

# Teachers in Film: Always in Process

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## Abstract

Teachers are often portrayed in Hollywood films as superhuman. While these types of films may perpetuate certain stereotypes of teachers, they can also have a great influence. Based on their own teaching experiences, and having viewed and re-viewed the films *Dangerous Minds* (Bruckheimer, Simpson, & Smith, 1995) and *The English Teacher* (Despres, LeClair, Salerno, & Zisk, 2013), the authors reflect on the importance of offering pre-service teachers the chance to consider how Hollywood-teacher films can affect their emerging teacher identities. This article is the result of a research project that included an extensive review of 25 Hollywood-teacher films, and through the processes of narrative inquiry provides a self-reflexive discussion on how certain films have shaped the authors' teaching and teacher identities.

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*Keywords:* teacher education, reflection, film, teacher identity, critical pedagogy, teacher inquiry, narrative inquiry

## Résumé

Les enseignants sont souvent dépeints comme des superhéros dans les films hollywoodiens. Alors que certains de ces films contribuent à entretenir certains stéréotypes des enseignants, ceux-ci peuvent également avoir une très bonne influence. Sur la base de leur propre expérience d'enseignement, et ayant visionné et revisionné les films *Mentalité dangereuse* (*Dangerous Minds*) (Bruckheimer, Simpson, & Smith, 1995) et *Une drôle de prof* (*The English Teacher*) (Despres, LeClair, Salerno, & Zisk, 2013), les auteurs font une réflexion sur l'importance d'offrir aux enseignants en formation initiale l'occasion de considérer comment les enseignants des films hollywoodiens peuvent avoir un impact sur leur identité d'enseignant émergente. Cet article est le résultat d'un projet de recherche incluant l'examen approfondi de 25 films hollywoodiens mettant en vedette des enseignants ; la discussion s'effectue à travers un processus d'enquête narrative permettant une autoréflexion sur la façon dont certains films ont modelé l'enseignement des auteurs et leur identité.

*Mots-clés :* formation des enseignants, réflexion, film, identité d'enseignant, pédagogie critique, questionnement d'enseignant, enquête narrative

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## Introduction

Barakett and Cleghorn (2008) observe there may be few exceptional university-based teacher education programs in Canada because many often focus on the development of the individual. They propose that, “instead of talking about teacher education or teacher training, it may be more accurate to talk about a process of *socialization* into the teaching profession” (p. 73). Society’s perceptions of teachers are influenced by many facets, including popular culture (Dalton, 2004), and especially movies (Resnick, 2018). The Hollywood-teacher film can “become part of that broader cultural system of representations that construct social reality” (Ryan & Kellner, 1988, p. 13). In the words of Dalton (2004), “We borrow from the stories of the films we see to help us create ourselves as characters and organize the plotlines of our daily lives” (p. 2). Others’ stories can help to shape one’s professional identity. And the exploration of Hollywood-teacher narratives can invite educators of all levels of experience to reflect on aspects of the profession.

This method of exploration, narrative inquiry, is being used increasingly in education, and it can invite teachers and teacher candidates to reflect on how they view themselves, their relationships with students, and their teaching-learning environment. Narrative, as Clandinin and Connelly (1990) note, “is a way of characterizing the phenomena of human experience” (p. 2). Giroux (2001) argues that Hollywood-teacher films are vehicles that can fuel passions, and unconsciously influence attitudes and beliefs (although, the authors of this article would also say, occasionally, the influence may be a conscious decision). From our own teaching experiences, the authors concur that what we have viewed on-screen and what occurred in our own English classrooms were very different. Many practising teachers may recoil at the ways in which the teaching profession is portrayed on-screen, while teacher candidates are often faced with unrealistic expectations. Texts such as film “offer constructions of reality that compete with those offered by academic, state and professional discourses about education” (Fisher, Harris, & Jarvis, 2008, p. 2). Still, these are significant discussions to have, to consider the challenges and the parallels among differing perspectives (Fisher, Harris, & Jarvis, 2008).

