

Representations of Education in HBO's *The Wire*, Season 4

By James Trier

The Wire is a crime drama that aired for five seasons on the Home Box Office (HBO) cable channel from 2002-2008. The entire series is set in Baltimore, Maryland, and as Kinder (2008) points out, "Each season *The Wire* shifts focus to a different segment of society: the drug wars, the docks, city politics, education, and the media" (p. 52). The series explores, in Lanahan's (2008) words,

an increasingly brutal and coarse society through the prism of Baltimore, whose postindustrial capitalism has decimated the working-class wage and sharply divided the haves and have-nots. The city's bloated bureaucracies sustain the inequality. The absence of a decent public-school education or meaningful political reform leaves an unskilled underclass trapped between a rampant illegal drug economy and a vicious "war on drugs." (p. 24)

My main purpose in this article is to introduce season four of *The Wire*—the "education" season—to readers who have either never seen any of the series, or who have seen some of it but not season four. Specifically, I will attempt to show that season four holds great pedagogical potential for academics in education.¹ First, though, I will present examples of the critical acclaim that *The Wire* received throughout its run, and I will introduce the backgrounds of the creators and main writers of the series, David Simon and Ed Burns.

James Trier is an associate professor in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

The Wire: The Best Show on Television (Ever)

The Wire drew much critical acclaim, being described as “the most aggressively experimental program on television” (Kehr, 2005); as “one of the most demanding and thought-provoking series ever to grace television” (Lowry, 2006); and as “a masterpiece” that is “one of the great achievements in television artistry” (Goodman, 2006). This kind of acclaim is exemplified by Jacob Weisberg (2006), who, in a frequently-cited column, described *The Wire* as “surely the best TV show ever broadcast in America,” adding: “No other program has ever done anything remotely like what this one does, namely to portray the social, political, and economic life of an American city with the scope, observational precision, and moral vision of great literature.”

Weisberg’s comparison of *The Wire* to great literature derives from the vision of the series creator, David Simon, who conceived the show as “a visual novel” (Rothkerch, 2002), and this novelistic quality has been remarked on by many who have written about the series, such as Lanahan (2008), who described what Simon was doing with the series as follows:

Simon was writing a televised novel, and a big one. Innumerable subplots came and went, and main characters disappeared from the show for several episodes at a time. Nothing ever resolved itself in an hour, and there were no good guys or bad guys. All were individuals constrained by their institutions, driven to compromise between conscience, greed, and ambition. Facets of their characters emerged slowly over time. They spoke in the sometimes-unintelligible vernaculars of their subcultures. All of this made unprecedented demands on viewers and provided immense reward to those who stuck around. A righteous anger at the failure of our social institutions drives *The Wire*, but the passionate ideas that fuel it are hidden several layers down. (p. 24)²

David Simon and Ed Burns are the originating sources of what Lanahan describes as “righteous anger” and “passionate ideas”—and the sources, too, of the deep knowledge and the multilayered experiences that manifest themselves in what Weisberg (2006) described as the realistic portrayal of “the social, political, and economic life of an American city.” Simon—the show’s creator, producer, and chief writer—grew up in Washington, D.C., attended the University of Maryland, and became a crime reporter for the *Baltimore Sun*, where he worked from 1983 until 1995. In the early 1980s, Simon met Ed Burns, who would eventually become his main collaborator on various projects. Burns, a native of Baltimore, served in Viet Nam and, upon returning from the war, attended Loyola College in Baltimore and earned a degree in history (with a minor in philosophy). Upon graduating, Burns joined the Baltimore police force in 1971 and became a homicide detective, as well as one of Simon’s main sources in Simon’s reporting of crime in Baltimore.

In 1991, Simon published his first book, *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets*, which became the basis for the television crime series *Homicide* (1993-1999), and for which Simon was one of the writers. Also in 1991, Ed Burns retired from

the police department after 20 years, and Simon approached Burns, according to Wilson (2008), “with an idea that would probably repulse most retired detectives: spending a year on the streets of a drug-infested ghetto, chronicling the lives of the users and the dealers—the very people he used to lock up—for a book that became *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood* in 1997.” (HBO subsequently adapted the book into a mini-series in 2000.) After finishing the research for *The Corner*, Simon (who was on a leave of absence from the *Sun* to work on *The Corner*) eventually (and bitterly) took a buyout from the newspaper as part of the paper’s downsizing. And Burns then became a teacher, spending four years teaching geography in a middle school in Baltimore, and another three years as a high school teacher in a magnet school. Eventually, Simon came knocking again on Burns’ door, and the two conceptualized the series *The Wire*, for which they served as the main co-writers during all five seasons. (After *The Wire* ended, the two also collaborated on the HBO mini-series *Generation Kill*.)³

Now that I have presented examples of the critical acclaim that *The Wire* has drawn and described the backgrounds of Simon and Burns, I will explain why I think season four of the series holds great pedagogical potential for academics in education. To do this, I am imagining a pedagogical scenario in which all of season four would be a required “text” for a course.⁴ An essential point that I need to make clear is that in this article, I will not divulge any fatal “spoilers”—i.e., information that reveals how storylines end and what ultimately happens to the main characters. My reason for doing this is that I am imagining readers who are like me when it comes to their viewing pleasures. I am a hardcore purist who vigilantly guards against being exposed to spoilers of films or television programs that I plan to see. So, if I had never seen *The Wire* and came across an article that included spoilers, I would not have read it until after I had viewed all five seasons of the series. I did not want to create that very situation with potential readers of this article.

