in the near future, he only becomes more
determined to stay. It is only when Mr. Clark finally loses his temper that he considers
giving up his endeavor to teach the “unteachables.”

Shameika Wallace, Mr. Clark’s most aggressive and outspoken student,
challenges his authority constantly and tests his patience in every way she can devise.
When she finally does get under Mr. Clark’s skin, he violently lifts and shakes her desk
with her in it. He becomes overwhelmed at the situation, gathers his things, and leaves
the room—to the cheers of his students. Mr. Clark is more upset with himself than with
Shameika or the other kids and he expresses to his friend and love interest Marissa that he
is ashamed of his behavior and doubts his ability to teach these kids with unwavering
patience.

I am not condoning Mr. Clark’s outburst—it was a demonstration of unethical
behavior in a classroom. However, I am glad that the scene was included in the film
because teachers do lose their tempers; they have emotions and insecurities just like
anyone else. I can think of a specific instance in my high school career when an
enthusiastic and humorous teacher—much like Mr. Clark—lost his temper and shouted at
his class. Sitting in my desk and watching it unfold, I felt guilty for not paying attention
and pushing the teacher to that point, for he rarely got angry. But, in another class, I
watched another teacher lose her temper when a student challenged her knowledge on a
topic—and she proceeded to argue heatedly with the student until everyone in the room
was very uncomfortable. I lost respect for that teacher. So, what is the difference between
the two and why did they elicit different reactions? The first teacher’s angry outburst was
a just that—an abrupt show of frustration. But the second teacher’s angry outburst was a verbal attack aimed at a specific student.

Not all students are little angels. My students are teenagers and they enjoy being rebellious. Occasionally or frequently, depending on the student, they seek to get under the skin of their parents, their teachers, and other authority figures because they can. It contributes to their invincible self-image. My students tease me and challenge me in class—either in a friendly or unfriendly manner. Someday, I may have a bad day and snap at a student or raise my voice at a class. It happens. Pre-service teachers, do not delude yourselves into thinking you must possess and maintain herculean, unfaltering patience in order to teach children or adolescents.

Teaching is a deeply emotional profession. Students and teachers do lose their tempers. Sometimes situations do escalate into violence and desk throwing. Teachers do have to manage student behavior the best they can. Finally, sometimes there are tearful or euphoric moments in an ordinary school day. I believe the key to managing these emotional outbursts is to keep them from escalating or permanently damaging rapport with a class or a student—and of course, never resorting to physical violence or verbal abuse. Mr. Clark was not reprimanded for his aggression towards a student—but you can bet that a real life teacher would hear something about it. If every American public school teacher quit his or her job after his or her first classroom altercation, like Mr. Clark did, teacher turnover would be astronomically higher than it is today!

**Power Struggles with Parents**

I considered Mr. Clark’s policy for parent contact to be one of the most disturbing aspects of the movie. Even as a freshman in college, I recognized that this was a
convention a Hollywood teacher, not a real teacher (though I have met one or two teachers who have taken his approach and visited students’ homes). Mr. Clark uses the school directory to make house visits and before taking on his new class at Inner Harlem Elementary. He knocks on the door of every family to meet the parents and get them involved in his classroom.

For a teacher in a small town type of community, which is Mr. Clark’s prior experience, this may not seem out of the ordinary. Personally, I have had some of my high school teachers visit my home to conference with my parents and I. But for a teacher who is employed in a typical public school in a large school district, this would be nearly impossible—and probably ill advised as well. I would imagine most of my 160 juniors and seniors at my student teaching placement would be very uncomfortable with my looking up their address to meet their parents. Today, that would be considered an invasion of privacy and perhaps unethical for a teacher to instigate.

Not only does Mr. Clark make these house calls—in an outrageous demonstration of overstepping professional boundaries, he escorts his most gifted student, Shameika, home and proceeds to cook her and her younger siblings dinner so that she can focus her full attention on her homework rather than babysitting. In a chilling scene that made me feel physically ill, Shameika’s mother comes home to find him there and they are in the principal’s office the next day discussing Mr. Clark’s dismissal. In the real world, a teacher would have a major lawsuit aimed at him or her for this sort of behavior. In teaching, the end hardly ever justifies the means; though teachers like Mr. Clark may have the best intentions, overstepping boundaries and trying to parent a student is a terrible idea.
Movies like *The Ron Clark Story* tend to portray teachers in such a way that the roles and responsibilities of teaching become confused with those of parenting. It is a loading boundary that is hard to navigate, like a tightrope. It is a difficult position to be in, at times. Teachers care about their students’ success, and when parents are unwilling or unable to actively participate in their child’s education, it is very difficult for a teacher to keep students accountable and motivated. I have had to make a few calls home to parents in the last six weeks—and received no answers or responses. But I must accept that I am my students’ teacher—I am not their mother.

Teachers also care about their students’ well being, and when something distressing is going on in a student’s home life, it is difficult to stand by. But a teacher must respect students’ families and their wishes. Mr. Clark completely forgoes respect for Shameika’s family and performs actions that should have gotten him fired. But in this film narrative, Mr. Clark easily—too easily—smoothes things over with Mrs. Wallace by praising Shameika’s intelligence and potential. In real life, there is no way this would pacify a parent who felt their authority and dignity as a parent had been violated. Parents are students’ first teachers and teachers may not agree with the methods or contents of parents’ instruction—however, certain boundaries must not be crossed in order to maintain professionalism and respectful relationships with students and their families. *The Ron Clark Story* gives a poor representation of the balanced dynamic between teachers and parents.

**The Bad Kids, Converted**

*The Ron Clark Story* is one of those films that is just too good to be true—a happy ending that only Hollywood could construct. At the end of the movie, Mr. Clark’s
students, who tested lowest in their school district before his arrival, test higher than any other class in the school. Furthermore, some of the lowest achieving students, who treated Mr. Clark like dirt at the beginning of the film, earn the highest scores in the district. Though these students cussed, lied, threw things at their teacher, vandalized Mr. Clark’s classroom, and verbally and physically abused each other and their teachers at the beginning of the film, they are all seemingly converted two hours of plot later.

During Mr. Clark’s end of the year party, he presents awards for highest achievement to Badriyah, Shameika, Julio, and Tayshawn. All four of these star students have one thing in common: at the start of the film, they had a poor self-image and were afraid or unwilling to fulfill their potential. However, when Mr. Clark comes in the middle of the school year, he is able to turn them all around. The film suggests that Mr. Clark is the hero who “saves” them.

Shameika, who begins the film with too much responsibility for a seventh grader and no respect for school authority, achieves perfect scores on her state test. Julio stops gambling and stealing from his mother and achieves highly in math. Tayshawn, who was severely emotionally and physically abused by his foster father and has serious anger problems, becomes a cheerful artist. Badriyah, who is bullied for being quiet and bookish, is now a valued member of her class and tests high in science with aspirations to become a doctor.

In my opinion, this is truly the greatest fault of the film. Though this image of the hero teacher is uplifting, it is a fiction. Some teachers do have powerful positive impacts on their students and their lives. However, what Mr. Clark accomplishes in this film is unrealistic and sets too-high expectations for pre-service teachers. He “converts” all of
the “bad” kids, as well as the nameless, average kids, and single-handedly transforms them all into academic stars in just a few weeks. This completely romanticizes teaching, perpetuates the myth of the Hero Teacher, and trivializes teaching.

A 2003 Public Agenda report that surveyed American teachers about their jobs found: “Almost four in ten teachers (38%) doubt they can get through to their hardest-to-reach students by the end of the year” (p. 17). The fact is, teaching is a slow and agonizing art—kids backslide and have deeply ingrained behaviors, habits and personalities produced by their prior experiences. The film’s suggestion that a student’s personal history and prior difficulties can be completely erased is folly. There are too many other factors that affect and hinder learning for this model of teaching to be realistic or believable. Yet, The Ron Clark Story is considered a great tribute to teaching and a teacher’s remarkable ability to “turn everything around” for the most insubordinate and struggling youth. This film mistakenly expresses that students only need an adult to believe in them and some creative lessons in order to miraculously morph into academic prodigies. Unfortunately, in reality, teaching does not work that way.

Erin Gruwell, portrayed by Hilary Swank in Freedom Writers (2007)

Directed by Richard LaGravenese and starring Hilary Swank, Freedom Writers (2007) is an American drama film about Erin Gruwell, a female first-year teacher who forges a formidable classroom community with her adolescent students—the majority of whom are involved in a racial gang war. The film was rated PG-13. It grossed approximately $37,000,000 domestically and about $7,000,000 internationally (Needham, 1990). The film was not nominated for any major American awards in the year of its release (Needham, 1990).
The film takes place from 1993 to 1996 at Woodrow Wilson High School, a co-ed public high school in Long Beach, California, as viewers follow the high school career of Mrs. Gruwell’s first cohort of students. The teacher protagonist is Erin Gruwell, an intelligent and idealistic young woman who has decided to pursue education instead of law in order to help troubled teens before they are beyond help. She becomes very close with one class of troubled teens and her classroom becomes a sanctuary where students are free from violence and racial prejudice.

The DVD cover art of the film (See Appendix, Figure 4) features Mrs. Gruwell’s side-glancing portrait, which is illuminated by light and takes up half the cover. Her husband, played by Patrick Dempsey, is over her shoulder and looks at her from a distance. At the bottom of the cover, five students of varying ethnicities stare out at the viewer, somewhat obscured by shadows. The cover is captioned: “Their Story. Their Words. Their Future.”

Though the caption places emphasis on the students, the cover’s central focus is Mrs. Gruwell. This cover, unlike the previous films, features specific, developed student characters from the film—suggesting that these are the students most impacted by Mrs. Gruwell. It is interesting that her husband is included—perhaps revealing the sacrifice Mrs. Gruwell makes for the students lining the bottom of the cover. Viewing this cover art, I would predict that this story is about a young, bright-eyed teacher who helps the forlorn students construct a brighter futures.

**New Trashy Reality Show: Teacher Turf Wars**

Viewers first meet Erin Gruwell, a first-time teacher, in a preparatory conference with the English department head, Margaret Campbell. Mrs. Campbell. Mrs. Gruwell is
bright-eyed in a crisp outfit and excitedly showcases her lesson plans. Mrs. Campbell, a veteran teacher, briefs Mrs. Gruwell on her new students. Mrs. Campbell, displeased with the voluntary integration system at Woodrow Wilson High, is extremely suspicious of the low achieving students in Mrs. Gruwell’s classes and regards them with acute contempt.

From the very beginning, Mrs. Campbell advises Mrs. Gruwell to edit her lesson plans in consideration of her students’ low intelligence, to avoid assigning homework, and to leave her prized pearl necklace at home when she comes to work. Mrs. Gruwell accepts it all with a smile and emphasizes her openness to learn the art of teaching. But later, Mrs. Gruwell decides to cut ties with her mentor when Mrs. Campbell refuses to allow her to use the school’s set of novels and insists the money and resources would be wasted on Mrs. Gruwell’s incompetent students.

When Gruwell confides in Honors English Language Arts teacher Brian Gelford about her disagreement with Campbell, he sharply criticizes her for her idealistic mindset—with personal hostility that would bring me to tears if a colleague directed it at me. Later in the film, when one of Mr. Gelford’s Honors students wants to transfer to Mrs. Gruwell’s class, Mr. Gelford takes personal offense.