Both authors have an interest and passion in film. Over time, like Dalton (2004), we grew to realize how “popular culture constructs its own curriculum in the movies through the onscreen relationship between teacher and student” (p. 1). We were brought back to our teacher-education experiences and realized that the opportunities to reflect

on our perspectives of the Hollywood-teacher and our own professional identities were absent, thus providing a catalyst of sorts for this research project. While Barakett and Cleghorn noted in 2008 the need for considering the process of socialization into the teaching profession, in recent years more literature has been published in this area, and more teacher educators are affording such opportunities for their teacher candidates. Resnick's (2018) text, for example, *Representing Education in Film: How Hollywood Portrays Educational Thought, Settings and Issues*, is meant "to help people interested in education enrich their thinking by taking a serious look at selected Hollywood films" (p. 3). Dahlgren's (2017) text *From Martyrs to Murderers: Images of Teachers and Teaching in Hollywood Films* provides a discussion and analysis of how teacher tropes have shifted from a romantic view to a more negative archetype. Interestingly, Dahlgren also demonstrates a parallel between the shifts in Hollywood-teacher representations and educational reform in the United States. These discussions (and texts!) among others are important aspects of the teaching profession, and movies, as Resnick (2018) argues, can be a powerful source of knowledge.

The authors viewed, analyzed, and discussed 25 Hollywood-teacher films dating back to the 1960s. Most films we had not viewed before, but as we started this project, we both became interested in re-visiting or re-viewing some of the films to consider how our perspectives may have changed. As Dalton (2004) and reader response theorists such as Rosenblatt (1969) contest, our relationships with texts are dynamic, and the ways in which we view and understand a film at different points in our lives is significant to consider as individuals, as well as educators. Bloch (2006) calls attention for the need to promote more wonder because, to be effective teachers, we should continuously be wondering and questioning. So, we took up Bloch's call and considered the following questions during our viewing experiences:

- What are the characteristics of effective teachers?
- What do teachers need to know?
- What is the teacher's credo?
- Can values and visions be taught?
- What does it mean to teach creatively, to teach creativity?
- Do we expect too much from a teacher education program?

What are the questions that need to be asked about teacher education? About teacher identity?

On a more personal level, one of the main questions we asked ourselves was: How have Hollywood-teacher films influenced our teaching experiences and teacher identities? To begin exploring this question, we first provide a brief discussion of the portrayal of teachers in Hollywood films in relation to teaching practices and teacher identity. We then each focus on a self-reflexive discussion about the films *Dangerous Minds* (Bruckheimer, Simpson, & Smith, 1995) and *The English Teacher* (Despres, LeClair, Salerno, & Zisk, 2013) to explore the ways in which these films have influenced and continue to influence our identities as teachers and our current teaching practices.

### **Reflecting on the Hollywood-Teacher Film**

There are many tropes of the Hollywood teacher. There are the traditional, stern teachers who follow the rules as seen in *School of Life* (Milliken & Dear, 2005) with Matt Warner, the conservative teacher, contrasted with Mr. D, the “cool teacher” who often defies traditional pedagogical approaches. There are also the outsiders who become teachers, such as Mr. Holland in *Mr. Holland’s Opus* (Cort, Field, Nolin, & Herek, 1995) or Roberta Guaspari in *Music of the Heart* (Kaplan, Maddalena, Miller, Scheuer, & Craven, 1999). Without any training as traditional teachers, per se, both teachers find themselves in new, different territories and initially struggle to find ways to teach their students. Both are also opposed by the veteran teachers who feel they have more status, and are often finding ways to please the principals. In more recent years, there have been alternative portrayal of teachers, such as Monsieur Lazhar in *Monsieur Lazhar* (Déry, McCraw, & Falardeau, 2011), a refugee trying to find work as a teacher, and who is hired as a substitute teacher after an elementary teacher commits suicide. Or Dan Dunne in *Half Nelson* (Boden et al., 2006), a teacher in an inner-city American high school who has a drug addiction and befriends one of his students. There are also the more humorous, satirical portrayals of the “bad teacher,” such as Elizabeth Halsey in *Bad Teacher* (Householter, Miller, & Kasdan, 2011), who defies everything a teacher should be, who appears to care less about her students, but at the same time, who actually turns out to be the one who cares the most for her students. These are just a few of the stereotypical representations of teachers in

Hollywood films. Yet the one common characteristic among all these versions of teachers is how they all, at some level, have a desire to help or even save their students. This, the authors would argue, is likely one of the more dominant Hollywood-teacher tropes and will be the focus of discussion in this article.