***The Wire* as a Required Text for a Course**

In this scenario, perhaps the course is an “Introduction to Schooling” course, or a “Foundations of Education” course, or a methods course (all within a teacher education program). What matters is not the type of imagined course, but the fact that season four of *The Wire* would be assigned as a required text. In other words, I will not be conceptualizing the curricular make-up of the whole course. Rather, I will be discussing a few pedagogical possibilities if season four became a required text, with one episode assigned for viewing each week throughout the course. (So the 13 hours of content from season four would fit perfectly into a typical 15-week semester course.)

I want to acknowledge that assigning an episode each week might seem like a pedagogical decision that takes precious seminar time away from addressing “the basics” of a typical education course, including state credentialing requirements.

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That is why I would assign the episodes to be viewed outside of seminar. Either each student would buy the box set of DVDs for season four to view the episodes on his or her own, or students could form groups for viewing the episodes. The box set costs about the same as a required text for a course, and the time to view an episode would take about the same time (maybe less) to closely read a dense academic article. I would add that viewing a media text such as *The Wire* would almost certainly be a highly engaging experience for students. Also, the pedagogical decision to take up a media text as a serious text that is equal in importance to academic print texts enacts a central cultural studies practice of challenging the distinction made between “high” and “low” texts, so that the “low” text of popular culture is treated as being as important as the “high” text of academic print readings (see Fiske, 1987, 1989a, 1989b). Most important, though, is that season four of *The Wire* can create pedagogical opportunities to address many of “the basics” of an education course, as I hope to show in the rest of this article.

One obvious major effect of taking up the entirety of season four is that all of the main storylines can be fully analyzed from beginning to end. The other major effect is that the many interconnections, intersections, and collisions between the educational, political, social, legal, and “streets/corner” storylines can be made. Given my main purpose in this article, I will go into more detail about the two educational storylines and follow up with briefer summaries of and articulations with some other main storylines. Specifically, in the sections that follow, I will combine partial discussions of the storylines with one or more suggestions for how the storylines can be pedagogically engaged.

Prez and the “Stations of the Cross”

One main education storyline of season four involves a former police detective named Roland Pryzbylewski, known to everyone as Prez. The character of Prez (who is White) reaches back to season one, when he revealed himself (during the first three seasons) on many occasions to be totally ill-suited (even a danger to himself and others) as a street detective. At the end of season three, Prez had resigned from the police force, but in season four Prez resurfaces in the first episode (“Boys of Summer”) when he goes to Tilghman Middle School on Baltimore’s west side, where he meets with Principal Claudell Withers (African American) and Assistant Principal Marcia Donnelly (White). Prez explains that he has a temporary teacher’s license, that he is a math teacher, and that he used to be a Baltimore police officer. He is hired on the spot, which begins his teaching career.

Nearly all of the students at Tilghman Middle School are African Americans, and a storyline involving a new White teacher seems on the surface as though *The Wire* might present the kind of “teacher savior” narrative told in such films as *Blackboard Jungle*, *To Sir with Love*, *Dangerous Minds*, *Lean on Me*, *Stand and Deliver*, *Freedom Writers*, and *The Ron Clark Story*. James Hynes (2006), in an

article about *The Wire*, offered this description of the basic storyline of most teacher savior movies:

We all know the Stations of the Cross for the inspirational-teacher film by now: [1] the naive young teacher's disastrous first class [*Up the Down Staircase*]; [2] the staff meeting that devolves into a bitch session about unruly students, pointless paperwork and the idiotic directives of the administration [*Teachers*]; [3] the embittered veteran teacher condescending to the idealistic rookie in the teacher's lounge [*Freedom Writers*]; [4] a climactic confrontation that either threatens violence or delivers it [*Blackboard Jungle*]; [5] and a final, tear-jerking moment of redemption as [6] the teach[er] finally reaches the kids [*Dangerous Minds*].

Hynes then observes: "Some of these moments show up even in *The Wire*," and this is true.

For example, in episode two ("Soft Eyes"), Prez attends a faculty orientation "that devolves into a bitch session" (cliché 2).⁶ The faculty meeting is led by a cheery woman giving a PowerPoint presentation about the acronym "IALAC" ("I Am Loveable and Capable"), which the presenter has the teachers say aloud in unison. Shifting from this hokey self-affirmation theme, the presenter addresses discipline issues, observing: "Another hot zone in the classroom is the pencil sharpener, where children tend to congregate." The orientation is totally irrelevant to the gritty realities of teaching at Tilghman Middle School, and the teachers rebel by mocking the presenter and disrupting the orientation as the camera focuses closely on Prez, who has the look of someone suddenly bewildered as to just what he has gotten himself into.