Throughout the film, both of Mrs. Gruwell’s colleagues regularly censure Mrs. Gruwell, her students, and her methods; they also attempt to sabotage her by any means, especially after Mrs. Gruwell is forced to go over their heads to a school district official to acquire the resources she desires for her class. I am deeply distressed by this aspect of the movie’s portrayal of teachers and their relationships and interactions as colleagues. While the two experienced faculty members are painted as cruel bullies with little knowledge of or respect for most of the students in their school, Mrs. Gruwell is
portrayed as the heroic new teacher—the savior who brings out the best in the students and defends them from harm at the hands of all the other teachers. When I first watched the movie earlier in college, I did not notice this particular dynamic. But upon viewing it a few years later with some teaching experience under my belt, the antagonistic and immature behavior completely flabbergasted me.

After watching this movie, I feel like prospective teachers would turn and flee when presented with such an image. I could not imagine anyone who would want to work in that sort of social and professional environment. *Freedom Writers* portrays teachers as competitive and selfish individuals who enjoy sabotaging each other—except for the one maverick teacher, who is the savior of the students and the victim of the other, villainous teachers. This is merely Hollywood’s tendency to turn everything into a good versus evil narrative. Typically, teachers coexist peacefully and many form close professional and personal bonds with each other.

Every teacher brings something unique to the profession—and all teachers have the opportunity to benefit from each other’s knowledge. The fact is, many teachers work collaboratively with each other on a regular basis; it is not the “every man for himself” blood thirst that viewers encounter in *Freedom Writers*. Departments may meet once or multiple times a week to discuss curriculum and share resources for teaching courses they have in common. New teachers typically are assigned or seek out a mentor teacher who gives them feedback and support in their first years as an educator. Teachers across disciplines meet to discuss interdisciplinary projects or specific students who are struggling or disrupting class.
In my experience, a positive relationship with at least one other teacher is crucial. As a student teacher, I can relate to my students very well—they are only a few years younger than I and we have common interests and are privy to shared pop culture. However, students cannot be my friends—and I cannot rely on them or confide in them when things are tough or uncertain. This is why teacher colleague relationships are so important; for a teacher in a school of any size, isolation can be crippling and it does negatively affect the teacher’s happiness and comfort in the work place. Even now, my fellow student teachers are a constant support and comfort to me—though we may differ in our teaching philosophies and styles, and we do not agree on everything, it is nice to know there is a friend in the classroom down the hall (or in my case, a few portables down the walkway). Freedom Writers’ representation of teacher relationships is so dramatized that I worry whether viewers will believe that such hostilities are commonplace within school faculties and avoid interacting with other educators.

Alas, the Beatles Were Mistaken

Freedom Writers grates on my nerves because it promotes this egregious lie: to succeed in their academic and personal lives, students only need love—specifically, love from a charismatic adult, a teacher. In the film, the lives of Mrs. Gruwell’s students are in shambles, and they suffer constant threats of violence in their daily lives, even at school. There is open hostility among groups of students and individual students due to gang antagonism. However, once Mrs. Gruwell expresses love and esteem for her troubled students, they bloom and begin turning their lives around. Much like Mr. Clark in The Ron Clark Story, Mrs. Gruwell takes an interest in her students’ personal lives and she expresses her desire for them to succeed. As soon as this relationship is mutual and the
students return her affection, the dangers of gang life seem to cease and her students have no where to go but up—they even make newspaper headlines regularly!

The insinuation that one teacher can solve all the pressing problems in a student’s life just by loving them is folly. It is deceitful. It is a myth that has probably infected many teachers in training, because many of the films thus far have exhibited and endorsed this “life-changing” love. Firstly, a teacher does not adore every single student he or she teaches—often, there are fundamental differences in personalities, values, or attitudes that repel teachers from certain students and vice versa.

Pre-service teachers: there will be students that you dread, students that you fear, students for whom you feel great or little pity. There may be students that make it their personal mission to push all your buttons and seek to manipulate or embarrass you—nobody is perfect. However, there will also be a few kids who are your kids; you recognize something pleasant or familiar in them, and you enjoy their company and whatever they bring to your class dynamic. Finally, there will likely be students who teach you more than you can teach them.

Secondly and even more importantly, loving a student will not negate or expel every obstacle that stands in their way. Students need more to succeed in school: they need basic nutrition, adequate sleep and rest, a safe and secure environment, peer relationships and a group to which they belong and contribute, competent and nurturing parents, self-discipline and a positive self image, enthusiasm for learning and skills to accomplish learning, etc. Some of these things a teacher can encourage—but many of them are absolutely out of his or her hands.
Mrs. Gruwell voluntarily takes on the role of the savior teacher—at the start of the film, she justifies her choice to pick teaching over practicing law because she wants to intervene before young people reach the legal system for their illicit or ignorant behavior. She seeks to save them from their parents, their other teachers, their social and socioeconomic circumstances, their gang-affiliated lifestyles, each other, and even themselves. Though *Freedom Writers* can be an uplifting and empowering film for a preservice teacher, who may marvel at the mountains moved by novice Mrs. Gruwell, it gives the wrong impression. Teachers can do a lot—but they also can only do so much. Much is up to the student, or up to the rules that govern the school system. But even more is left up to circumstances and chance.

**Wait, Where Are All the Other Kids?**

There is another discrepancy that seems to be common among the more idealistic Teacher Movies (such as *Dead Poets Society*); it is especially emphasized in *Freedom Writers*. That is what I would like to call the myth of the single class period. When English Language Arts (ELA) teacher Erin Gruwell begins her first teaching job, she is entrusted with a grand total of 140 students—freshman and sophomores—about forty students in each period. As a high school ELA teacher, I teach more than 150 students—juniors and seniors—dispersed into five class periods, about 25-30 students in each period. Now I am not a math teacher, but while watching the film, it was painfully obvious to me that viewers only saw Erin teach one of those periods—about 30-40 students—for the entire film. Furthermore, viewers learned the individual names and partial personal backgrounds of less than ten of those students, the most notable being
Jamal, Sindy, Eva, Marcus, Ben, Victoria, and Andre. So here is my question: where are all the other kids?

This is a viable illustration of why commercial films are not adequate for depicting real teaching—most of the students that a teacher interacts with each day are missing! Mrs. Gruwell really connects with a single cohort of students and the film follows her progress and relationships with those students and those students’ collective and individual growth. This is completely unaligned with my experience teaching and it breeds early misconceptions for pre-service teachers. After all, teaching just forty students for about an hour is very different from teaching 140 students throughout an 8-hour school day. The fact that *Freedom Writers* omits most of Mrs. Gruwell’s school day and the majority of her students gives a starkly narrow view of teaching.

Teaching multiple cohorts is extremely demanding, especially because there is limited time in a class period for teachers to achieve their objectives and they only have one hour, a planning period, to catch their breath each day. Teaching is a fast-paced job! Another thing that *Freedom Writers* does not consider is the unique personality or ambiance of each class period. I do not have nearly the same relationship with my fifth period class as I do with my first or third periods—and these students are the same age, share the same interests, undergo the same learning activities, and complete the same assignments).

I come to my first period with the knowledge that coaxing my twenty-five sleepy, grumpy seniors will be like pulling teeth and many will leisurely saunter in with Starbucks several minutes after the tardy bell. I know that third period, a smaller group, will be dominated by the same talkative students. My fifth period, a whopping thirty
students, will be very talkative, constantly checking their cell phones, and cracking jokes—but they usually do turn in their work on time. Moreover, one student can drastically affect the mood of the class—when certain students are absent, the dynamic of the class can noticeably change and instructional approach may have to be adjusted accordingly.

Those are just three of the five periods I teach in a day—and I must intimately know the collective and individual personalities of each group. I must be a slightly different teacher for every period. When I begin in the morning, I stumble a bit in my teaching; by the end of the day, I am on a roll because I have taught the lesson a few times and made necessary or practical adjustments. I have a different relationship with each group, and I feel more confident and connected in some than others. Novice teacher Erin Gruwell, however, only bonds with one group of students—and this group alone is a huge challenge for her personally and professionally. Who knows if she has the stamina and resilience to run through multiple periods, nearly every day, for nine months out of the year?

The myth of the single class also masks the absurdity of Mrs. Gruwell’s methods. In the film, she buys at least four novels for every student. She takes all of them on a field trip to the Simon Wiesenthal Center of Tolerance and treats them to a fancy dinner at the hotel for which she works. She buys them each a personal notebook (side note: what are the chances that every troubled teenager in her class would bare their most intimate secrets and tragedies to her in those journals?). Gruwell works three jobs, so acquiring these treats and rewards for forty students is not unfeasible—but what about her other 100 students? Do they receive the same special treatment—if so, how can she possibly
make that happen, even with three jobs, and still pay her own bills? If not, it is extremely unethical and unfair on her part to blatantly play favorites. After all, considering the multitude of Woodrow Wilson High students who are in gangs, would not most if not all of her 100 other students also lead troubled, violent lives and merit her compassion and special treatment?

I know from experience that while a teacher may inevitably have a favorite class period—a group of students with which he or she really jives well—it is not appropriate to play favorites as Mrs. Gruwell does. The kids notice, they know when they are excluded from special treatment and they do feel indignation. I would never give a reward or treat to one class period and not give that same opportunity or courtesy to another group; furthermore, all of my students usually need to earn the rewards. *Freedom Writers* only shows about one-sixth of a teacher’s full instructional time throughout the day, which may cause pre-service teachers to neglect or fail to consider the magnitude of a 7-period school day and the true bulk of their workload.

**I Am Only Human**

The final aspect of *Freedom Writers* that I would like to discuss is the teacher protagonist’s superhuman persona—this motif is not only present in this film, but also many other American teacher-centric films. This is perhaps the most damaging film stereotype of all: some teacher-centric films, including *Freedom Writers*, feature teacher protagonists who completely dismantle and destroy their lives for the sake of their students. It is almost as if these films define teaching as the act of forsaking all personal endeavors and sacrificing all comforts in order to meet the insurmountable needs of victimized students.
Mrs. Gruwell begins her teaching career with high expectations, and as the film progresses her conduct becomes more and more unsettling. She works not one, but two, extra jobs in order to buy what she desires for her students and bypass the authority of her bad-tempered department head. She stays up late into the night reading students’ heartbreaking journals in her classroom and her house is overrun with teacher projects and classroom décor. She has no friends, no social life outside of school and school responsibilities; she also isolates herself from her judgmental coworkers. Outside of school, she talks about nothing but her students and her workday.

As if all of this was not enough, she neglects and frustrates her husband, and ultimately her all-consuming job as a teacher costs Mrs. Gruwell her marriage. Despite the devastating divorce, Mrs. Gruwell sheds not one tear and takes no time off to collect herself emotionally—and despite all the personal sacrifices and adversity she endures, Mrs. Gruwell does not falter. Though she is immersed in multiple crises, her hair, makeup, and attire are neat, her smile is intact, and she never questions whether or not she has perhaps overworked herself.

To her, her self-destructive behavior is acceptable and even expected. Even her own father encourages her to keep on with her pet project of playing missionary with her band of troubled teens—at the expense of her personal life. Her job and her students are all she has and both of these are temporary: she may lose her job due to her obstinate bypassing school policies and her students will eventually graduate and leave her behind (just kidding, she quits teaching at Woodrow Wilson in order to teach at a university and follow the majority of her favored students).