Among many practising teachers, a shared reaction to Hollywood-teacher films is “popular though [these films] may be, realistic [they are] not” (Lalor, 2005, para. 3). Many Hollywood films tend to portray teachers as “superhuman, capable of permanently changing lives in a short period of time” (Farhi, 1999, p. 157). Consequently, this may place unrealistic expectations on all teachers. This superhuman myth is especially seen with English teachers in films who are often motivated by the desire to “rescue” their students. In the majority of these cases the English teacher protagonists are white females, often coming from privileged backgrounds, who are thrust into unfamiliar, adverse territory and forced to deal with students, families, and situations they have never encountered before or perhaps are very naïve about. More often than not, these teachers are able to conquer the unfavourable situations and see some level of success with their students. This may seem unrealistic, as merely a form of entertainment allowing for a grandiose, hyperbolized narrative of the English teacher’s life that can sell tickets at the box office. However, there is a deeper layer.

One of the biggest challenges the authors face in teacher education is that while we invite new teacher candidates to interrogate the ways that their images of teachers and teaching have been constructed, and to acknowledge that these images have been constructed through a complex concatenation of cultural experiences that include many years spent in school and university classrooms, as well as film, TV, and fiction, the teacher candidates often want to be trained or prepared, even inducted or indoctrinated. But, we encourage teachers, teacher candidates, and teacher educators to ask questions that can startle, surprise, and arrest our perspectives and views so we can begin to imagine new possibilities. Barthes (1977) claims that “one copies a role” (p. 99). Culler (1997) asks, “What is this ‘I’ that I am—person, agent or actor, self—and what makes it what it is?” (p. 110). Culler further asks: “Is the self something given or something made” and “should it be conceived in individual or in social terms?” (p. 110). These are important questions for everybody involved in education. Above all, teachers need to move beyond imitation and mimicry in order to create new positions and possibilities. Culler calls for more interdisciplinary, analytical, and speculative reflection, and helps us imagine a

hopeful vision of teacher education. As Culler observes, the position of agnosticism, of knowing there is a great deal “you don’t know,” is “the condition of life itself” (p. 16). The authors of this article think that teacher candidates need to interrogate their past experiences in schools and all they think they know about the vocation and responsibility of teaching. Teachers need to engage in an ongoing, sophisticated understanding of how their sense of teacher identity has been shaped and constructed, and continues to be shaped and constructed. Film plays an important role in how we understand teacher identity.

Filmic representation of teachers, whether or not they are deemed as highly fictional or unrealistic, “may serve as a catalyst to help candidates revise and realign their expectations of teaching” (Delamarter, 2015, p. 11). Instead of simply inviting teachers to reflect on their own about the teacher films, what might be more effective is the combination of viewing/responding to the films as well as “an interpretive framework, and structured reflection that has the potential to [influence] candidates’ expectations of teaching” (p. 11). Tan (2006) argues that using films is an effective way to promote reflection among teacher candidates because the stories are “propelled by images,” and there is a sense of realism. While the notion of “the real” is complicated, Metz (1977) notes that it is not the cinema’s signifiers, the visual and auditory elements, that are “real,” but the characters and events. So while Hollywood films do employ a high degree of creative licence to exaggerate details in teacher films, there can also be strong connections. Thus, films provide opportunities for viewers, in this case the teacher candidates, to connect to the teacher characters and their events (Tan, 2006). As Tan (2006) points out, reflective learning includes

the process of internally examining an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, and which results in a changed conceptual perspective. Films, when appropriately chosen [and analyzed], are ideal in triggering the pre-service teachers to reflect on an issue of concern, ponder on the meanings and implications for themselves, and finally change or modify their values, beliefs and actions. (p. 485)

Thus, simply claiming films such as *Dead Poets Society* (Haft, Witt, Thomas, & Weir, 1989) to be “misleading and deeply seductive” and being “horrified that anyone would think that what happens in Mr. Keating’s classroom...had anything to do with literary

study” (Dettmar, 2014, para. 3) are unjustified. To say *Mr. Holland’s Opus* (Cort et al., 1995) is a “fantasy” and “[passes] over the hard work required of real-life teachers” (Lalor, 2005, para. 4) are statements that need to be discussed. Rather than viewing such films as an “unrealistic” interpretation of a teacher’s life and worrying about the possible undesirable influence on teacher candidates, why not use Hollywood-teacher films as a mode to engage pre-service teachers in reflecting about what it means to be a teacher?