In another scene (also in episode two), four female veteran teachers school "the idealistic rookie" Prez in the teachers' lounge (cliché 3). They explain the necessity of enforcing the same class rules: double-space papers, use the same heading on all papers, keep the windows closed, and tell students exactly what to do. At one point, Prez asks if they can agree to not have kids chew gum, which makes the veterans smile at his naivety. The team leader, Mrs. Sampson, then advises Prez: "There's a lot to learn, but for now, build in lots of activities in your lesson plans. You can't have enough. You keep them busy, you keep them off guard." As the veteran teachers leave for class, one tells Prez, "You need soft eyes," which Prez doesn't understand (it means to acquire an understanding of the big picture).

In episode three ("Home Rooms"), we witness "the naïve young teacher's disastrous first class" (cliché 1)—actually we see Prez's disastrous first days of teaching. During homeroom, a student named Randy steals Prez's hall passes, and Prez gives lunch tickets to the wrong students. Prez only gets the lunch tickets back when Mrs. Sampson intervenes. Then, during Prez's first period, we see "a confrontation . . . that threatens violence" when Prez's lesson is disrupted by two girls who almost come to blows. Prez can't stop the confrontation, which is diffused only when Mrs. Sampson (again) appears. Students immediately quiet down and return to their seats. And the next day (same episode), the confrontation that threatened

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violence becomes violence delivered (cliché 4) when one of the confrontational girls suddenly lunges at the other, slashing her face with a razor, causing her to fall to the floor as blood streams from the wound. Amid the chaos, Prez is stunned and paralyzed, and Mrs. Sampson again arrives to handle the situation, physically subduing the girl with the razor, commanding a student down to the office to call 911, and telling everyone to get in their seats.

The next day (episode four, "Refugees"), the disastrous beginnings of Prez's first days of teaching continue (cliché 4). When Prez attempts to talk to students about the violent incident, one student interrupts by saying he heard a rumor that Prez was a police officer, which breeds many shouted questions, including one from a student named Namond: "Yo, Mr. P., you ever been shot, like"—Namond then simulates being shot and falls to the floor as other boys gather around him and simulate kicking and shooting him. As Prez rushes over to the boys, Randy (mentioned above) slips out of the classroom. And in episode five ("Alliances"), Prez attempts to establish a set of rules, but Namond at one point mouths off, which causes Prez to give him a detention, which Namond responds to by getting out of his seat and yelling, "Fuck you, Prezbo!" Prez orders Namond out of the room, and though Namond leaves, he fires off this parting shot to Prez: "Get your police stick out your desk and beat me. You know you fucking want to."

These descriptions of selected scenes from the first five episodes reveal that the Prez storyline shares most of the clichés that Hynes (2006) described as making up the basic plot of teacher savior films; and in episodes six ("Margin of Error") and seven ("Unto Others"), we also see Prez living up to another cliché when he "finally reaches the kids," gaining their trust and respect (cliché 6).

Pedagogical Suggestions

At this point, I want to suggest that one analysis that students in an education course can undertake concerning the Prez storyline is to examine it according to the clichés (the "stations" or "moments") that Hynes (2006) identifies in the above passage. I suggest three related activities that would take place after students have viewed the first five episodes of the season.⁷

For the first activity, students would be given Hynes's passage about the "Stations of the Cross" and asked to discuss which clichés the Prez storyline has lived up to in the first five episodes (they are likely to be able to easily recognize the clichés I have described above).

The second activity would be to have students form small groups for the purpose of viewing and analyzing (as an assignment) some of the teacher savior/hero films mentioned above (*Freedom Writers*, *Dangerous Minds*, etc.). Hynes's "Stations of the Cross" passage could serve as a critical lens for structuring the groups' analyses. The groups would then present their analyses of the teacher savior films to the rest of the class during a seminar, showing selected scenes featuring the clichés in the films. The overall purpose of this activity would be for students to become familiar

with the clichés of the teacher savior films as they have played out in school films over many decades, which would set up the next activity.

The third activity would be to have students analyze the rest of the Prez storyline to discover if it mirrors and reinscribes the teacher savior narrative all the way through, by culminating in “a final, tear-jerking moment of redemption” (cliché 5, which is the central cliché of them all)—or if it departs from that central cliché, and if so, in what ways it does so. Because I have conceptualized incorporating season four of *The Wire* into an education course within a teacher education program, preservice teachers can be asked to articulate their reactions to how the Prez storyline plays out in the end. Such articulations can then become valuable discussion material during seminars. For example, if the storyline reinscribes the teacher savior narrative, does it do so in a more (arguably) realistic way than the typical teacher savior film? Conversely, if the storyline departs or subverts the teacher savior myth, what effects (positive? negative? a bit of both?) does such a counter-narrative have on preservice teachers?