The situations and hardships Mrs. Gruwell endures in the film are mostly self-
inflicted and they are trials that would seriously impair a real human being. But Hollywood insinuates that in order to be a super teacher, one must be super human. But real teachers are human—they have flaws, as well as needs and desires that must be fulfilled. Upon viewing this film for the first time, I idolized Hilary Swank’s heroic character in *Freedom Writers*. But now I hold her in contempt because Erin Gruwell sets an unattainable standard for a pre-service teacher like my peers and me. She is not a real first time teacher; she is an illusion of perfection, without flaws or weaknesses or shortcomings. She single-handedly fixes her students’ mangled lives and sets them on a path to success. If a real first year teacher attempted most of the things Mrs. Gruwell accomplishes in the film, I believe he or she would crash and burn.

If the media continues to support the superhuman teacher archetype (which they likely will considering how popular this film has become), I fear that pre-service teachers will expect too much of themselves—that they will either consider themselves failures for falling short of Erin Gruwell’s example or they will voluntary take on the role of teacher martyr and savior and destroy themselves in a profession that can be both rewarding and unforgiving. I am not a superhuman. But this does not make me an incompetent or lesser teacher.

**Dan Dunne, portrayed by Ryan Gosling in *Half Nelson* (2006)**

Directed by Ryan Fleck and starring Ryan Gosling, *Half Nelson* (2006) is an American drama film about a middle school teacher with a cocaine addiction and his unorthodox friendship with one of his female students. The film was rated R (Needham, 1990). *Half Nelson* grossed approximately $3,000,000 domestically; the amount of
international revenues was unavailable (Needham, 1990). In the year of its release, it was
nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actor in a Leading Role (Needham, 1990).

The film is set in Brooklyn at an inner city middle school, sometime in the 1990s or early 2000s. The teacher protagonist is Dan Dunne, a young, White male history teacher and girls basketball coach; he favors discussing dialectics with his 8th graders instead of the set curriculum; outside of school, he drinks, smokes, and regularly snorts or inhales cocaine. When one of his students, Drey, learns of his addiction, she and Dunne build an unconventional friendship since they both have no friends their own ages. While his drug habit is spiraling out of control, he struggles to keep Drey from becoming a drug runner for her surrogate father and his dealer, Frank.

The DVD cover art of the film (See Appendix, Figure 5) depicts Mr. Dunne’s portrait—his expression is bleak or forlorn. Over his shoulder, the Brooklyn skyline appears deserted and hazy. Also over his shoulder are Frank, who glances over his shoulder with a distrustful expression, and Drey. She stares intensely, almost glowering, at the back of Mr. Dunne’s head, or at the viewer. The cover is captioned: “Secrets Don’t Let Go.” This cover is more mysterious or cryptic than the previous ones—but it is obvious, given Drey’s scorching glare, that this may not be a cheerful film. Mr. Dunne’s lost expression tips off the viewer that he will not be like the beaming and smirking teachers in the other films.

**A New Kind of Separation Anxiety**

When I first viewed *Half Nelson*, I was discouraged by my inability to form a coherent response. I neither liked nor disliked the movie and did not have many strong reactions to it. To my great bewilderment, I did not feel like I had watched a movie about
a teacher. After much reflection, I have deduced that I was suffering a bit of culture shock. *Half Nelson* is so radically different from the four previously discussed Teacher Movies I have seen—it has very few of the familiar tropes which the four aforementioned Teacher Movies shared and it completely deviates from the typical Teacher Movie narrative arc. This portrait of teaching is completely outside my concept of “teacher”—I could not identify with Dan Dunne at all and none of my teachers in school resembled him strongly.

Feeling the film’s message zoomed right over my head, I had to dig deeper to compose a coherent and meaningful response and decode its implications. It produced more questions than revelations. The first thing I noticed was the severe impact Mr. Dunne’s personal life (read: his addiction to cocaine) had on his life at school. Multiple times, he shows up to school after a night of hard drugs, drinking, and insomnia to teach an ethnically diverse group of about fifteen middle school students. At these points, he makes little sense during his instruction—if you can call it that. Usually, he babbles about dialectical theory and pays little attention to his students’ moods, intellectual engagement, or academic progress. There is no planning, no curriculum, no lessons logistics, no creative projects or even traditional assignments. There is actually very little school time in this film’s plot; Mr. Dunne actually seems to avoid teaching, as indicated by his borderline childish evasions and pitiful excuses when the department head confronts him.

Now, many Teacher Films, such as *Freedom Writers* and *The Ron Clark Story*, portray a teacher who suffers because their work is always coming home with them. Mrs. Gruwell and Mr. Clark both struggle with boundaries between their personal and
professional lives. Mr. Dunne seems to have a different sort of problem: his personal life completely overtakes his professional life and he has no boundaries whatsoever. His personal life and all of his unhealthy habits bleed right into his life at school—they are so tangled it is impossible for him to separate them. He cannot enter his classroom without his crippling addiction, his angst over his ex-girlfriend Rachel, or his other emotional burdens. He has sex with a colleague and cooks dinner with his student, Drey, at his apartment. His professional and personal lives are inextricable and indistinguishable.

Boundaries between the personal and professional are undoubtedly important for a teacher—to neglect them would be unhealthy. Unlike Erin Gruwell or Ron Clark, real teachers could burn out or become resentful towards teaching if work is all they do, at school and at home. Conversely, a teacher like Dan Dunne would suffer at work because he or she would be preoccupied with personal affairs and incapable of functioning on a professional level. Though many teachers probably try to keep work and personal things separate and compartmentalized, it is tough. Truly, it is impossible to keep the two clearly distinct—just as it is difficult to keep Church and State separate. I feel that one will always infringe on the other in some capacity.

Nonetheless, Mr. Dunne prompted me to reflect on real teachers’ tendency to lead a double life—one that is private, which may be turbulent or exciting, and one that is public and censored, for the students to see. But how much should I share or keep to myself? Where are those boundaries? I believe this is something each teacher must decide for his or herself. There is an interesting double standard happening here. Teachers are supposed to unearth as much information about students’ interests, strengths, weaknesses, and learning styles as possible, by multiple means such as their
parents, their other teachers or coaches, their academic files and discipline records, and especially the individual students themselves. Knowing a student’s family or other personal background can be tremendously helpful in planning individualized or relevant instruction. However, a teacher being too social or open with students about their personal lives is ill advised.

On one hand, knowledge is power—there is a chance that giving students much personal information could make a teacher vulnerable to insubordination or personal attacks from students, or that it could be construed as inappropriate or unprofessional. But I believe there is also value in a teacher sharing elements of his or her personal life with students. I have noticed in my time as a student teacher that my students are surprised to hear I have a life outside of school—I have to remind them I am in my early twenties and I spend time with friends and family and have non-school-affiliated hobbies. I have a history.

More often than not, sharing pieces of that history with them not only gets their attention during instruction but also reminds them that I am human, not one-dimensional or a robot. Telling them about my experiences as a high school student, a college student, or an adult allows me to be a role model for them. If they can relate to me, they will be more likely to trust me, and I believe it is almost impossible for teaching and learning to work without trust between teacher and student.

I am certain there will be things I regret sharing with students, things that I will keep private. But there are also so many stories I want to share with them, and I want to hear theirs as well. Dan Dunne kept no boundaries, and his students suffered or missed out due to his negligence and unprofessional behavior; Drey is the prominent casualty in
his self-destruction because she becomes hurt when he shares too much with her and then later asserts, “I’m not your friend, I’m your teacher. Go play with kids your own age.” Pre-service teachers should be especially conscious of their boundaries and try to plan them ahead of time—what they will share their students and what needs to be checked at the classroom door.

**What To Teach?**

In a cocaine-fueled frenzy, Mr. Dunne sputters to a girl at a bar: “What am I supposed to teach them?” Despite his drug-induced episode, Mr. Dunne voices the question that nags at me everyday. Some experienced teachers probably have seasoned answers to this inquiry—or perhaps they do not. However, I know from experience that as a pre-service or new teacher, this question is always on my mind.

As I mentioned earlier, Mr. Dunne tends to avoid teaching—he is the Anti-Teacher. He neglects the comprehensive binder of Civil Rights Movement curriculum provided by his creditable department head. He does not walk around the room to chat with individual kids about their work. Even though the kids clearly like him, he seems insecure about his role as a teacher; many people think that teachers are supposed to be omniscient, to have all the answers. They are supposed to be stable, responsible, knowledgeable, wise, and certain. Teachers are expected to always know the right thing to say.

But the truth is, we do not. I do not. Even after four years of teaching training, diverse courses, numerous field experiences, etc., I do not have all the answers, nor am I fully prepared to teach. Mr. Dunne and I both feel insecurity in that we are unsure what qualifies us to teach and we question what is worth teaching. The job of teaching is
enormous—hundreds to thousands of students come through a single high school. I estimate that a student in an American public school spends approximately 1,300 hours in school every school year (with perfect attendance, that is). Thus, those students probably interact with their teachers in their daily classes more than with any other adults or authority figures. In teacher training, as well as the Teacher Movies I have previously explored, emphasis is placed on “reaching” those kids—helping them succeed and find themselves. Looking back on my own school years, I can conclude that I would be a radically different person without the influence of my teachers.

This creates some pressure and awakens a feeling of inadequacy and a fear of failure. I feel it most keenly when a student leads a life radically different from my own teen years. Honestly, what do I know about them or their needs? As Mr. Dunne muses in *Half Nelson*, how can I possibly prepare them for a world that I am not even equipped to master? When I do not know an answer, I do tell my students I do not know or I am unsure. I look up words in the dictionary, and I have to search things on *Google* from time to time. But most of the time, I have to stand in class and give the impression that I have answers for my students and that my knowledge is valuable to them and their future success. The job’s enormity keenly underscores one’s shortcomings.

Furthermore, despite all the emphasis on curriculum, state standards, and standardized testing scores, I am still unsure what is worth teaching. Unlike Mr. Dunne, whose lack of planning and preparation is so stark it makes me cringe, I struggle daily to manipulate content so that it will be relevant and meaningful for my students. Yet, for all my effort, I still question my choices—and I will probably continue to do so until I am a
seasoned teacher and develop more experience. My deeper fear is that I may always live with such questions.

While teaching Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* during my student teaching experience, there were multiple supplemental materials about Afghanistan and the Taliban available to me. It was my decision what to include and what not to include (with my cooperating teacher’s permission)—and the decision was not easy, especially because my students’ prior knowledge of those two topics was narrow and deduced from media representations. The things I present in class will likely leave lasting impressions on students’ schemata of the world—and that fact is both exciting and scary.

So, what do I teach them? Do I stick to what is in the curriculum standards and the tips in the teacher edition textbook? Do I pull from social media and the Internet, where my students spend so much of their time? Do I teach the classics because they are somewhat universal, or try to pull in more contemporary texts because they seem more relatable? Or do I stick to the basic skills that reading and writing will afford students? How can I keep them updated on current events and be aware of what goes on in the classroom as well as what goes on in the outside world? So many questions—it is no wonder that Dan Dunne was so unsure of himself and buried his feelings of inadequacy in a debilitating drug habit.

During my student teaching experience, my cooperating teacher and I had an interesting conversation regarding Mr. Dunne’s penetrating question, “What am I supposed to teach them?” Some teachers, to my surprise, believe they are only responsible for providing students with content area knowledge—only what is outlined in the curriculum. Some teachers, my cooperating teacher confided in me, do not believe
they should be responsible for modeling and teaching life skills, study skills, social and communication skills, etc. Apparently, a math teacher should only have to teach math; an English teacher should only have to teach grammar, writing, and literature.