We, the authors of this article are both teachers and teacher educators. Our lives have been significantly devoted to teaching, to researching education, and to supporting creativity in teaching. Miller (2005) promotes “a pragmatic pedagogy” (p. 136) that seeks “to locate one’s evolving narrative within a specific range of institutional contexts, shifting attention from the self to the nexus where the self and institution meet” (p. 138). Miller asks, “What experiences have led you to teach, study, read, and write in the ways you do?” (p. 138). In turn, Miller recommends that we “provide our students with the opportunity to speak, read, and write in a wider range of discursive contexts” (pp. 140–141). We agree with Hargreaves (2003), who claims that because “teaching is a paradoxical profession” (p. 9) there is an urgent need for creativity, flexibility, problem-solving, ingenuity, risk-taking, and continuous improvement. With that pedagogical and scholarly commitment, we are eager to promote the value of attending to film as an important source of stories and images about teaching and learning.

What follows are reflections on two Hollywood-teacher films presented by the authors of this article. Claire chose to respond to *Dangerous Minds* (Bruckheimer et al., 1995), as it was one of the first films she viewed as a high school student contemplating the teaching profession. The film explores the experience of teaching in general, dealing with the shock of entering a non-idealized classroom, managing the classroom, and exploring the role beyond the teacher. As noted earlier, viewers’ relationships with films are dynamic, and over time, the meaning of a film may change. In re-viewing the film as a veteran teacher and teacher educator, Claire realized many parallels between her life and that of the teacher protagonist in the film. Carl chose *The English Teacher* (Despres et al., 2013), especially because it represents a sardonic, even satirical, perspective on familiar themes in Hollywood films about teachers. More nuanced narratives about teachers’ lives are needed. The purpose of these reflections is to demonstrate how Hollywood-teacher films have had and continue to have an influence on us, two seasoned educators, and how important it is to attend to Hollywood film as a form of critical pedagogy and reflection in

teacher education programs as a means to allow teacher candidates to explore their own identities as emerging teachers.

### Claire Ahn's Responses to *Dangerous Minds*

During my pre-service teacher years I was not afforded many (if any at all) opportunities to critically reflect on what it means to be a teacher, nor did I even consider or was I asked to consider my influences. I taught high school English for 10 years, and while I do recognize the glamorized lifestyle of teachers portrayed in Hollywood films, I can say with conviction that the Hollywood-teacher films did positively influence and help shape my teaching philosophy. One such film is *Dangerous Minds* (Bruckheimer et al., 1995). This film depicts the events of a retired US Marine turned teacher, LouAnne Johnson, following her through her trials and tribulations as she struggles to deal with troublesome students and an underfunded and unsupportive school system. There are some underlying issues that could be contested about this film, such as the “attempts to represent ‘whiteness’ as an archetype of rationality, authority, and cultural standards...[proposing] a mix of compassion and consumerism as the pedagogical solution to motivating teenagers who have long given up on schooling as either relevant or meaningful to their lives” (Giroux, 1997, p. 46). However, it is these issues that can influence teacher candidates' perspectives on teaching, and is worth teasing out by providing opportunities of reflections in teacher education programs. With any film, some may focus on the implicit, problematic issues in *Dangerous Minds*. However, some of these issues may not be far from the truth.

In the opening scenes of the film, Johnson is dressed in a fine tweed outfit, her hair pinned back, and she herself is filled with high hopes and expectations as she starts on her first day of teaching. However, she enters unknown territory. The school is located in the inner city, with students coming from unstable home lives, experiencing poverty and gang life, and whose goals do not necessarily include doing well in school. There is a clear difference between Johnson's life and the lives of her students, and this is something she must deal with as a teacher. Likewise, I am a middle-class Canadian-born Korean who is fortunate enough to come from a loving and supportive home, who lived in a major city, and who has been privileged to have access to a good education. However, when I started teaching, I was indeed the odd one out, much like Johnson. The school was

located in a community where a number of students' first language was not English, many did not hail from affluent families, many students in my classes had little desire to do well in school, and some were a part of gang life. One of my students attended school simply because it was part of his conditions of parole from juvenile detention. While the school did offer a variety of levels of courses, I was teaching a non-academic Grade 11 English class that represented a good mix of the community demographic.

Johnson's class greets her with glares and rude comments, and ignores her presence. To discipline a student's inappropriate comments toward her, she writes his name on the board, the class laughs at her, and she leaves the room. However, she is determined. Overnight, she attempts to find a way to get the students' attention, mockingly laughs at a theoretical book on assertive disciplining, and eventually thinks of a solution. The next day, her attire and demeanour are different, and she is able to connect to her students by referring to her former life as a Marine and providing a karate demonstration. She then further engages the students by giving them all an A-grade. Johnson is honestly blunt with her students, but caring and compassionate at the same time, and makes the effort to connect to them and to know them beyond the classroom, to understand their lives. Toward the end of the film, the students have gained much respect for Johnson. Due to an unfortunate event, Johnson tells her class she is leaving. The class is confused and challenges her; one student says, "If you love us so much, and you're so interested in us graduating, how come you choose to leave?" By the end of the film, the students have convinced her not to leave, because they need her, because, as one student says, she is their beacon of light.

