

Motivated by the Movies: How Hollywood Influences Preservice Teachers' Pedagogical Knowledge

C. Lorraine Webb, Ed.D.

Associate Professor
Texas A&M University-San Antonio
1 University Way
San Antonio, TX 78224, USA

Robin Robinson Kapavik

Associate Professor
Texas A&M University-San Antonio
1 University Way
San Antonio, TX 78224, USA

Abstract:

Don't you just love watching movies about teachers – especially ones that are meant to inspire us to save the world? Fortunately for us, Hollywood has provided us with many to choose from – several of which are based on true stories. Can these awe-inspiring movies be detrimental to the teaching profession, though? Are they capable of misleading pre-service teachers into believing they are more realistic and less Hollywood? This study sought to answer these questions.

Key Words: Movies Film Teaching

Introduction

Hollywood is the land of make-believe. Whether going to theaters, renting, or buying, Americans enjoy losing themselves in artistically-created movies. Even when based on true events and/or persons, movies are created and edited by individuals wishing to share their perspectives on the subject matter. And Krausz believes these perspectives impact viewers, consciously and subconsciously, in areas including career choices (2003). When it comes to themes based on educators' lives, however, do these create a false or misleading view of the teaching profession? A good number of Hollywood's interpretations of educators' lives "make the nonteaching world believe that, even without funds, material, equipment, or even a certified teacher, every student can make leaps and bounds" ("At the Movies," 2007, p. 17). And if these misinterpretations are adopted by pre-service teachers, how does it affect their self-efficacy and/or motivations for teaching?

Literature Review

Limited research has been conducted in evaluating how education-themed movies affect pre-service teachers' views on teaching, students, and career choices. Researchers have sought, however, to evaluate authenticities of such films and how the outcomes might affect individual's thoughts and choices. In the following examples, researchers found these movies to lack authenticity.

Pyett (2014) found that Hollywood's interpretations of teaching music can be problematic in several areas, including teaching styles, definition of teacher heroism, and dedication to the profession. Pyett researched three movies related to music education: *Mr. Holland's Opus* (1995), *School of Rock* (2003), and *Music of the Heart* (1999). Generally, teaching styles in these movies portrayed a top-down model instead of the more acceptable student-centered approach. Teachers in all three movies, like most Hollywood films about teachers, are portrayed as heroes because they've taken students from one extreme to another in terms of academics, behavior, and emotional stability. Dedication to the profession also contributes to the heroism portrayed by Hollywood educators.

Teachers in these movies demonstrate such dedication to teaching that their personal lives are all but non-existent. Since these Hollywood portrayals of music educators are problematic, “it would thus be foolish to think that these films are not influencing the views of young teachers and students” (Pyett, 2014, p. 34).

In a study by Gale and Densmore (2001), research focused on teacher-student relations. The researchers analyzed three movies: *Kindergarten Cop* (1990), *Dangerous Minds* (1995), and *Dead Poets Society* (1989), and found four areas in relationships between teachers and students that were misrepresented within each. The four areas identified by Gale and Densmore were “institutional realities of students’ lives, opportunities to challenge the familiar and embrace the foreign, ambiguity and complexity, and the ‘ordinary’ of teacher-student relations” (2001, p. 616). The researchers determined that more often than not the Hollywood portrayals are the exception and not the norm of authentic classrooms. In addition, they provide little to no guidance on how to appropriately deal with relationships in an ordinary, authentic classroom. These movies provide extreme measures to take in extreme situations, which rarely work in an authentic classroom.

Bulman’s study in 2002 focused on one central theme: ethic of individualism. The researcher analyzed films with settings in urban, suburban, and private high schools and found that adolescents portrayed in these movies had to overcome insurmountable obstacles in order to become academically successful and/or personally fulfilled. The key to overcoming these obstacles in urban settings involved the direct efforts of a teacher – the majority of times, an inexperienced, well-meaning teacher. Outcomes focused more on academics in the urban setting as a goal to obtain, and the suburban setting films focused more on students finding their own identities with little to no help from an adult figure. Academic success in these films was assumed as neither an obstacle to overcome, nor a burden to endure. In the private high school setting films, however, academic success was a given but portrayed as a burden and stress these students must overcome in order to become personally fulfilled (Bulman, 2002).