The very thought infuriated me as a pre-service teacher. I believe in educating the whole student—not only giving students content, but teaching them how to make it useful and meaningful in their lives. Additionally, I believe in helping students to grow and mature in non-academic areas as well, especially to help them mature socially. Most young people probably spend more time with their teachers than any other adult authority figure—if they do not learn the necessary skills to be a successful adult in school, where will they learn it? Perhaps at home? But, teens spend more time at school than at home! No wonder Dan Dunne was so confused about what he should teach or not teach—the answer really resides in how one construes the roles and responsibilities of the profession.

I have only one solution: I think that confidence in my personalized curriculum will come with time. But for now, I must decide my Necessities. In other words, I must ask myself: When my students leave my classroom at the end of these short months, what are the top three pieces of subject matter and the top three life skills that I want them to take away from my class? What are the things that will not only help them to survive but also fuel their desire to continue learning and progressing after my class has closed? Attempting to answer these concrete questions gives me some comfort. If I can at least reach these objectives in my first few years of teaching, I will not go through my career like Dan Dunne, abandoning teaching completely because I am too afraid to take it on.

Upon completing my final viewing of the film, I still could not understand its title. I know that a half-nelson is a wrestling move—a basic hold used to pin an opponent. But Mr. Dunne coaches girls’ basketball, not wrestling; in fact, there is no mention of wrestling in the film. But one could argue that the film depicts a teacher who is caught in a kind of chokehold. Despite his life spiraling out of control, Mr. Dunne continues to go to school everyday. But he is burdened; there is something unseen holding him back or pressing down on him. A half-nelson forces an opponent to submit (without dominating him or her completely) and it is difficult to break free of this hold. Mr. Dunne seems to be caught as in a wrestling match with a powerful force that resides inside his fearful mind.

When I see a teacher who has trouble managing a rowdy classroom or a teacher who has many students failing and dropping out, I do not consider that teacher a failure. When a teacher experiences burn out and has trouble keeping up with the daily intellectual, emotional, and physical demands of being a teacher, I do not think this teacher is a failure, either. In my eyes, the worst fate that can befall a teacher is to be completely overwhelmed by a fear I will call Despair—a crushing feeling of inadequacy and futility.

A teacher infected with Despair believes that nothing he or she does as a teacher matters or makes a difference. Despair is likely to develop when a teacher is caught between an ideal, which we are always pursuing, and the shortcomings and hardships of reality, which we can only change within our means. Over time, the friction created by these two contrasting worlds can grind the fortitude out of the most passionate young teacher. A teacher who succumbs to Despair has lost all hope, faith, and purpose in
teaching—thus, he or she cannot teach. This Despair is the force that cripples and paralyzes Mr. Dunne in the film. He is so afraid that his work is pointless and arbitrary that he gives up on teaching. In this way and many others, Dan Dunne is the opposite of Hero Teachers like Erin Gruwell and Ron Clark, who are so confident in their ability to impact students and make a difference that they go above and beyond conventions and rules.

There are many things that make new teachers anxious—violent students, angry parents, and embarrassing blunders during instruction, to name a few—but I believe that Despair is the one thing that a new teacher should actually fear because it is so defeating. I know that there will be days ahead in my career when I will doubt every choice I made during the school day. But, I do not want to end up like Mr. Dunne. My greatest satisfaction as an educator will be the knowledge that I have spurred some sort of growth or change in my students’ thinking—or at least that I have had a positive influence on their lives. All a pre-service teacher can really do is take things in stride and find meaning in the little joys of teaching.

I will never know if Mr. Dunne breaks free of Despair. At the close of the film, he is showered and shaven as he giggles on his sofa next to Drey. Yet, his classroom is taken over by a new teacher named Mr. Light—does this mean Mr. Dunne has relinquished his position? Has he quit teaching for good? Is this the only way for him to be at peace with himself and resolve his inner conflict? Does he overcome his addiction with Drey’s help? These are all questions that can only produce speculations, not answers. I would like to think that Mr. Dunne recovers his sense of purpose and worth through his unconventional friendship with Drey—perhaps they both sever their connections with the drug world.
Though Mr. Dunne has left his classroom, he can rediscover his teaching philosophy and start anew in another school, where he feels he can have a positive impact and expose kids to worthwhile knowledge.

**Henry Barthes, portrayed by Adrien Brody in *Detachment* (2011)**

Directed by Tony Kaye and starring Adrien Brody, *Detachment* (2011) is an American drama film about a male substitute teacher who spends a month trying to navigate a public school characterized by burnt-out teachers and borderline sociopathic students. The film was not rated (Needham, 1990). *Detachment* grossed approximately $71,000 domestically—the amount of international revenues was unavailable (Needham, 1990). The film was not nominated for any major American awards in the year of its release (Needham, 1990).

The film is set in the early 2000’s, following the passing of the federal statute called *No Child Left Behind*. The teacher protagonist is Henry Barthes, a forlorn substitute teacher who tries his best to remain detached from his environment, yet finds himself coerced into caring for everyone around him: his grandfather, who is plagued by dementia, Erica, a young freelance prostitute, and Meredith, a heavy-set artistic girl who is constantly bullied by her father and peers. Mr. Barthes is a witness to everyday atrocities that teachers suffer in the public school system.

The DVD cover art of the film (See Appendix, Figure 6) depicts Mr. Barthes, dressed in a black suit and holding an opened paperback with Edgar Allen Poe on the cover. He stares out at the dimly-lit classroom with a blank yet raw expression. The classroom seems to contain no students: the desks are overturned, papers, books, and trash are torn and scattered—it looks like desolate chaos. This cover art echoes the end of
the film, when Mr. Barthes reads Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” and the school rots around him. As a viewer, I can tell that this will be an ominous representation of education and teaching.

**A Garden of Horrors**

*Detachment* is unlike any other teacher film I have seen. My initial reactions to this film were horror and incredulity. *Detachment* gives an even more intimate depiction of the Despair I witnessed in *Half Nelson*. Throughout the film, Henry Barthes, a professional substitute teacher, interacts with a faculty completely infested with Despair.

Unlike other Teacher Movies, this film includes several subplots about non-protagonist educators. Principal Dearden is to be stripped of her job, and as she endures the harsh criticism of her superiors, she mourns the decay of her once prosperous school. Ms. Madison, a young, pretty red head and math teacher, is assaulted by a student (and later that student’s mother) who verbally threatens her. Dr. Parker, the school counselor, suffers severe emotional turmoil as she feels unable to help any of her student patients—who not only do not trust her, but also openly insult her. Ms. Perkins, a veteran teacher, laments the startling lack of parent involvement and how education has suffered over the years. Mr. Wiatt grips the iron link fence outside the school and is surprised when Mr. Barthes actually acknowledges his existence.

Whereas all the faculty members in the film are pitiable victims, the students seem to be nothing short of sociopathic. They bully and ridicule each other with surprisingly cruelty and, more shockingly, they regard their teachers with utter venomous hostility and ruthless disrespect. The students are beyond decency, self-respect, compassion, loyalty, or shame. Teenagers come to school in strikingly immodest
clothing, yell and spit in teachers’ faces, and commit suicide on campus. The nameless high school in the film more resembles a gruesome mental asylum than an American public high school. In this garden of horrors, nothing good grows—only contempt, fear, and, of course, Despair. Honestly, will there ever be a Teacher Movie in which a public high school is not a complete mess?

Now, despite its dark content, I really enjoyed the movie—it does indeed hit on many of the trials and tribulations affecting teachers and administrators in present day schools. However, I feel it is just as damaging as the more idealistic teacher-centric films such as Freedom Writers because its representation is so extreme. In Detachment, teaching is as dangerous as handling exotic or venomous pets—except, the kids may not just be acting in self-defense when they bite or scratch. Though I wrangle with some of the same monsters—lack of parental involvement, classroom disruptions and student apathy, lack of resources, bullying amongst students—my experiences do not share the astonishing pessimism depicted in the film.

According to Public Agenda report entitled Getting By: What American Teenagers Really Think about Their Schools, most teens (from various backgrounds) value an education, want to excel in school and “do not actively dislike their schools or their teachers” (1997, p. 14). As high as 78% of teens responded that they look forward to going to school each day! (Public Agenda, 1997, p. 15). I can attest that the adolescents that I have worked with through my pre-service experience are not sociopaths; most of them are very kind to and respectful of their teachers and their peers. Additionally, the majority of them do not regard school as absolute hell—they enjoy being with their friends, learning new things, and discussing the topics we cover in class. The worst
student behavior I have experienced thus far is a student refusing to comply when I give
directions or storming out of the classroom—both of these have been a handful of
instances.

This is not to say that a teaching career will not include “tough” kids who do
behave like the monstrous students in Detachment or disrespect and antagonism from
administrators or students’ families. However, these are not the things that have
characterized my teaching experience; no self-valuing human being would enter the
teaching profession, or a public school for that matter, if Detachment’s depictions were
accurate. Truly, the film is hyperbole of the worst sort and would probably frighten away
any naive freshman college student considering majoring in education.

After ingesting the garden of horrors cultivated in Detachment, I did not agree
with message of the film. The film ends with Henry Barthes reading Edgar Allen Poe’s
“The Fall of the House of Usher”; as he reads, the classrooms, hallways, and school
corridors become desolate and filled with old, yellowed papers—but no students or
teachers. The school falls into decay, much like the old mansion described in Poe’s story.
This disintegrative metaphor suggests, as the entire film does, that everyone has given up
on or abandoned education. The film gave up on the teachers, the students, and the school
itself.

This, I think, is the worst possible message to send to both aspiring and pre-
service teachers. Though I believe the film’s purpose might have been to utilize this dark,
hyperbolic representation to spur educational activism and change in a positive direction,
it merely succeeds in becoming the poster child for Despair. This is disrespectful to real
teachers who work tirelessly everyday to preserve public education and maintain a safe
and nurturing environment for all students. Though there are undoubtedly flaws in the education system in America and there is room for improvement, it has not dissolved wholesale into the bleak chaos of Detachment. As long as there are passionate, resilient, and reflective teachers and adolescents who want to better themselves and achieve life goals, I do not believe it will.

The Waterfall

The film’s title, Detachment, relates closely to Mr. Barthes’ role as a substitute teacher. He comments that though many believe a substitute is responsible for getting students caught up in the absence of a permanent teacher, his job is just to maintain order until a permanent teacher is found. Though all of the other Teacher Movies in my study depict a full-time educator as their protagonists, this film instead elects to focus on a “professional” substitute teacher. I suppose this is so viewers may share his outsider’s perspective of a deeply flawed school.

Throughout the film, Mr. Barthes attempts to remained detached—from his traumatic memories of his mother’s suicide, from his grandfather’s mental deterioration, from his students and their baffling lack of consideration or manners. In the classroom, he is cool and collected—he does not seek to impress or gratify his students. When one student throws Mr. Barthes bag across the room to show his insubordination and intimidate the substitute on his first day, Mr. Barthes calmly informs him: “That bag has no feelings. I don’t have any feelings for you to hurt, either.” Furthermore, Mr. Barthes tells students that if they do not wish to be in his class, they may and should leave—he does not care if they miss out. This display of detachment on his part is somewhat inherent in his role as a substitute—he is a temporary figure.
However, a real, full-time teacher cannot afford to be so detached—Mr. Barthes makes it look far too easy. Teachers, in many ways, are responsible for their students.