At first, I too found it difficult to connect with my students who completed just enough work to pass. They were unmotivated and school was merely a place to socialize with their friends. I realized right away that what I was taught in my teacher education program was not going to fit well with these students. But I was determined. I had to start from scratch. I had to adjust the amount of homework I assigned to my students, classroom detentions were not going to work, and occasionally using shock value and being blunt was necessary. Sometimes, much like in the film, this was something as simple as saying I believed the students could do well in my course. One student responded to this by stating: "We can't do anything. We're stupid, that's why we're in this class." This student was likely one of the brightest in the class. And so I responded by saying: "That's bullshit and you know it." That was the one and only time I swore; it was my first year of

teaching and I was terrified of being reprimanded, but during this moment of frustration, I could not help it. Fortunately for me, it worked out. He and the rest of the class knew I spoke the truth, and started completing assignments with a higher calibre of work. On the very last day, this student came to me, shook my hand, and thanked me for a great class.

I had watched *Dangerous Minds* when I was a high school student and I admired Johnson's will to connect to her students, her tenacity and willingness to be a good teacher. However, upon entering my teacher education program, I did not think I would ever be teaching a class like Johnson's because it was a Hollywood film, but mostly because I was naïve about various teaching environments I may have to experience. Looking back on the film now as an experienced teacher I can see many parallels, as noted above, with my first year of teaching, as well as during the rest of my teaching career. Other examples are when Johnson motivates her students by offering chocolate bars and inviting them to dinner at a fancy restaurant. While some may see these strategies as bribes or consumerist pedagogy (having dinner with students is unlikely due to bureaucratic red tape), sometimes these types of goals are necessary. I did not give out chocolate bars on a regular basis as rewards, but occasionally, after a long week or month of hard work, I would reward my students with cookies or donuts. At other times, my class with students who were struggling the most would hand in their work and, if they had all achieved a grade of 70% or higher (which was what was agreed upon by the class), then I would give them treats. These are strategies that were never taught in textbooks, were never discussed in class, and, if they were brought up in class, we were often warned to avoid them. However, having had the opportunity to watch a film like *Dangerous Minds* and to observe Johnson's techniques and strategies might have proven useful in discussing the advantages and disadvantages, while also reflecting on when such strategies, such as offering treats, might be beneficial and how to implement these strategies so as to not use them as a crutch. Thus, if I could have had serious, critical reflective moments about the influences of teacher films on my perceptions of teaching and what it means to be a good teacher, it would have been helpful, and it may have lessened the shock of entering an unexpected classroom environment. A reflective space to ponder about teacher films is necessary to guide teacher candidates in aligning their understandings of teaching, but also as a way to open discussions about various expectations and confrontations with the reality of teaching (Delamater, 2015).

In *Dangerous Minds*, Johnson's discourse is that of wanting to save her students, to help them strive for a better life. One specific event is when Johnson learns there is a high chance one student, Emilio, is targeted and will be shot. She opens her home as a safe haven and eventually persuades him to go to the principal and ask for help. While he agrees, unfortunately, his pleas are not heard and he is shot to death. Some may view this scene as extremely exaggerated, as an unrealistic part of teaching, especially having a student stay at a teacher's home. However, what this scene does show is how the student trusts the teacher enough to not only stay at her house, but also to heed her advice. This scene in particular would offer many significant opportunities for teacher candidates to reflect on their role beyond the teacher, as someone who may be the only adult role model in a student's life and/or someone who they can reach out to for help.

During my career I did want to save some of my students: those students who lived in the bleakest of conditions, but found the joy and kindness in any situation or were driven to do everything they could to get out. These students demonstrated such drive and resilience that I tried to do everything in my power to help them find a better life for themselves after high school. But generally, I knew I could not do more than be a good teacher for them. While not the same as Johnson, I did have a student confide in me that her father was abusing her. We went through all the right steps, and at the end of the day, this student was told she had to go back home, where her father would be, and act like nothing happened so in-home investigations could occur. I was sick to my stomach. I wanted to bring her home with me. I even asked my principal, but he said no. I did not get a lot of sleep that night. Fortunately, in this case, everything was resolved. While Johnson's situation may appear to be greatly exaggerated in an effort to increase box office numbers, it is often not too far from the truth. Thus, again, inviting teacher candidates to draw upon representations of teachers in film or to even view teacher films in class can provide invaluable opportunities for pre-service teachers to reflect on and examine how these films shape their beliefs about teaching before, during, and after practicum experiences to help guide them into being a teacher in their own classrooms.