These activities (related to the teacher savior narrative) are admittedly only a few of any number of others that can be conceptualized about the Prez storyline. As readers will discover when they view season four, the Prez storyline also offers representations related to gender and race, including Prez’s relation to the veteran female teachers of color (particularly Mrs. Sampson, a very strong pedagogical figure); representations related to teacher-administrator power dynamics, which occur between Prez and his most immediate administrative superior, Assistant Principal Marcia Donnelly; representations related to systemic institutional pressures (as I discuss below); and many others. I am certain that readers will be able to conceptualize powerful pedagogical activities and projects related to these and other representations offered by the Prez storyline.

“Bunny” Colvin, Parenti, and the Experimental Pilot Program

Another main education storyline concerns Dr. David Parenti, a professor of sociology at the University of Maryland, and retired police major Howard “Bunny” Colvin. Parenti has a grant to study violent offenders, and he needs a field researcher who can help him find subjects on the streets to interview and observe, with the goal of developing an intervention program for these subjects. A friend of Bunny Colvin’s persuades him to meet with Parenti about being the field researcher. At first, Colvin is skeptical because Parenti wants subjects between 18 to 21 years old, which Colvin knows is too old because men that age are already too far into “the game” for any intervention strategies. Despite his reservations, though, Colvin agrees to work with Parenti and is eventually able to show him that the best population to work with is kids of middle school age. As it turns out, the narrative steers them to Tilghman Middle School, where they are given permission to design

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an experimental educational program for students who are especially disruptive behavioral problems in their classes. So this education storyline concerns how the pilot program develops throughout the season.

A Hamsterdam for Tilghman?

The first stage of the pilot project involves Colvin doing some observational research by sitting in on classes and walking the halls (episode four, "Refugees"). In an important scene set in the teachers' lounge (episode five, "Alliances"), Colvin explains to Dr. Parenti and Mrs. Sampson what his observations have taught him about the school, as well as his idea for the pilot program:

Colvin: Seems to me there are two kinds of kids walking in this building: stoop kids, corner kids.

Parenti: Excuse me?

Colvin: Well, stoop kids. They're the ones that stay on the front steps when their parents tell them. The others go down to the corners.

Mrs. Sampson: They can't sit still in the class. The others can, and do.

Colvin: So, we separate the two.

Parenti: That's tracking.

Colvin: Excuse me?

Parenti: Tracking students—it's a nasty phrase in educational circles. It, it refers to the grouping of children based on expected performance—

Colvin: Well what's wrong with it?

Mrs. Sampson: It says you have reduced expectations for certain students, that you expect less from them academically.

Colvin: So you pretend to teach all these kids, and truth is you ain't teaching any of them. But what if the stoop kids could be in classrooms where there was no disruptions?

Parenti: And the corner kids?

Colvin: I mean they're the ones you're after, right? I mean that's why you got the grant money?

Mrs. Sampson: As long as this doesn't involve warehousing children, I'm for anything that allows me to do my job. Every teacher here will tell you the same. The trick for you is to come up with a program that actually addresses itself to the corner kids.

Parenti: I don't know—if we start pulling kids out of regular classes, won't they be stigmatized?

Colvin: It's not a stigma being booted out of class every other day?

Parenti: Question is, how do we identify the corner kids?

Mrs. Sampson: That won't be a problem.

Parenti: Ok.

Soon after this scene comes the one in which Prez kicks Namond out of class. In that scene, Namond leaves the classroom angrily, and Colvin, Parenti, and Mrs. Sampson happen to be in the hallway. Namond snaps at Parenti, "What the fuck you lookin' at, bitch?" and Colvin remarks that he thinks they have found one of the corner kids for their program.

With the program conceptualized and permission received from Principal Withers, Colvin and Parenti rely on Mrs. Sampson to identify the most disruptive eighth-grade students as possible candidates for the program. Mrs. Sampson gets input from the teachers, which generates a list of about forty students, from which she recommends ten to start with (see episode five, "Alliances"). In a series of scenes (episode six, "Margin of Error"), Assistant Principal Donnelly enters different classrooms and removes the ten students; among them are three from Prez's class: a girl named Zenobia, a boy named Darnell, and Namond (it is important to note that Prez was unaware that any of his students would become part of the pilot program—the decision was made by others).