Some may even believe that students’ success is dependent on the teacher. Indeed, in the classroom I feel like I am constantly wavering between attachment and detachment. On one hand, I am attached to my students—I spend every weekday with them, and I get to know them as people. I feel pride when they accomplish something difficult or important to them, and I share their hurt and disappointment on a bad day. Also, I feel indignation on their behalves, and I feel anger and disappointment when they do something irresponsible or disrespectful. To sever this attachment would wound my rapport with them and thus my effectiveness as a teacher. Though it so often calls for professionalism, teaching is a deeply personal pursuit.

However, I know that becoming too attached to students would wound me as well. First of all, students will leave my classroom eventually—they go on to subsequent grade levels and (hopefully) graduate from high school. I have to be willing to let them go and prepare them for their departure. Detachment is important for maintaining professionalism in teaching, such as controlling one’s temper in the classroom, being equitable in grading and discipline, and keeping healthy emotional distance and ethical boundaries. Teachers need to be fair, disciplined, self-aware, and steadfast to be effective and it is difficult when an instructor is too attached to a student or students. Attachments can rapidly become unhealthy, as I have witnessed both in real life and in films such as Mr. Holland’s Opus, Half Nelson, and A Teacher.

One of the greatest trials of a pre-service teacher is discerning the correct balance of attachment and detachment. Even Mr. Barthes, a substitute teacher who tries to exert
detachment in all areas of his life, becomes attached to his artistic student Meredith. When do I banter playfully with students? How do I remind them that I am an authority figure? Can I hug a student who’s visibly distressed (this action proved catastrophic for Mr. Barthes)? How close is too close? How distant is too distant?

I am reminded of an analogy that one of my education professors once presented in his lecture about a teacher’s roles and responsibilities. He asked me and other pre-service teachers to imagine the classroom as a wide, rapid river filled with students approaching a large waterfall. As a teacher, you are swimming against the current—that current is composed of struggles and obstacles, both big and small. The teacher tries to grab as many students as possible and “save” them—that is, keep them from dropping out of school, abandoning their goals, or even intentionally hurting or destroying themselves as Erika and Meredith do in Detachment. My professor emphasized that a teacher knows that he or she cannot possibly “save” every student in the river—and it is a hard fact to swallow. However, the teacher never stops swimming and trying to pluck kids from the water.

As I approach the beginning of my teaching career, a profound decision lies before me that will affect every facet of my teacher lifestyle. I will have to establish comfortable and appropriate boundaries and how (and when) my interactions with students will reflect attachment and detachment. All pre-service teachers must establish this delicate balance and every teacher’s decision is different—however, an understanding of the waterfall analogy is crucial so teachers are prepared to answer this question: “How far are you willing (and able) to go?”
How Can I Tell You?

*Detachment* dealt with some very dark themes in education—one of them being teen suicide, a topic I also found in *Dead Poets Society*. Similarly, Mr. Barthes and Mr. Keating both feel anguish and some responsibility for their student’s death. Both teachers have a student approach them for comfort and affirmation when the students’ parents withhold such praise and affection.

Mr. Barthes is present when his student Meredith, who had developed a borderline obsessive fascination with him, commits suicide after telling him goodbye in the school courtyard. Viewers know that Meredith enjoys haunting artistic projects, but suffers criticism for her father and her peers; Mr. Barthes is one of the few who shows that he cares for her wellbeing and values her artistic talent. Mr. Barthes attempts to resuscitate her, but it appears she poisoned herself with cyanide or another chemical. He becomes deeply disturbed after Meredith’s passing and his pain is tangible. As I mentioned before, teachers frequently feel doubt—but in this situation, when a student is tragically lost or removed forever, doubt becomes something else.

From 1999 to 2006, 11% of teenage deaths in the United States were suicides (Minino, 2010). Every year, students take their own lives, and their parents, peers, and teachers are left behind to grapple with the loss, the immense hole that is left, and unanswerable questions. This is a real tragedy that could befall any teacher, no matter age or experience—thus, I think it is important to talk about this aspect of the film. Before Meredith takes her life, she has an emotional exchange with Mr. Barthes. She seeks affirmation from him that he cannot give her without sacrificing his professionalism, his necessary detachment. It is obvious he has esteem for this student and genuinely cares for
her—just not in the way she wants him to care. When he tries to push her away gently, she becomes hysterical, perceiving his action as rejection. Poor Mr. Barthes is torn because comforting her could mean damaging her further. Later, he feels some responsibility for her death.

In my student teaching experience, we held a faculty in-service day during which we talked about the emotional health of students and how to prevent suicide and self harm as a faculty. We discussed symptoms or important changes in student behavior that may signal depression or self-harm. Additionally, all of the teachers scoured the school student roster in order to identify students with whom they had good relationships—in order to identify students who had few or no connection to an adult at school. These exercises and the scenes between Meredith and Mr. Barthes in Detachment prompted me to reflect on an important question that I do not think is often uttered in the realm of education. I asked myself, “How can I tell or show my students that I love them?”

It would be a lie for me to deny my love for the impressionable, yet brilliant teens I teach every day. I have great respect for them and they are, perhaps unwittingly, a huge part of my life. Though I make time for my personal endeavors and hobbies outside of school, the aspirations and well being of my students are never far from my mind. Nowadays, I spend most evenings planning their homework and assignments and daily activities, weighing what they would enjoy and from what resources they would most benefit. I regard most of my 200 pupils with fondness and pride. They are the reason I work hard, re-read novels over and over, and get up at an ungodly hour to get to school at least thirty minutes before they do!
But, how do I let them know that they have this positive impact on my life? How do I make them feel that I care and they can comfortably come to me if they need help? Mr. Barthes protects Meredith and other students from bullies, shows an interest in her artwork, and values her input in class—and yet, their mutual trust disintegrates quickly when she reaches out to him and he struggles to respond appropriately. Are the little things I do as a teacher—asking students about their hobbies, interests, families, and extracurriculars—really enough to make them feel safe and wanted in my classroom?

Despite what a lot of adults may think, teenagers have real, serious problems in their lives, and they suffer from school and other obligations. Sometimes, a teacher will not know how to help them handle or fix their problems. Mr. Barthes is at a loss for how to help Meredith in her emotional turmoil. After her death, he is utterly lost. Just like him, I care about my students’ happiness and seek to support them. I know that if they do not have adults in their home lives that offer them that support, they will likely lean on me. I am open to that possibility and prepared to offer them resources to help them, if I can.

But, after taking care of the kids, how do you take care of yourself? Mr. Barthes, trying to maintain his detachment, does not discuss his students at home with Erika or with his grandfather in the assisted living center. But, viewers do see the emotional strain it adds to his already heavy burden. In other Teacher movies, such as Freedom Writers, the teacher protagonist takes on the pain and burdens of their students, and the cumulative weight does take a toll.

This illustrates a huge risk involved in teaching—the enormous risk of attaching and committing to kids. It could result in triumph, disappointment, or tragedy. But it is crucial for pre-service teachers to know what they are committing to when they decide to
spend their career educating adolescents at a vulnerable time in those lives. If teachers feel that they are ready to take on that responsibility, they can prepare to be supportive for students experiencing hardship and also fortify themselves to deal with those experiences.

**Diana Watts, portrayed by Lindsay Burdge in *A Teacher* (2013)**

Directed by Hannah Fidell and starring Lindsay Burdge, *A Teacher* (2013) is an American drama film about a young, female AP English teacher who has a sexual affair with one of her male students. The film, which had a limited theatrical release and is now available on Netflix and Amazon Prime, was not rated but includes mature content (Needham, 1990). Financial information for the film was unavailable (Needham, 1990). In the year of its release, the film was not nominated for any major American film awards.

The film is set in the early 2000s—given the characters’ use of Facebook and other social media technology, the plot probably occurs close to present day. The teacher protagonist is Diana Watts, an English AP teacher in Austin, Texas with four years teaching experience. As she suppresses emotions concerning her mother’s degenerative mental illness (possibly some form of dementia), she becomes deeply invested in her illicit, sexual relationship with her 12th grade student, Eric Tull. She isolates herself from her family, her close friends, and her colleagues; quickly, she abandons discretion and becomes obsessed with Eric. Miss Watts becomes unhinged after Eric eventually rejects her advances and it is implied at the film’s end that her affair becomes public.

The cover art of the film (See Appendix, Figure 7) is an extremely blurry image of Eric and Diana. Only Eric’s ear, neck, and shoulder are visible—Diana’s face is hazy
but visible looming over Eric’s shoulder. Her eyes are closed and her mouth is slightly ajar. They appear to be naked. This image is very unsettling, knowing the content of the film—the stark blurriness of the image may symbolize Diana’s warped mind and her blurred boundaries. This cover bears no resemblance to the others, save for the teacher protagonist’s portrait as the focal point. Viewing this cover, I can assume this film will be mature in content (especially sexual material), and give a sinister representation of a teacher as a predator.

**Never Wear Your Hair Down**

Of all the teacher movies I viewed during this study, *A Teacher* was by far the most difficult to watch all the way through. Ironically, I think that the reason *A Teacher* is more disturbing than either *Half Nelson* or *Detachment* is that the film is so honest. Whereas films like *Detachment* or *Freedom Writers* are noticeably exaggerated or somewhat far-fetched, *A Teacher* lacks embellishment in its depiction of an affair between a female teacher and her male student. This particular topic has frequently appeared on public news programs and in magazine and newspaper headlines over the last several years. Shelley Dufresne, a high school teacher from Destrehan, Louisiana, which is very close to my hometown, recently pleaded guilty to having sex with her 16-year-old male student (Duke, 2015).

This story and others like it have been clogging local news and have boosted Louisiana’s unfortunate, developing reputation for inappropriate teacher-student relationships—which spells bad news for young, female Louisiana residents like myself who are aspiring teachers. I can recall that during my time in high school, one would occasionally hear rumors about teachers getting caught red-handed in a sexual affair with
an underage student at other high schools. But, now that I am a pre-service teacher, the stories on the news hit more close to home.

Numerous questions have been asked and studies conducted about the psychological state of teachers who voluntarily engage in a sexual relationship with a student. According to a 1995 article in *The New York Times*, most teachers would never take advantage of their students emotionally or sexually—however, a four-year study on school sexual abuse found that “up to 5 percent of teachers engage in some form of sexual abuse of students, from inappropriate verbal flirtation to intercourse” (Goldberg). Additionally, a 1993 national survey by the American Association of University Women found that about 15% of 8th-11th graders (25% girls and 10% boys) have been sexually harassed by a school staff member (Goldberg). These numbers shocked me. Ten years after *The New York Times* published this article, I can only estimate how the temptations and teacher-student affairs have multiplied with the advances of text messaging and social media communication outlets. As shown in *A Teacher*, students and teachers today have more ways to engage in personal communication outside of school.

These statistics have major ramifications for all teachers—no matter gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religious beliefs, age, or teaching experience. *Public Agenda* and *Gallup* survey results from real American teachers reveal: “For many teachers and principals, the possibility of being sued or being accused of physical or sexual abuse of a student is ever present in their minds. Many say they completely avoid touching students or being alone with them to avoid this hazard” (Public Agenda, 2003b, p. 3).

I can attest to this lingering paranoia—I have been told multiple times in my teacher training to minimize bodily contact with students and avoid meeting alone in a
classroom with a student. Thoughtless gestures, actions, or comments in conversation can so easily be misconstrued. When I am in the hallway or in a classroom among adolescent students, awareness about my body language, gestures, and conversations is *constantly* in the back of my mind.