Delamater (2015) had teacher candidates view various teacher films during a course, which were supported by articles and theoretical frameworks. Candidates were required to reflect on these films during class discussion as well as through written reflective assignments. By the end of the course, one candidate wrote:

The best part about that film class is that it gave each of us an opportunity to not only reflect on how Hollywood views education but how we view education. And, I'd never really taken a chance to reflect on how I understand education and what I want to be in it...but through discussing some of the films, I learned what a good teacher really is...it just kind of made me rethink, and it gave purpose to my own understanding of why I wanted to be in education. (p. 10)

The exact influence of Hollywood films on teachers, both pre-service teachers and future teachers, cannot be fully known. However, what is important to acknowledge is that these types of films do have some impact on teacher candidates. In a similar study, Klein and Haltinerr (2012) found that teacher candidates' "responses regarding film pedagogy were favourable; they appreciated seeing examples of teaching philosophies in action and learning about teaching through engaging stories" (p. 16). Thus, it is important for teacher education programs to "create intentional, programmed space for this kind of reflection" (Delamater, 2015, p. 11).

### **Carl Leggo's Responses to *The English Teacher***

Each year I teach several dozen more teacher candidates as they complete their Bachelor of Education degrees and prepare to be teachers. By the end of the second week in the Bachelor of Education program, the teacher candidates are always overwhelmed with how much they need to learn in order to be effective teachers. Like a drumming chorus that punctuates their days, they are overwhelmed by the proliferating facts, skills, concepts, strategies, expectations, philosophies, and paradigms that are all equally clamouring for attention, all equally essential to any hope of success.

In all my work with teacher candidates, I remember my own Bachelor of Education studies, and my teaching practicum, and the nine years of secondary school teaching that occupied most of my 20s and a slice of my 30s. I remember the first class I taught during a practicum assignment. My school advisor invited me to teach two poems about snakes, one by Emily Dickinson and the other by D. H. Lawrence. I prepared with film strips, colourful pictures of snakes from *National Geographic*, intriguing biological facts about snakes, copious notes on the symbolism, themes, and imagery of the two poems, and questions to stimulate discussion. At the end of the lesson, I felt confident that I had

presented the poems in creative ways, and that the students were engaged in a worthwhile learning experience. After the students left the classroom, the teacher advisor glowered and barked, “I can’t believe it. What do they teach you at the university?” I was shocked. I anticipated that all my thoughtful planning and diligent effort would be rewarded with copious compliments. Instead, the teacher advisor breathed menacingly, “You did not even mention the oxymoron in the first poem.” At the time, I didn’t even know what an *oxymoron* was, but I couldn’t tell the teacher advisor. I said nothing. At the beginning of my teaching career, in my early twenties, I learned an important lesson: I will never be able to hold enough facts and information in my head to know everything that might be useful to know as a teacher.

In my work with teacher candidates I constantly live a dilemma. Teacher candidates express a pressing practical agenda: What do I need to know in order to succeed as a teacher? I wonder if they see the teacher in the image of a comic book hero with a utility belt replete with all the tools they will need for every contingency and emergency. While I do not diminish my professional responsibility to prepare teacher candidates with practical strategies and experiences, my main response is to encourage teacher candidates to live creatively in the pedagogic world of students and teachers. I encourage them to consider the role of passion, love, hope, and vocation in their life stories. I invite them to live poetically.

The film *The English Teacher* (Despres et al., 2013) is both evocative and provocative. In the way of many stories, the narrative of *The English Teacher* is hauntingly resonant with many of my own experiences as an English teacher. Linda Sinclair is idealistic, but she is certainly not idealized. The film opens with an exterior shot of a high school and a school bus. The camera then pans inside the school where the hallway is chaotic with students at the end of their school day. An off-screen narrator introduces the viewer to Linda Sinclair, “one forty-five, unwed English teacher with no prospect of marriage, a rather ordinary life, one of discipline, frugality, small indignities, modest hopes, and disappointments.” Linda is presented as a romantic who, as a sensitive child, found her sanctuary in literature. As a teacher, her life purpose is to stoke “the flame of literary passion in young minds.” One of Linda’s favourite students, Jason Sherwood, returns to his hometown of Kingston, Pennsylvania. Jason has been pursuing creative writing in New York City, and he has returned with a play script titled “The Chrysalis” that nobody has yet accepted for performance. He is disappointed. His hopes for a life as a writer are

fading. Linda offers to read the script, loves it, and agrees to produce it at her high school. Linda is determined that “Jason will have the life he deserves as an artist.”