Pedagogical Suggestions

One suggestion for engaging students in analyzing the segment of the storyline described above is to introduce an important fact about Colvin's background as a police officer. The subtitle of the above section—"A *Hamsterdam* for Tilghman?"—alludes to season three of *The Wire*. When Colvin was a police major with the Baltimore police, he conducted a radical experiment that Bowden (2008) describes as follows:

In one of the show's most interesting set pieces, a remarkable police major, "Bunny" Colvin, frustrated by the absurdity of the city's useless drug war, conducts a novel experiment. Without the knowledge of his superiors, he effectively legalizes drugs in West Baltimore, creating a mini-Amsterdam, dubbed "Hamsterdam," where all of the corner dealers are allowed to set up shop. By consolidating drug dealing, which he knows he cannot stop anyway, Colvin eliminates the daily turf battles that drive up the murder rates and dramatically improves life in most of his district. Calm returns to terrorized neighborhoods, and his patrolmen, freed from their cars and the endless pursuit of drug-dealing corner boys, return to real police work, walking beats, getting to know the people they serve. (p. 52)

Colvin ended up being forced to retire when the leadership of the police department learned of his experiment (so, like Prez, he is a former cop who resurfaces in season four as an educator at Tilghman Middle School).

One pedagogical suggestion concerning the above quoted passage would be to ask students to draw both comparisons and contrasts between Colvin's "Ham-

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sterdam” experiment and what he is proposing to Dr. Parenti about separating the stoop kids from the corner kids at Tilghman. For example, in one sense, the drug users and dealers in the “Hamsterdam” experiment were “warehoused”—to use Mrs. Sampson’s term—within a confined area, which gives rise to the questions, “Will the students at Tilghman end up being warehoused and written off as a result of Colvin and Parenti’s experimental pilot program?” Or is the program designed to actually engage the students in positive, productive ways—i.e., ways not attempted with the drug users and dealers in the ‘Hamsterdam’ experiment?”

One more pedagogical idea would be to introduce students at this point to the discourse about tracking in public schools, perhaps by assigning still quite relevant articles by Oakes (1987, 1992) about tracking and by Slavin and Madden (1989) and Slavin, Madden, Karweit, Livermon, and Dalton (1990) about at-risk students. Other relevant possibilities include articles by Futrell and Gomez (2008), Heubert (2003), and Schweiker-Marra and Pula (2005). These readings can help frame an activity in which students can be asked to critically evaluate whether or not the pilot program has something about it that does not fit into the descriptions of tracking. These questions might work: Is the pilot program really tracking, or is it something else? If something else, what is it?

One more very important question to pose concerns what effects the removal of the three students from Prez’s class produces on the class atmosphere and on Prez’s teaching.

Getting Ready for Gen Pop

In episode six (“Margin of Error”), we see eight boys and two girls of the pilot program in the room that they will stay in every day. A police officer stands at the doorway. In the room are Colvin, Parenti, a social worker named Miss Mason, and the teacher, named Ms. Duquette, who is a doctoral student in the Psychology Department at the University of Maryland. Throughout the storyline, Ms. Duquette remains absolutely calm and in control.

Mrs. Sampson tells the students they have been identified as having “proven time and again” that they “are not ready for a regular classroom.” She explains further that this is a mandatory program, and that the small class size and special curriculum have the potential to prepare them to become ready to return to the regular classes. To this, Namond observes: “Ready for gen pop. This is prison, yo. And we in solitary and shit.”

In episode seven (“Unto Others”), we see the first day of teaching, which is (like Prez’s was) a predictably rocky one. Namond acts out, throwing a chair, hoping to get suspended, only to learn that nobody gets suspended. Instead, disruptive students are taken to a time-out room with Miss Mason, Colvin, and a police officer. This is what happens to Namond, who at first is defiant but eventually returns to the pilot classroom when he realizes he won’t be suspended.

Despite the raucous beginning, once students see that there is no way out of

the program, they begin to cooperate, though they continue to use profanity and get angry throughout the storyline. What causes a substantive change, however, is that Colvin realizes that the students have to be engaged in ways meaningful to their lives on the streets, and for most of the boys, that means lives as corner boys. So in an important scene in episode eight (“Corner Boys”), we see Colvin ask, “What makes a good corner boy?” Immediately, the students answer in rapid succession: “Keep your eyes open”; “Keep the count straight”; “Don’t trust nobody”; and more. In another scene (days later, it seems), Colvin continues engaging students in talking about the logic of the corner, though now students are taking turns and express well-articulated insights into the machinations of working a corner. Eventually, Colvin has the students get into smaller groups and write up the rules of being a good corner boy. After the class, Ms. Duquette tells Colvin and Parenti that she’s never seen such animated, focused discussions before in a classroom.

As the storyline plays out, Colvin and Ms. Duquette continue to get students to work together in groups. For example, in episode nine (“Know Your Place”), small groups are formed and charged with the task of building a tower out of erector set pieces, without any directions provided. Namond, Zenobia, and Darnell win, and the prize is that Colvin takes them to a Ruth’s Chris restaurant. By this point, most of the students have shown marked improvement in their classroom behavior. However, the night out at dinner doesn’t go well. The students are overwhelmed by the foreign experience of dining in such an upscale restaurant, and by the end of the night they are once again insulting one another and not getting along. In a subsequent scene, the bad experience at the restaurant has become the basis for a role-modeling exercise in which one boy plays the waiter and the other a customer, with the other students looking on.