The social stigma of unethical teacher-student relationships not only affects my behavior in the workplace, but also how I present myself to students. As a young, female teacher (who is currently only five years older than her oldest student), I feel that there is great pressure on me to conform to a certain genre of attire in order to avoid seeming inappropriate or merely too friendly. One professor once advised me to never wear my hair down to school because I could be mistaken for a student or conceived as too “relaxed” around my students. I try to avoid wearing even a knee-length skirt to school because teenage boys have made comments about my legs—which is more distracting for me than it is for them—and v-neck blouses and anything sheer or form fitting is off-limits.

On one hand, I understand it is important to dress modestly and professionally. At the same time, it is sometimes difficult for me to dress myself in a way that: 1. Is comfortable, practical, in conformity with the district dress code, and true to my taste; 2. Makes me appear approachable, yet authoritative; 3. Helps me keep students’ attention during instruction (i.e. bold colors instead of neutrals or grays). Here is my dilemma, and the dilemma of many pre-service teachers who are constructing their teacher identities: How do I dress myself, every single day, in a way that does not come off as too stuffy or too informal?
Transitioning from a college student wardrobe to a teacher wardrobe is not easy—nor is adopting a lifestyle that entails censorship. For example, it is unsurprising for one see a lawyer, a doctor, a journalist, or a member of another commonplace profession grabbing an alcoholic beverage after a long workday or demanding week. However, if a teacher of legal age is sighted at a bar having a drink, or engages in other ordinary adult behaviors, I feel that eyebrows are raised and people question the teacher’s personal ethics.

This may be an overblown sense of paranoia—but this wariness does not develop arbitrarily, it is socially constructed. According to Public Agenda’s survey of real teachers, educators are truly afraid of being targeted and of the far-reaching and unpleasant consequences of accusations: “[A] complaint or charge—no matter how false or unreasonable—could be completely unnerving, even to the point of driving some [teachers] to leave the profession” (Public Agenda, 2003b, p. 16).

All this effort is to avoid unwanted attention from students and maintain authority and professionalism in the classroom. Yet, in the film, Diana Watts’ wardrobe is not seductive or even eye-catching. Her behavior during instruction does not seem lewd, suggestive, or out of the ordinary; even when she asks Eric to stay after class one day (when their relationship is already underway), she is completely composed and nonchalant. She is also the minority—most teachers are not guilty of the same unethical conduct.

But, in education, I feel that perception is everything, and one misstep can lead to all sorts of terrible rumors or trigger immature behavior from students. Therefore, at all times, teachers are forced to be appropriate in every aspect of appearance and behavior,
and I would imagine that that extreme and sustained exertion of self-awareness and self-censoring becomes exhausting for many individuals in the profession.

**Going Native**

When I tell people that I am studying to be a teacher, they tend to automatically assume that I am preparing to teach elementary school. I suppose they are under this impression because of my personality and interests: I enjoy watching animated films, singing songs, telling and writing stories, and creating arts and crafts projects in my spare time. I can understand why people assume that I would work with young children, who also typically enjoy those things. (It may also be because I am a young woman—and I feel that the public is more open to a young woman teaching young children than to a young female teacher teaching pubescent boys—refer back the previous section about teacher-student relationships.)

Throughout my pre-service teaching experiences, I have realized that if I am going to teach high school students, I must attempt to think like a high school student. This includes not only knowing where students are developmentally (especially neurologically), but also keeping students’ interests, priorities, and intrinsic and extrinsic motivations firmly in mind when planning instruction, methods of engagement, and classroom management procedures. Consequently, to a certain extent, a kindergarten teacher has to understand or adopt the outlook of a kindergartener; a middle school teacher has to know how the mind of a middle school student operates; and a high school teacher, both fortunately and unfortunately must adopt the teenage perspective in order to be effective in teaching and motivating teenagers.
What struck me about *A Teacher* was the startling extent to which Diana Watts adopts the personality traits, maturity levels, and behaviors of her high school students. Miss Watts engages in all sorts of immature behaviors befitting a hormonal or insecure teenage girl who has a crush on for fascination for a teenage boy. These behaviors include sending nude photos to Eric, constantly checking her cell phone for messages from Eric, frequently checking her hair and make up before meeting with Eric and “stalking” Eric’s *Facebook* profile and flipping through his profile pictures.

She also exhibits other rebellious behaviors that are associated with teenagers, most notably covertly visiting Eric’s home when his father is away or sneaking him into her own apartment. Most shockingly, she has sex with Eric in her car *on a public street*—abandoning all discretion as if her own prefrontal cortex is undeveloped like her students’ or completely impaired. Though she conceptualizes these rendezvous as “romantic,” they are extremely inappropriate, not only for a teacher, but for an adult woman. Why, I asked myself, is she acting so childishly?

Inquiry into teacher-student relationships has revealed that such relationships are “indicative of an emotional defect in the teacher” (Goldberg). The film insinuates that Miss Watts comes from a troubled family background: she seems completely estranged from her family and suffers panic attacks when confronted with reminders of her mother’s condition (perhaps some sort of dementia?), which entails forgetfulness and confusion. She has very few friends and seems to be mostly anti-social; she has noticeably difficulty connecting with males her own age, as her roommate tries to introduce her to her male friends at an adult party. A few times during the film, Ms.
Watts goes for silent runs through the neighborhoods, perhaps to relieve anxiety or escape stressful musings.

The emotional strain from Miss Watts’ family or perhaps issues in her own psyche may have driven her to adopt a more immature personality—she internalizes the habits and behaviors of her high school students, regressing emotionally and behaviorally. Perhaps this is one reason why she has trouble relating to individuals her own age. According to clinical psychologists, children typically have a feeling of being perfect or infallible, which resolves at about age four; however, “teachers, therapists, and others in a position of power who have never resolved that phase can start taking to heart the admiration they get from students and subordinates, and abuse it” (Goldberg, 1995).

In her relationship with Eric, Miss Watts is constantly seeking attention and affirmation, which indicates that she resorts to teenage behaviors and engages in this unethical relationship in order to fill some sort of emotional void or feel desirable as “the older, seductive woman.” This is a lesson for teachers in constructing a healthy support system that does not rely on students, but rather on other emotionally stable and mature adults.

When a teacher begins exhibiting too much of his or her students’ behavioral habits, boundaries can be crossed or permanently damaged. Pre-service teachers especially can struggle with this, simply because of the narrow age gap. As I mentioned earlier, my high school students are the same age as my younger brother, and I share several common interests with my students. In just four or five short years, they will be in my shoes, experiencing college and entering adult life. It can be very challenging to
maintain boundaries and assert my authority as the teacher because I am so young (and do not forget short in stature).

Sometimes, I worry that my students will be too comfortable with me and I will have to clearly and vocally address it and re-establish boundaries. I recall just last week, I was filing back into the classroom with my students after an outdoor mini lesson. One of my tall male students, a senior, who was behind me reached out and ran his hand through my hair, which was up in a ponytail. His behavior was completely unwarranted and shocked me—never in all my time of teacher training had a student ever done something like that. In my surprise, I hurriedly told him it was completely inappropriate and reminded him that he would never do that to any of his other teachers. Looking back, the behavior made me so uncomfortable that I wish I had pulled him out of class and given him an even firmer talking-to, or addressed the whole class to remind them that I am their teacher, not their peer.

An occurrence like this one and a film like *A Teacher* are enough to make me anxious in those situations. However, my reflections on the film have only strengthened my resolve to set appropriate boundaries for my behavior, as well as student behavior. Embracing my role as teacher means I will always have to be the adult, which is so ironic, considering teachers are discouraged from freely expressing adult behavior, such as drinking alcohol or “cussing.” While being a “perfect” responsible adult is a challenging task for a 20-something year old entering a new career after college, it is necessary for success as a teacher.
**Elizabeth Halsey, portrayed by Cameron Diaz in *Bad Teacher* (2011)**

Directed by Jake Kasdan and starring Cameron Diaz, *Bad Teacher* (2011) is an American comedy and satire film about a female middle school teacher who is the antithesis of the heroic teacher figure. The film was rated R (Needham, 1990). The theatrical, not unrated, cut of this film was viewed for this study. *Bad Teacher* grossed approximately $100,300,000 domestically and $116,000,000 internationally (Needham, 1990). In the year of its release, it was not nominated for any major American film awards.

The film is set in the early 2000’s, during the age of widespread standardized testing in American schools. The teacher protagonist is Elizabeth Halsey—an immoral and deeply materialistic woman who has one year of teaching experience (which is debatable given her nonexistent instruction). She cannot stand her students and avoids teaching at all costs. Miss Halsey begrudgingly returns to her teaching job at John Adams Middle School in Chicago after her wealthy fiancé breaks off their marital engagement.

In order to accrue money for a breast augmentation surgery, Miss Halsey embezzles money from school fundraises, takes bribes from students’ parents, and seduces an education official to steal the state test answer key and gain a pay bonus for her students’ passing scores. This results in a sabotage-filled war with Amy Squirrel, the eccentric and unbalanced teacher across the hall. Ultimately, Miss Halsey becomes the school’s guidance counselor and tries to help middle school students become more socially apt.

The DVD cover art of the film (See Appendix, Figure 8) features Miss Halsey splayed in her chair behind her desk—only her face, mostly obscured by sunglasses, her
legs, and her black and red spike heels are visible behind the desk. Her expression indicates that she is sleeping. There is a chalkboard behind her and an apple on her desk that reads: “Eat Me!” No students are visible on the cover. The bright colors and sarcastic humor of the cover indicates that it is comedic and less emotional than the previous films. The cover utilizes common school imagery (an apple, a desk, a chalkboard, a post-it note) and juxtaposes it with a clearly disheveled and lazy teacher. Upon viewing this cover, I would assume that the film offers caricatures of teachers and the world in which they reside.

A Necessary Evil

As I mentioned in the introductory sections of my study, I was resolved to hate Bad Teacher; the trailer was enough to make me cringe and fill me with dread. Personally, I heavily dislike contemporary comedy films and satires because they seem so foolish and unintelligent to me. However, I was surprised to find that Bad Teacher did make me laugh and aspects of its satire were excellent.

As I watched the film for the first time, I felt that some satirical jokes were so spot on that the humor in the film seemed to come from “inside”—that is, that it was written for teachers by teachers. Much of the humor would be more accessible to teachers, who know the profession and the flaws or characteristics that are being emphasized and parodied, than to a non-teacher. Some examples, to name a few, include the perils of lunch duty, the politics within the faculty, the hormonal interactions in the classroom (which are so awkward to witness), and the “grade-grubbing” student whose mother bakes (terrible) cookies to access the teacher’s good graces. I actually laughed aloud
when Miss Halsey became a guidance counselor at the end of the film because it was so ironic.

This prompted me to research the director and writers—I considered that these filmmakers could possess some sort of personal connection or insight into education. I hypothesized: “Perhaps they have taught prior to their film career, or they have a family member or some sort of informant that inspired the material for the script?” However, despite my attempts to delve into articles and interviews, I could find no obvious connection. I could not find any online interviews with the writers, Lee Eisenberg and Gene Stupnitsky—which barred me from determining where they got the idea for *Bad Teacher*, how they crafted this story, and their intention in doing so. Interviews with director Jake Kasden were also sparse. I could only determine that all three of these men are comedic specialists, known for their raunchy and sarcastic comedy films and TV shows. I suppose I expected some of the satire to be based on biographical material, like the some of the other Teacher Movies in my study. But *Bad Teacher* is indeed the inversion of those films in that it is comedy for entertainment's sake. But just because it harbors no clear education-related agenda does not mean it does not have ramifications, both positive and negative, for teachers.