The film narrative unfolds with many twists and turns. In one pivotal scene, Linda and Jason are alone in Linda’s classroom. Jason cries with an abiding sense of immature frustration that he will have to abandon his dreams of writing and go to law school. Linda hugs him, Jason kisses Linda, Linda momentarily resists, then they engage in an impetuous sexual romp on Linda’s classroom desk while the camera focuses on the portraits of famous, always stern-looking writers pinned like a fresco around the borders of the classroom. Following this inciting event, everything begins to fall apart with a darkly comic, often ironic, sometimes slapstick energy that includes many discussions about the inappropriateness of the ending of Jason’s script for a school play, as well as jealousies, conflicts, angst, confusion, and upset. But in the end, everything works out. *The English Teacher* is a comedy—at times a rather dark and unsettling comedy, full of irony, but definitely a comedy with a happy ending. And that is probably the main reason why I like the film. After a life of ordinariness and discipline, Linda makes rash decisions, lies vociferously, and blames others shamelessly, but in the messiness of her passions for literature and writing, she learns to imagine other possibilities.

Near the end of the film when everything seems to be falling apart, Jason angrily asks Linda: “What makes you think you have the answers? I mean who are you, anyway? You’re just some lonely old woman who gets a power trip lecturing teenagers. Do you really think you affect their lives by reading them Emerson? You’re a joke. They don’t respect you. The second they finish high school they forget you.” Jason is wounded and cruel, and his speech is mean and hurtful, but he does ask a question that English teachers need to ask often: “Do you really think you affect their lives by reading them Emerson?” That is certainly my hope, and I am confident it is the hope of many English teachers. It is also a hope that should be questioned. Frequently.

When Jason’s father, a doctor, learns about Linda’s actions, he comments: “For an advanced English teacher you seem awfully naïve to me, or is your head so full of these stories you don’t know the difference between fact and fiction?” I am not sure that the difference between fact and fiction can be readily determined, but the question inspires Linda to realize that she is living in stories that can be revisited and revised. Jason has written a play about family dynamics and relationships that are full of angst and anger and despair. In the beginning, Linda is eager to support Jason’s dark conclusion, but

eventually she realizes that the tragic end is not the only possibility. She challenges Jason: “Can you imagine a different ending where everybody doesn’t die?” Jason responds, “No.” Linda holds this tangled mess in her hands, and finds a message of confident hope that extends far beyond the simple or stereotypical solution. She rewrites the end of the play, not only because the school administrator insists, but because she recognizes that a different ending is necessary. With ironic wisdom, Linda is most successfully a teacher when she questions and rewrites Jason’s ending.

I readily recognize myself in Linda Sinclair. As a young English teacher, I was filled with a zeal for nurturing a love of literature and writing in young people. And after 35 years of teaching, I haven’t changed much. Like Linda Sinclair, I remember countless hours spent with books in romantic wonder and heartfelt entanglement. Years ago, I taught a Grade 10 class about the Romantic poets, including Shelley, Byron, Keats, and Wordsworth. As I extolled the rebellious imagination of the Romantic poets with growing passion, one student, Kirby who often seemed disconnected, called out: “You are like the Romantic poets, Sir!” It was a tender moment when I realized that my passion was understood by this young man, whom I didn’t think had heard much of what I said.

Like Linda Sinclair, my commitment to books has always been rooted in a deep conviction that is passionately personal, pedagogical, and political. In reading literature I learn about the world, and literature gives me hope and confidence that books can be effective in transforming the world. Brueggemann (2001) reminds us “to recognize how singularly words, speech, language, and phrase shape consciousness and define reality” (p. 64). Brueggemann presents a compelling understanding of how political consciousness and transformative living are connected to language and literature that are infused with imagination: “The evocation of an alternative reality consists at least in part in the battle for language and the legitimization of a new rhetoric” (p. 18). Literature is never didactic. Literary imagination does not tell us how to live. Instead, literature invites us to question our living experiences and to imagine other possibilities.