Pedagogical Suggestion

Along with answering the questions (posed above) related to tracking, at-risk interventions, and warehousing, another related activity to engage students with this storyline would be to have students analyze it for its powerful representations of culturally relevant teaching. I specifically suggest having students read articles by Ladson-Billings (1992, 1995) and then analyzing the storyline for how, in Ladson-Billings’s (1992) words, the teachers engage the students in “the kind of teaching that is designed not merely to fit the school culture to the students’ culture but also to use student culture as the basis for helping students understand themselves and others, structure interactions, and conceptualize knowledge” (p. 314). What student culture, exactly, has Colvin tapped into that pulls the students into the dialogue?

No Child Left Behind:

“It’s a national crime, and we’ll pay for it”

As mentioned earlier, writer Ed Burns taught for years in Baltimore public

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schools, and in an interview with the magazine *Instructor* (2007), Burns expressed what his experience taught him: "Education is our biggest failure as a society. The inequality in our system disadvantages millions of people. It borders on the criminal." Burns elsewhere also singled out what he thinks is among the main reasons for the dire state of education; when the DVD's "Commentary" feature is played for episode one ("Boys of Summer") of the fourth season, we hear Burns remark (near the end) about the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), saying, "It's a national crime, and we'll pay for it."⁸ Series creator David Simon also says that doing the season on education left him "furious" over NCLB. So just as they did in the previous seasons, Simon and Burns built a systemic critique into a season, this time of the social institution of education. Specifically, the critique revolves around the standardized tests necessitated by NCLB.

"Juking the stats"

The issue of standardized testing first surfaces in the Prez storyline in an important scene in episode eight ("Corner Boys"). After Prez experiences success teaching "off the curriculum" by teaching probabilities through dice (episode seven, "Unto Others"), he finds the official math curriculum, which is tied to the state standardized tests, too dry and prescribed. In the key scene, Prez complains in the teachers' lounge to the same four veteran teachers who earlier had schooled him about class rules. At one point, this dialogue takes place:

Mrs. Scott: The thing is, it's your curriculum, and you have to stick to it.

Prez: I can't. It's absurd.

Mrs. Scott: You have to. That test in April is the difference between the state taking over the school or not.⁹

Prez: Maybe the state should.

Mrs. Shapiro: Look, you don't teach math, you teach the test. North Avenue is all about the Leave No Child Behind stuff getting spoon-fed.

Prez: And what do they learn?

Mrs. Sampson: Find some middle ground. Everyday, try to do a little for the statewide, and keep a unit problem on the blackboard, for Donnelly, you know, if she comes to visit, she thinks you're on point. The rest of the time, do what you feel like you need to do.

Mrs. Scott: But be careful. You're still on the far side of your evaluation.

Prez: Yeah.

Another teacher (who had given him the "soft eyes" advice) tells him, "The first year isn't about the kids. It's about you surviving."

In another key scene in episode nine ("Know Your Place"), Assistant Principal

Donnelly tells teachers during a faculty meeting that for the next six weeks, they must all teach language arts test-preparation skills, no matter what their subject areas are. In fact, they are to teach the very questions that will be asked on the test. The teachers grumble, and Prez and Mrs. Sampson have this conversation:

Prez: I don't get it. All this so that we score higher on the state tests? [Mrs. Sampson nods yes.] If we're teaching the kids the test questions, what is it we're assessing in that?

Mrs. Sampson: Nothing. It assesses nothing. The test scores go up, they can say the schools are improving. The test scores stay down, they can't.

Prez: Juking the stats.

Mrs. Sampson: Excuse me?

Prez [Referring to his police experience]: Making robberies into larcenies, making rapes disappear. You juke the stats, and majors become colonels.

Also in episode nine, we see Prez leading his listless, uninterested students through a test-prep strategy, and then later in the teachers' lounge he vents to Mrs. Sampson, saying: "To hell with Donnelly and to hell with their statewide test scores. I came here to teach, right?" Mrs. Sampson offers an empathetic smile.

Pedagogical Suggestions

Most preservice teachers at some point, most likely during their student teaching, come face to face with the realities of end-of-year testing. In my experience, I have had mentor teachers take courses back early from the student teachers during student teaching because they (the mentors) needed to do the test prep lessons to ensure the best possible scores. So one inquiry that students could be engaged in would be to keep a journal of how the discourse of standardized testing plays out for them during their student teaching. What do they learn from their mentor teachers and other teachers about their experiences and ways of dealing with standardized testing? Do students hear echoes of Mrs. Sampson's advice to Prez about finding some "middle ground," and if so, what does that "middle ground" look like?

Another way to engage students in the discourse about standardized testing and NCLB would be to assign the book (or selected chapters) titled *Many Children Left Behind* (Meier, et. al., 2004), which would help inform students about the wider national debate that has been going on for years about NCLB.

"We can't lie. Not to them."