What surprised me most was that *Bad Teacher* does not follow the cliché. I expected Miss Halsey to mature and transform as a character before the end of the film, as do the other teacher protagonists. But she never changes! From beginning to end, she only works for her own gain and her distaste for students, other teachers, and teaching itself endures. Miss Halsey is the quintessential bad teacher, possessing every contemptible trait in her line of work: “She is lazy, selfish, slovenly, greedy, conniving,
unconcerned with her students, and ignorant of educational methods” (Beck, 2012, p. 91). Truly, while viewing the film, I felt my mouth drop open more than once at her shocking behavior! She is terrible! I think my chief fear before viewing Bad Teacher was that Miss Halsey’s horrific conduct would be attributed to me and other teachers.

A ton of literature and reviews have been authored about this film—it seems to have produced quite a flurry in the education world. Many are critical of the movie and argue that it will have a detrimental impact on real teachers. In her 2013 article “Bad Teacher is Bad for Teachers,” Dr. Dalton (2013), who has appraised so many Teacher Movies in recent decades, heatedly denounces the film: “Most obviously, the film is bad for viewers because of the overarching message that there are no good teachers and that the educational system is corrupt at every level” (p. 86).

Bernard Beck, author of “The Teacher from the Black Lagoon: Revenge of the Bad Teacher,” agrees with Dalton, remarking that the film glosses over or neglects the real issues facing teachers today, as well as excuses the behavior of bad teachers. In his 2012 article, Beck laments: “The movie exposes to the audience the cynicism and callousness of the bad teacher, but the hard-working, committed people all around her are revealed as laughable and pitiable (p. 91). Both authors are of the opinion that this movie discredits teachers and does the profession injury in the public eye.

But, on the other hand, maybe this impious representation of teaching is a good thing? Bad Teacher is clearly a parody and complete inversion of the Teacher Movie genre—a response to what Eleanor Barkhorn (2011) of The Atlantic calls “sappy,” “useless,” and utterly predictable teacher flicks. A former educator herself, Barkhorn applauds the irreverence of Bad Teacher in the wake of Dead Poets Society, Freedom
Writers, The Ron Clark Story, and other idealistic teacher films. Teacher Idealistic Teacher Movies, I have found, seem to hurt rather than help public perception of teachers by setting unattainable or overly ambitious social standards.

The worst part about “inspirational” teacher films is that they “trivialize not only the difficulties many real students must overcome, but also the hard-earned skill and tireless effort real teachers must use to help those students succeed” (Moore, 2007). With this in mind, I want to agree with Barkhorn that Bad Teacher, a comedy in a sea of drama films, is needed—it prompts viewers to be critical of the genre and notice the discrepancies and absurdities that are embedded in some overly idealistic Teacher Movies. Bad Teacher inspires recognition, relief, and humor in many teachers—which is in stark contrast to the feeling of pressure and dread piled on by the Hero Teachers.

Barkhorn also comments, as Beck and Dalton do, about the lack of punishment for Miss Halsey’s behavior. Barkhorn (2011) argues that allowing Halsey to get away with her transgressions “highlights another flaw in the inspirational teacher movies genre” by emphasizing that “the school administration and the district at large play a crucial role student success.” Miss Halsey is a notoriously bad teacher because she is allowed to be; her principal and colleagues, superiors, and even her students’ parents are easily manipulated and ignore her bad behavior.

In this way, Bad Teacher reveals the flawed idea of the Hero Teacher (who single-handedly inspires and “saves” the students) and emphasizes the responsibility (and culpability) of the other members of the education system. Bad Teacher may not be harmless—but I do think this comedy is a necessary evil to counteract the extremes found in the more “serious” films, like Freedom Writers or Detachment.
Stranger Than Fiction

I found Bad Teacher intriguing because it occurred in a strange alternate universe—and I think that really affected my personal response to the film. While viewing it, I was painfully aware that most of the plot could not happen in a real school. This is mostly due to the fact that the film takes minorities (teacher as sexual predator or prude, teacher as thief, teacher as drug dealer, teacher as fraud, teacher as “the Grinch”) and throws them together, making it seem like the whole school system is corrupt. Additionally, at the close of the film, the bad teacher is promoted and has a clean record, while her rival—who is a caricature of a Hero Teacher and truly cares about her students—is transferred to the worst school in the state (maybe the school in Detachment?) as punishment. In real schools, this is not how it works.

As I explained previously, some believe that Bad Teacher sets a bad example and “foster[s] a lack of trust in teachers, their training, and their professionalism” (Dalton, 2013, p. 86). But, I do not think this movie lowers teacher standards or creates distrust because it is so absurd. A real teacher could not hit a student with a dodge ball for answering a question incorrectly—nor could he or she get away with showing a film and sleeping every day in class or showing up skimpily dressed to a school fundraiser. That teacher would be up for review almost instantly if parents, colleagues, or administrators got wind of that behavior. Most teachers, I would think, are so nervous about being targeted with a lawsuit or other accusations that they would never dream of doing the things Elizabeth Halsey does. Most viewers, I would assume, recognize that this is comedic fallacy—especially because some of those viewers have probably encountered real bad teachers in their time at school.
If this film magnifies minorities in the education world, the character of Elizabeth Halsey is meant to encompass every facet of the phrase “bad teacher.” However, the movie’s definition of bad teacher is so exaggerated that it obscures what that phrase actually means in the real world. Being a bad teacher does not necessarily mean you do drugs or use foul language, though these things are not flattering or professional. Honestly, in my experience and research, I have determined that the worst teachers are the ones that should never have entered the profession in the first place. There are a small percentage of bad teachers, and their biggest fault is an inability to reach kids.

These folks are “bad” not because they are immoral, but because they lack the basic criterion for teaching: a desire and aptitude to work with young people. According to Joshua Mackin (2014) of The Atlantic, “bad” or unsuccessful teachers are labeled so because they exhibit “[a] lack of experience, low awareness, poor social skills, [and] an inability to relate to children.” These sorts of teachers are not the norm, contrary to the movie’s depiction, and some of these problems can be fixed with training, mentoring, professional development, and time and experience. When it comes to teaching, “bad” can mean a lot of things—but the typical bad teacher is ineffective, not conniving like Miss Halsey in Bad Teacher or deluded like Miss Watts in A Teacher.

Many pre-service teachers are probably afraid of being or becoming a bad teacher—they are afraid they will fail or will not be successful in their teaching career. In the deep recesses of their hearts, they fear being the teacher that students despise, avoid, and ridicule. It is a reasonable fear, I think—the prospect of failure is scary and humiliating when one is entering a new career and taking on so many responsibilities. However, I am not afraid of becoming Elizabeth Halsey. I am not at risk for crossing the
lines she crosses—and if I did, well, I would be just plain stupid. I find the other movies much more frightening; the idealistic teacher movies are more dangerous to pre-service teachers than films like *Bad Teacher*. Hero Teachers like Mrs. Gruwell or Mr. Clark scare me, because I do not want a life where I have to destroy myself to be considered a great and successful teacher. Should I feel guilty for feeling that way?

**Those Who Can’t Do, Teach**

"What went wrong in your life that you ended up educating children?" This question is posed to Miss Halsey while she smokes marijuana in the school gym with another teacher, Mr. Gettis. This casual inquiry, which was probably intended to be ironic or funny, is extremely important because it reinforces one of the most damaging stereotypes about teachers.

“Those who can, do and those who can’t, teach.” Every time I hear this idiom, I am filled with rage, because it insinuates that the people who become teachers are individuals who are not skilled enough to make a living doing anything else—accounting, writing, researching, inventing, etc. It devalues the complex art of teaching and insults teachers and the work they do. To my great chagrin, this idiom is still present in pervasive attitudes about teachers and teaching. When I first chose teaching as my future profession, people were amazed and asked me, “Why would you do *that* when you could do anything else?” My family wanted me to pursue a job with a higher salary and more recognition—they did not want me to settle. It is amazing to me that though teaching should be deeply respected, it is treated as a last resort by society.

In her article “A Witness to the Decline in Teaching,” Mary McNamara of *The Los Angeles Times* describes the careers of her parents, who are both former educators. I
enjoyed this opinion piece because in this anecdote McNamara (2001) perfectly captures the societal attitude I am trying to convey:

My father chose to teach over a wide variety of professions because he thought it was important. And, in the end, it was the lack of respect that drove him out. Not from his students, but from society. I felt it as a child whenever I told anyone what my parents did. "They teach," I would say. "Oh," came the inevitable response. "College?" "No," I answered, fighting my rising shame. "High school." The implication was clear time and again—if they were ambitious, if they were talented, if they were any damn good at all, they would not be stuck teaching high school.

McNamara uses some choice diction in this passage: words like “shame” and “stuck” illustrate teaching young people as a low or lesser pursuit, and reinforces Gettis’ question, “What has to go wrong in your life for you to become a teacher?” It insinuates that teachers either settle for a job beneath them, or were never any good in the first place.

Viewers observe many different educators in Bad Teacher, but they all have at least one trait in common: they are like rusty, clunky cars at a dealership. In other words, they are not the cream of the crop. They are either completely without substance or skill, like Miss Halsey, or they are disturbingly zealous like Miss Squirrel, or overly eccentric (read: obsessed with dolphins) like Principal Snur. They are residents of the island of misfit toys in the “claymation” Rudolph film. They are caricatures, one dimensional—and the sad truth is, some viewers probably associate these characters with real teachers. In this light, we teachers are misguided, bumbling fools, who choose teaching not
because we want to, but because we have no other alternatives.

Met with this sort of prejudice and disrespect, what educated, talented, and successful person would want to be a teacher? It seems that the only teachers who are celebrated in media and in the public are individuals like Erin Gruwell and the other Hero Teachers. The “heroic” teachers are praised for their ability to “change lives,” “go above and beyond,” and “make a difference.”

Which leads me to ask: how "miraculous" do I need to be to gain respect? Is being just "good" and “effective,” like most people are at their jobs, not enough? How do I navigate this unreasonable and narrow spectrum that these films have formed—the self-sacrificing heroes, the incompetent or helpless victims, or the unstable or self-serving villains? What if I do not want to play any of those roles, or I do not fit any of those categories? What if I want to simply be human?

Some may consider Bad Teacher a harmless, silly comedy film. However, it expresses, better than any of the other films I have studied, how teachers are low-ranked in the societal hierarchy, placed in the small box-like confines, and perceived or characterized as bumbling cartoons or social outcasts. Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw coined the insidious idiom, “Those who can’t do, teach,” in his play Man and Superman. Clearly, he was never a teacher, or he would realize that teachers can do, they can achieve great heights in any profession they choose. They just choose it do it in a classroom, with kids that matter to them.
CONCLUSION

Teacher Movie Myths

After watching all eight films and analyzing them in-depth, I am aware that I have barely scratched the surface. There are countless American films about teachers—both popular and obscure. But even in this small group of subjects, I could discern a trend. Though the films are diverse and depict teachers and teaching differently, they all seem to fall on a dichotomized spectrum. Each teacher protagonist fell into one of three categories: a self-sacrificing hero, an incompetent or helpless victim, or a conniving or manipulative villain (See Appendix, Figure 9). The issue is, no teacher (and no human being for that matter) falls into just one of those roles—each title is too one-dimensional to be authentic.