Research Study and Methodology

The literature reviewed emphasized the unrealistic portrayals of teachers and/or students, which led the authors to question how these films affect pre-service teachers. This study sought to address the following hypothesis: Movies based on real educators’ lives contribute to misconceptions of the teaching experience by pre-service teachers. Thirty-two students enrolled in an undergraduate classroom management course were assigned five reality based movies about teacher and student interactions to view: *Dangerous Minds*, *Freedom Writers*, *Lean on Me*, *The Ron Clark Story*, and *Stand and Deliver*. After viewing the movies, students completed an online questionnaire consisting of 12 open-ended questions as well as demographic questions as part of a graded assignment. The 12 open-ended questions revolved around the topics of teacher and student interactions, teacher success, and personal opinions of the participants’ views of the teachers portrayed in the movies. After the assignment had been evaluated by the instructor and feedback had been given to the students, permission was requested to use their assignment answers as data in this study. Twenty-six of the thirty-two pre-service teachers volunteered to participate in this qualitative study, knowing that their personal information would be removed before the data were analyzed. For the purpose of this manuscript, the authors chose to focus on the following questions: Q12 Have you seen any of these movies before, and if so, how did they influence you (if at all) in your career choice? If you had not seen any of the movies depicted, how do these segments make you feel about your decision to become a teacher? Q5 What are your overall impressions of the teachers in the segments? Are they realistic portrayals of teachers? Why or why not? The open-ended data from the volunteers were then coded for keywords, and emergent themes were identified.

Findings

From the twenty-six analyzed responses, nine students had previously watched all five films, five students had never watched any of the films, and twelve students had viewed some, but not all the films. When asked about how the film segments made them feel about their decision to become a teacher, two overwhelming responses emerged: reaffirmation of the teaching profession and feelings of motivation and inspiration. Therefore, while the reviewed literature found that films about the education profession lack authenticity, the pre-service teachers who participated in this survey still related to the teachers portrayed in the films in varying ways.

A majority of the pre-service teachers responded that the films positively reaffirmed their decision to pursue the teaching profession as a career choice. Responses such as, “I know I have mad[e] the right decision in becoming a teacher” (Student #9, personal communication) were common throughout the open-ended survey responses. Another student shared, “I have never seen any of these movies before.

But just by watching all of these movie segments make[s] me realize that teachers have a hard job, but it is also very rewarding. You can see that all the teachers in the different movie segments love what they do, and they help students be as successful as possible. I feel that my decision to become a teacher was the right decision for me. I love to help people in general so I feel that I would have that compassion and drive to help my students in any way that I can. I know that I have what it takes to be an effective teacher who will help her students be successful” (Student #2, personal communication).

In addition to receiving affirmation, the majority of students shared that the films were motivating and inspirational. Student #25 stated, “When I was younger I always knew I wanted to be a teacher some day. I always had that passion for helping others. When I saw the movie *Stand and Deliver* a couple of years back, I felt that I could help and encourage others who do not believe in them like Mr. Escalante. After watching the movie I felt more inspired and knew that I can make a positive impact in a students [sic] life” (personal communication). In reference to *The Ron Clark Story*, student #19 shared, “He really did influence me and made me want to be like him. I want to be able to engage my students and do things that they are interested. Even if it looks silly, it will help to get my students motivated” (personal communication). Likewise, the same student related to the film *Stand and Deliver*, “He had a great deal of influence in my wanting to be a teacher. I was amazed at how he got students that came from different backgrounds and who were never paid attention to [by the education system] because they felt they were not smart enough. He proved to everyone they were smart, they just needed someone to take the time and teach them. They needed someone to care about them enough” (Student #19, personal communication).

Finding affirmation and motivation are important; however, is that enough? To further delve into the films’ influence of pre-service teachers, the authors focused on another set of questions: Are the films realistic portrayals of teachers, and what are the overall impressions of the teachers? Eighty-four percent of study participants responded that either all, or all but one of the films were realistic. And, of those participants, only one film consistently raised questions from the pre-service teachers about its realistic portrayal of teachers, and that was *Stand and Deliver*. Many pre-service teachers questioned the methods utilized by the teacher in that particular film, and called his actions “unprofessional” (Student #26, personal communication) and “inappropriate” (Student #8 & Student #10, personal communication). In contrast, another pre-service teacher addressed the main character’s language by stating, “I didn’t like how he spoke to the students but he was able to reach them so it work[ed]. I think he is realistic...” (Student #15, personal communication).