At the beginning of his remarkable book, *Writing at the End of the World*, Miller (2005) asks with rhetorical and compelling urgency: “Why go on teaching when everything seems to be falling apart? Why read when the world is overrun with books? Why write when there’s no hope of ever gaining an audience?” (p. x). He then presents an eloquent rationale for the significance of the work of English teachers. As Miller claims, “posing such questions aloud is not a sign of despair; it’s a way to start a conversation

about how and why reading, writing, and teaching the literate arts can be made to continue to matter in the twenty-first century” (p. x). So, encouraged by Miller, I continue to participate in that conversation. And, like Linda Sinclair, I recognize that reading literature teaches us how to live in words and the world. Like Malone (2003), I read in order “to stay alive, to be as fully alive as I can be” (p. 32). No single activity has consumed more of my life than reading. My earliest memories include books, especially the longing for books. Malone claims that “reading helps us, helps me, to love” (p. 177). So, reading is a way of living and loving in words and in the world. As Edmundson (2004) claims, “the test of a book lies in its power to map or transform a life” (p. 129). Literature invites us to live in words and live in the world in ongoing processes of learning and composing. Linda Sinclair understands that “changing the world is hard work,” but she still needs to learn that the heart of pedagogy is questioning. Literature provides the language we need in order to grow critical, subversive, interrogative, skeptical, ironic, visionary, even prophetic, about our ways of being in the world and other possibilities for being in the world. Edmundson writes about the need to acknowledge our ignorance, our confusion, in order to enter into a place of learning and knowing. And, as we devote ourselves to living and questioning, we also learn to play. After her fall from the idealistic and maternal teacher, Linda recovers her sense of who she is. Andrews (2006) recommends approaching life with wonder, “to never feel that we have the final answer, but to keep searching” and “never close yourself off to a new form of wisdom or aliveness” (p. 152). Andrews understands how “judgmental people don’t laugh. Rigid moralists don’t laugh. Extremists don’t laugh. Most right-wingers have phony smiles and wooden faces” (pp. 129–130). She promotes joy as “a source of subversion” (p. 132).

Like Linda Sinclair, I learned by making mistakes, lots of mistakes. Near the end of the film the familiar narrator’s voice that introduced viewers to Linda reports: “Linda Sinclair resumed her life as a school teacher though she brought a new modern approach to her craft.” In a satisfying comic circle, the film begins with Linda’s teaching of Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*, and extolling the virtues of romantic love expressed in the sacrifice of Sydney Carton. At the end of the film, Linda invites her students to write a new ending to *A Tale of Two Cities*: “let your imaginations run wild.” I can’t think of better advice for all teachers, at the beginning of their careers as well as nearing the conclusion of them.

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## Conclusion

As two veteran secondary English teachers and educators in teacher education programs, the opportunity to view (or re-view) the films *Dangerous Minds* and *The English Teacher* has brought about different moments of realization. The most prominent is to consider how much these films have affected (consciously or not) our own teaching practices—both past and present. In looking at *Dangerous Minds*, Claire was able to draw inspiration from the teacher and her methods and, to some degree, was able to implement similar approaches in her teaching. After a number of years of teaching, Claire was also able to see similarities between her own situation as a new teacher and the struggles and turmoil that LouAnne Johnson had experienced. Similarly, with *The English Teacher*, Carl observed parallels as both a new and experienced teacher who wanted to help his students, who wanted to share his passion for literature, and who, like Linda Sinclair, also learned from his mistakes. Teachers are always in process.

We have become especially interested in how taking time to critically reflect on the fictional narratives of films can guide teachers to find what Tomlinson (2007) calls “balance-as-control,” which “is not about coming to rest.” Instead, it is “a process of constant reflexive *re-balancing* [emphasis added] in the face of contingency” (p. 158). According to Tomlinson, balance is “taking positive control of life” by being “capably and sensitively attuned to our fast-moving environment” (p. 158). He especially promotes the need to be creatively “flexible, responsive and resilient” (p. 159). Instead of being filled with more knowledge of curricular disciplines and psychological development and strategies for classroom management, teachers need to foster healthy and hopeful ways for living in the midst of the countless challenges that compose daily experiences of teaching and learning. Films present narratives, texts, characters, conflicts, hopes, experiences, emotions, and possibilities that evoke and provoke us to reflect and interrogate from many different perspectives. All of us who are committed to education ought to go to the movies more often!

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