The first four films in my study are the “classics”—they follow the narrative arc and conventions for Teacher Movies that I outlined at the beginning of my study. Though films like *Dead Poets Society, Mr. Holland’s Opus, The Ron Clark Story*, and *Freedom Writers* are meant to be inspirational celebrations of teaching and tributes to the power of one teacher, they have adverse effects for teachers. Most significantly, they set unrealistic social standards for teachers’ work and lifestyles and they exert pressure on real teachers. Additionally, the classic films promote many misconceptions and myths about teaching—such as the myth of the single class, teachers’ lacking social lives, lessons composed entirely of motivational lectures, and, of course, the myth of the superhuman teacher.

The last four films in my study could be called the counter-films because they are the antithesis of the genre; they deviate from the traditional Hero Teacher arc because the
teachers do not succeed in “saving” students or do not attempt to be “heroic.” I found that these films were more difficult and challenging to respond to because they are in stark contrast to the traditional representations of teachers that I had internalized while growing up. Films like Half Nelson, Detachment, A Teacher, and Bad Teacher reveal the dark side of the profession: teachers and students struggling with extreme psycho-emotional issues, a deeply flawed school or school system, and the Despair or feeling of helplessness or uselessness. These films sought to be more honest and shed light on real issues that are adversely affecting schools, students, and teachers today—but just because they are less idealistic does not mean they are more realistic. Just like the classic films, much is magnified, much is minimized, and much is lost entirely.

Though my project focuses on teacher characters in films, I do not think that the issue of misrepresentation is exclusive to portrayals of teaching. In the media, there are stereotypical representations of every profession—and those representations have an impact on how people perceive doctors, lawyers, mailmen, window washers, etc. When I began this study, I knew that we as humans absorb or take in information through the psychosocial process of internalization. We absorb representations we see in our surroundings, especially in media like films, and then we project them onto our reality. But, ironically, filmmakers try to make the movies (especially dramas) reflect real life so that viewers can identify with situations and characters. Thus, there is a cycle that is born, a dialogue between the physical reality we inhabit and the social reality that we construct for ourselves—which begs the question: What is real and what is imagined?

The study has not only pushed me to consider and reflect on how I conceptualize myself and my colleagues as teachers and where we get our information to do so, but also
how students internalize and interpret what they see in films and other media. How do they know what is truth and what is fabricated? This question has led me to consider how I as a teacher can make my students more aware of what they ingest in the media—perhaps by exposing them to media portrayals of teenagers and high school students and asking them to analyze, just as I did in this study, what is represented truthfully and what is misrepresented, generalized, or exaggerated. Below, I have outlined and briefly reflected on some of the misconceptions and misrepresentations that I identified across most of the films:

1. Passion is all it takes to be successful at teaching.

   In at least half of the films, the teacher protagonist’s passion for teaching and for his/her kids enable him/her to overcome insurmountable odds like gang violence and hostility, state standardized tests, poverty-related issues, and the confines of traditional academia, to name a few. The films suggest that it is not a teacher’s skill for instruction, planning, assessment, or grading that makes him or her successful—success is measured in borderline obsessive devotion to students’ needs. Passion is important, but it is simply not enough; teachers must also be patient, resilient, educated, personable, matured, organized, and ethical, among other things. The films give viewers an excruciatingly narrow rubric for appraising teachers’ effectiveness.

2. Good teachers break the rules; only mediocre teachers follow the rules.

   All of the teacher protagonists have a knack for breaking school rules and policies, not to mention the code of ethics we practice here in Texas. In order to be successful with students, the teachers (even the celebrated Hero Teachers!) go
against the system or bend the rules to their needs. John Keating has students tear out textbook pages and stand on his desk, Ron Clark paints his classroom garish pastels and jumps rope with young girls, and Hilary Swank defies her department head’s wishes and buys her students their own books. In the films, any teacher or other faculty member who observes the system is illustrated as a villain, or at least highly unlikable and unpopular with students. There is rarely punishment for the teachers who disregard the rules—a convention which is laughable in real life. This anti-establishment theme across the movies portrays teachers as mavericks who feel that rules do not or should not apply to them, which is not an attitude to model for children or adolescents.

3. Teachers are the only trustworthy adults capable of guiding or "saving" students—all other adults are villains or fools.

In many of the films, teachers are painted as the saviors of the students—they must save the students from everything and everyone, even the students themselves. Parents, principals, administrators, and counselors are depicted as hostile and cruel, or merely incompetent compared to the teachers. Both Freedom Writers and Bad Teacher depict teachers as constantly at war with each other. In The Ron Clark Story and Dead Poets Society, the teacher protagonists advise their students to go against their parents’ wishes. Most parents either do not care about their kids at all, or bribe the teacher (Bad Teacher) to ensure their child’s academic success, which is equally demeaning. Most teachers know very well that it is exceedingly difficult to engage and motivate students whose parents are not involved in their education. Also, teachers do need the support of their
principals and colleagues to be truly successful. It takes a community to educate and raise a child, but these movies dismantle communities and depict school districts as dens of ignorance or war zones.

4. Teaching is more important than ANYTHING and ALWAYS comes first.

In most of the films in this study, the teacher protagonist is either barred from a comfortable and fulfilling personal life, or willingly omits personal pursuits from his or her life. Many of the movies express that if you have a personal life and have hobbies other than grading, lesson planning, or making school-related crafts projects, you are a poor teacher. Teachers protagonists like Mr. Keating and Mrs. Gruwell neglect their marriages for teaching, whereas Mr. Barthes and Miss Watts completely lack healthy relationships. In many of the films, viewers do not observe the teacher protagonists practicing healthy habits like cooking or exercise, or doing other leisure activities just for fun. All of them have a poor or nonexistent personal life that suffers and takes a back seat to their teaching job. Teaching should not detract from a teacher’s quality of life; at best, it should enhance it, and at worst, it is a normal day job.

5. The best (and worst) teachers are self-destructive.

Lastly, every single one of the teacher protagonists in my study demonstrates some sort of self-destructive behaviors. Some try to get fired, others do drugs or put themselves in harmful situations. Many of them opt to destroy themselves through teaching and sacrificing their personal health, happiness, safety, and employment via teaching. It is as if teachers have a sadistic death wish! It sends the following message: “I am not a good teacher unless I cause
myself harm in my quest to save students or merely do my job.” This is an unhealthy example for pre-service teachers to observe and attempt to follow.

As a pre-service teacher, I felt these messages, endorsed by the films, gave me a misguided idea of what it means to be a teacher. These Teacher Movie myths are likely present in public’s conception teachers’ jobs and lifestyles; it is important for teachers, especially pre-service teachers, to recognize these stereotype-driven beliefs and dismantle them.

Each of these films serves some purpose and offers a unique representation of teachers and teaching. But the biggest fault of these movies is that film is an inadequate medium for capturing life in the classroom. As Mark Walsh (1999) astutely remarks in his article “Hollywood Goes to School,” “[t]he difficult, sometimes tedious work of teaching and learning doesn't translate quite as easily to the big and small screens, even when producers try.” But, Joshua Mackin of The Atlantic, who called for a boycott on “feel good” Teacher Movies in a 2014 article, wrote that it is a good thing that real teaching is not as easy as the movies lead viewers to believe: “The classroom reflects so much of the human experience: a struggle to make progress and meaning and inspiration out of the raw quotidian material of everyday life.” I agree with both authors: teaching is hard, but it is rewarding, and it is difficult to capture that struggle in a movie script. Robin Williams, Hilary Swank, and Ryan Gosling are celebrity actors—not teachers.

Upon completing this project, I would advise pre-service teachers who are constructing their teacher identity and preparing for their new career to look elsewhere for insight into the profession. With access to various digital and Internet media, we are gullible and wittingly ignorant—we tend to trust what we find on Wikipedia and in drama
films, even when we know we should not. Pre-service teachers will do themselves and their students a disservice if they invest in these movies too much—they will fail trying to emulate the fictional teacher protagonists in these movies. There are many other avenues for gaining true insight into the profession, like books and memoirs authored by new or veteran educators, or documentaries that follow real teachers. The best course of action a pre-service teacher can take is to seek to learn from real teachers, not the teachers in the movies; truly, the best way to learn how to manage a classroom is to be present in a classroom through observations or volunteer teaching opportunities.

**The Myth of the Teacher Protagonist**

Throughout this project, I have identified multiple ways that Teacher Movies mislead and misrepresent the teaching profession. However, there is one, final point I wish to make regarding film representations of teaching. The most profound illusion that I found in all eight films, and perhaps in the Teacher Movie genre as a whole, is the myth of the teacher protagonist.

In each of these films, there was a teacher character who drove the action of the plot or behaved as a catalyst; the film centered on his or her experiences, both failures and accomplishments. However, I realized, there is no such thing as a teacher protagonist in real teaching. All of the teacher protagonists—Keating, Holland, Clark, Gruwell, Dunne, Barthes, Watts, and Halsey—wittingly or unwittingly use students as their means to an end. Watts uses Eric for personal comfort and pleasure, Halsey uses her students to get a pay raise, and Holland vicariously lives through Rowena to satisfy his music aspirations. Clark, Keating, and Gruwell use their students as well, though not vindictively; their students give them purpose and without any students to save or inspire,
they are useless beings. Barthes and Dunne teach to keep routine and purpose in their quickly unraveling lives—the students, at least the reachable ones like Drey and Meredith, make them feel like they are useful and can contribute something positive to others’ lives.

But in real teaching, the teacher is a secondary character working behind the scenes or coaching from off-camera. The teacher is the means to the end, not the students. Teacher Movies do not reflect that—and to do so would dismantle the Teacher Movie as we know it today. Without a teacher protagonist, it may be nearly impossible to have a Teacher Movie. But all films that feature a teacher protagonist at work, no matter how tear-jerking or inspirational or uplifting, will ultimately fail because “[t]ruly great teaching is less about the performing teacher and more about the performing student” (Gillard, 2012, p. 6). True teachers recognize that they are not the stars of their classrooms, poised before the camera as they change life after life. The best teachers are off-camera, setting the scene, and calling for “Action!” while their students attempt to overcome all the plot twists of school before the credits roll.
APPENDIX

Figure 1: Cover of *Dead Poets Society* (1989)

Source: *Internet Movie Database (IMDb)*

(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0097165/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1)
**Figure 2:** Cover of *Mr. Holland’s Opus* (1995)

Source: *Internet Movie Database (IMDb)*

(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0113862/mediaindex?ref_=tt_pv_mi_sm)
Figure 3: Cover of *The Ron Clark Story* (2006)

Source: *Internet Movie Database (IMDb)*

(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0473389/mediaindex?ref_=tt_pv_mi_sm)
Figure 4: Cover of Freedom Writers (2007)

Source: Internet Movie Database (IMDb)
(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0463998/mediaindex?page=2&ref_=ttmi_mi_sm)
Figure 5: Cover of Half Nelson (2006)

Source: Internet Movie Database (IMDb)
(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0468489/mediaindex?ref_=tt_pv_mi_sm)
Figure 6: Cover of Detachment (2011)

Source: Internet Movie Database (IMDb)

(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1683526/?ref_=nv_sr_1)
Figure 7: Cover of *A Teacher* (2013)

Source: Internet Movie Database (IMDb)

(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2201548/?ref_=nv_sr_1)
Figure 8: Cover of Bad Teacher (2011)

Source: Internet Movie Database (IMDb)

(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1284575/?ref_=nv_sr_1)
Figure 9: Spectrum of Teacher Protagonists in Films
REFERENCES