The issue of standardized testing and NCLB enters into the Colvin/Parenti storyline in episode ten ("Misgivings"), when Donnelly calls Colvin and Parenti from the pilot classroom to tell them that they must begin preparing their students for the state standardized tests. She also tells them that the Area Superintendent, Mrs. Conway, wants to meet with them. During that meeting, Parenti argues that

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the students aren't going to be able to sit through test-prep lessons, to which Mrs. Conway asks, "So, we're writing them off?" She adds that Colvin and Parenti do not seem to be educating the students but rather socializing them. Parenti gets angry at this, but Colvin tries to explain the situation to her:

When you put a textbook in front of these kids, put a problem on the blackboard or teach them about problems on a statewide test, it won't matter. None of it. Cuz they're not learning for our world. They're learning for theirs. And they know exactly what it is they're training for, and what it is everyone expects them to be.

Mrs. Conway interjects, stating emphatically, "I expect them to be students." Colvin continues his explanation:

But it's not about you or us, or the test, or the system. It's what they expect of themselves. I mean, every single one of them know they headed back to the corners. Their brothers and sisters—shit, their parents—they came through these same classrooms, didn't they? We pretended to teach them, and they pretended to learn, now where they end up? Same damn corners. I mean, they're not fools, these kids. They don't know our world, but they know their own. I mean, Jesus, they see right through us. . . . We can't lie. Not to them.

Mrs. Conway reluctantly agrees to let the program continue, though she intends to keep a close eye on the program. When Mrs. Conway visits the classroom, Chandra and Zenobia are role-playing a scenario that Chandra takes too far by slapping Zenobia, who in turn shoves Miss Mason (the counselor) to the floor when she tries to intervene. In a meeting later, Mrs. Conway is angry, saying what she saw was definitely not education—nor did the students seem very socialized. She asks how many of the ten students might be able to rejoin regular classes, and is not impressed to hear that maybe three, at best. When she asks Donnelly and Withers for their views, both support the pilot program. Miss Mason, however, disagrees (seeming to be looking for some political gain with Mrs. Conway), saying some of the students "are profoundly damaged," and she pronounces the program "flawed."

Pedagogical Suggestions

One activity I suggest at this point would be to show students the HBO (2007) documentary titled *Hard Times at Douglass High: A No Child Left Behind Report Card*, which they could subsequently analyze for a "real world" representation of a critique of NCLB that mirrors the one offered in *The Wire*. The DVD box cover conveys a sense of what it is about through this description:

The No Child Left Behind Act was created to boost academic levels of American students by setting standardized goals across the nation—and holding states, districts, and schools accountable for performance. For urban schools in high-poverty areas, reaching these goals is a daunting task, and many now face the possibility of being taken over by the state—even being shut down. At Frederick Douglass High School in Baltimore, MD, the expectations raised by NCLB have reached a

critical point. [The filmmakers] offer a yearlong look inside a storied institution at a time when its very existence is in doubt. From cautionary profiles to triumphant tales, *Hard Times at Douglass High* serves as a reminder that education is inevitably an achievement of people, not policy.

Another HBO documentary that students could view as part of this activity is *I Am a Promise: The Children of Stanton Elementary* (1993). Together, these documentaries provide powerful, informative critiques of standardized testing and the travesty of underfunding of urban schools in America.

Situating the School within the Political Storyline

At the beginning of this article, I stated that I would go into more detail about the main education storylines, and that I would also provide briefer discussions of other main storylines, which is what this and the next sections are about.

One other important storyline of season four is the political storyline, which began in season three. This storyline concerns the race for mayor of Baltimore. The two-term incumbent is Mayor Clarence Royce, a popular Black political figure who, when the race began, expected to win easily against his main opponent in the democratic primary, a White councilman named Tommy Carcetti. Despite Mayor Royce's control of municipal power, Carcetti proves to be as talented at playing hardball politics as Royce, and as the election nears, the possibility of Carcetti winning becomes more real. Carcetti ends up winning (that's not a spoiler—the overall season storyline necessitated Carcetti's win), based on a host of promises he made, including a five-percent raise to the city's police force. Once in office, however, Carcetti and his administration discover a deficit mess that Royce left them: the city's school budget is \$54 million dollars in the red.

Pedagogical Suggestion

Episodes eleven (“A New Day”), twelve (“That's Got His Own”), and thirteen (“Final Grades”) are most relevant in terms of how the political storyline intersects with the overall educational storyline. In these episodes, Mayor Carcetti and his advisors consider blaming the public schools for mismanaging their own budgets, and they also consider cutting the school system's overall budget, thereby finding necessary funds to maintain their political leverage, though risking the support of the unionized teachers throughout the city. The storyline involving Colvin and the pilot program is especially affected by the political storyline, and students can be asked to analyze how the storyline involving Tilghman Middle School becomes intertwined with the political storyline.