Therefore, these films, known for their portrayals of teachers pushing students to success, elicited data from the surveyed pre-service teachers that are in disagreement with the literature previously discussed. Although Gale and Densmore (2001) emphasized that teacher portrayals in Hollywood films were the exceptions rather than the norm, this study did not support their assertion. In fact, student #23 stated, “I really loved all these teachers. They were all unique and they all had their own way of teaching. I think they are realistic because I have had the opportunity to be taught by teachers like these. Teachers like the ones portrayed in the movie are really effective in the classroom. Sometimes teachers just lecture and they aren’t involved with the students. Teachers need to take into consideration that some students have a broken home and they often cling to their teachers for support and care. I really hope I can be like one of those teachers in these segments because I think that’s how teachers should be when it comes to teaching. I want to be one of those teachers that my student[s] will remember” (personal communication).

Another pre-service teacher acknowledged some of the teacher traits portrayed in the films as simply being “passion” (Student #4, personal communication). That same pre-service teacher shared, “I was blown away by each teacher’s ability to teach their students with such passion and the methods used to challenge each student to think more abstractly and see the deeper meaning. Each teacher related the subject to the student’s environment and interest. The teachers would ask critical thinking questions and the students would respond in various ways from orally, to writing journals and poems, to playing games like around the work [sic]. The movies did depict realistic portrayals of teachers, not all teachers teach in ways to stimulate student’s knowledge and logic but there are some exceptional teachers who teach in ways for students to best learn a subject.”

In an effort to elicit specific qualities seen in each of the teachers, the authors prompted the pre-service teachers, within the survey, to describe overall impressions of the teachers. From those open-ended responses, three themes emerged: the teachers’ pedagogical skills, the teachers’ caring nature within each of her/his learning communities, and the motivational and inspirational qualities of each teacher.

Coded as pedagogical skills included differentiated instruction, making content relevant to students' lives, and sharing a passion for specific content areas. Student #2 stated, "My overall impression of the teachers in the movie segments is that they all have one thing in common and that is their love and passion for teacher" (personal communication). With regards to the depicted teachers caring nature within each of her/his learning communities, student #16 described, "I was very impressed of how she got the students to work as a team...I believe that she created her classroom into a family environment rather than a classroom just to do work and testing" (personal communication). And, lastly, many of the pre-service teachers noticed the motivational and inspirational qualities of each teacher depicted in the films. As an example, student #21 described the female teacher in *Freedom Writers*, "She has good qualities that all teachers should have. She inspired her students and she believed in them" (personal communication).

These themes describe realistic qualities of real and practicing teachers, therefore, the participating pre-service teachers knew *what* to look for amongst the movie actors' portrayals of practicing teachers. However, Pyett (2014) would argue that the pre-service teachers are simply seeing those qualities they know teachers should possess and are overlooking the dramatic depictions that are unrealistic from the daily lives of teachers. So, what does this mean? Might the students have named the films unrealistic rather than realistic portrayals had the Hollywood suspense not been quite so entertaining?

Implications/Conclusions

"Representation of education in fiction and philosophy has been influential in how society views education" (Vandermeersche, Soetaert, & Rutten, 2013, p. 92). Encouraging pre-service teachers to study their own beliefs and views of teaching in addition to portrayals of teachers in the media can assist in developing a well-rounded idea of teachers and the profession of teaching. In addition, Paul (2002) suggested viewing such media portrayals in teacher education courses so that faculty might assist in critical analysis alongside the pre-service teachers. Beyerbach (2005) suggested, "Oppositional pedagogy can be extended to analyses of teachers in film; new pedagogies can help pre-service teachers to interrogate representations and develop critical views" (p. 269). These films, however, should not be viewed as a cookbook, but rather as inspirational in nature.

References

- At the Movies. (2007). *Teacher Magazine*, 18(6), 17.
- Beyerbach, B. (2005). Themes in sixty years of teachers in film: fast times, dangerous minds, stand on me. *The Social Foundations Classroom*, 37(3), 267-285.
- Bulman, R. C. (2002). Teachers in the 'hood: Hollywood's middle-class fantasy. *The Urban Review*, 34(3), 251-276.
- Gale, T. & Densmore, K. (2001). Questions of (re)production and legitimation: a second screening of three films on teacher-student relation. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 33(5), 601-619.
- Krausz, P. (2002). Does the cinema represent teacher fairly? *Australian Screen Education*, 30, 62-66.
- Paul, D. (2002). The blackboard jungle: critically interrogating Hollywood's vision of the urban classrooms. *Annual Editions: Multicultural Education*. 121-129.
- Pyett, K. (2014). Movies, music, and mind: what does Hollywood know about music teaching? *Canadian Music Educator*, 56(1), 31-34.
- Vandermeersche, G., Soetaert, R., & Rutten, K. (2013). "Shall I tell you what is wrong with Hector as a teacher?": *The History Boys*, stereotypes of popular and high culture, and teacher education. *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 41(2), 88-97.