The Gravitational Pull of the Streets and the “Corners”

Another main storyline of season four concerns the police investigation into the drug organization run by a young, cunning, and utterly ruthless and murderous

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drug kingpin named Marlo Stansfield. Having put the heads of the once-dominant Barksdale drug organization out of business, Marlo has become intent on gaining control of the drug trade over his many remaining competitors on Baltimore's East side. Marlo's two main enforcers, Chris Partlow and Felicia "Snoop" Pearson, have been murdering anyone who gets in Marlo's way, and disposing the bodies in various vacant brick row houses on the west side. Eventually the bodies are discovered, which intensifies the wire unit's investigation into Marlo's criminal activities.

Pedagogical Suggestions

One activity I would recommend is for students to analyze how the Marlo storyline intersects with the storylines involving two boys from Prez's class who Marlo has designs on.

One boy is Michael, a quiet, reserved boy who is very capable of handling himself well while boxing at a neighborhood gym or in a street fight. Michael devotes himself to being the guardian and protector of his little brother, Bug. He and Bug live with their mother, a crack addict who (hazily) sees her two children as objects that enable her to receive the disability checks that help pay for her drugs. Bug needs all the protection, guidance, and love that Michael can provide. Unfortunately, Marlo wants to recruit Michael into his drug organization because he recognizes Michael's street intelligence and brooding strength. Though Marlo makes overtures to Michael to join his crew, Michael keeps his distance as best he can.

Marlo also has designs on another boy in Prez's class, Randy. Randy is an immediately likeable boy who has a quick smile and the charm of a born entrepreneur. (At school, he frequently slips out of class to sell candy at discount rates to younger kids in the lunchroom.) Randy has been a ward of the state of Maryland most of his life, having lived in many foster care facilities, though he currently lives with Miss Anna, a strict and caring woman who provides Randy with a stable home environment that is rare for Randy and that he values more than anything. Despite his good nature and likeability, trouble follows him everywhere, and events and circumstances both within school and outside on the corners conspire to threaten the stability of his home situation with Miss Anna. Specifically, Randy unwittingly becomes involved (through the manipulation of one of Marlo's crew) in a series of circumstances that leads to the death of a corner boy who crossed Marlo. Put another way, Randy discovers he played an innocent yet actual role in the death of someone else. The result is that he is caught up in a police investigation and is also threatened by members of Marlo's crew (to keep him silent).

In describing season four of *The Wire*, Tyree (2008) states that it offers "an honest depiction of the gravitational pull of the streets and drug 'corners' for a generation of African American inner-city youth with few other prospects" (p. 32). Tyree's statement can be used to engage students in analyzing the degree to which the "gravitational pull of the streets and drug 'corners'" affects both Randy and Michael as their storylines unfold. Also, and not at all incidentally, the same kind

of analysis can be done for the storylines involving the other two boys discussed above, Duquan and Namond. And to deepen this analysis of the pull of the corners, students can be assigned to view the aforementioned HBO miniseries by David Simon and Ed Burns titled *The Corner*, which won an Emmy in 2000 as best miniseries. The subtitle of the book by Simon and Burns that the miniseries was based on is “A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood,” and that neighborhood is West Baltimore, where the four main boys of season four live and struggle. The series brilliantly depicts the “gravitational pull of the streets and drug ‘corners’ for a generation of African American inner-city youth with few other prospects.”

Other Approaches for Pedagogically

Drawing upon *The Wire*

At this point, I want to return to the scenario I mentioned at the beginning about the instructor who would like to take up *The Wire* in her teaching but is not able to assign the entire season. What can be done? I will suggest two approaches.

The more complicated approach would essentially be to reproduce the method I used to analyze the two education storylines of season four. First, as I (re)viewed the 13 episodes of the fourth season, I noted the exact beginning and ending times of every “school” scene in each episode—i.e., each scene that takes place inside or just outside of the school (Prez or Colvin are in most of the school scenes). Then, to facilitate my analysis of the two main educational storylines, I used some relatively simple-to-use software (iMovie) to edit together all the scenes comprising each storyline, which resulted in two valuable “media texts” (mpg.4 format). For example, the Prez storyline is made up of approximately 65 scenes that total about 75 minutes. A few briefer scenes span less than a minute, some longer scenes last 4 or 5 minutes, but most of the scenes last 2 or 3 minutes. About half of these scenes feature Prez with his students in his classroom, and in the rest (with just a few exceptions), we see Prez either somewhere else in the school building (the lounge, in all-faculty meetings, in the hallways of the school) or just outside of the school (exiting the school, getting in his car in front of the school). I also did the same with the Colvin storyline, which is comprised of approximately 45 scenes that, when edited together, form a media text of about 65 minutes long.

It should be easy to imagine the great amount of time and labor that went into this process of making these two media texts, but for those who would like to incorporate the storylines into their teaching, the labor and time pay off pedagogically, for obvious reasons (all the scenes are together, and any scene on the media “vignette” can be navigated to in a matter of seconds). Each vignette can also be shown in its totality during a seminar. As such, the vignettes become powerful case studies of fictional (yet all-too-real) educators whose experiences students can vicariously identify with.

I would also recommend a less complicated yet every bit as potentially mean-

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ingful approach for taking up selected scenes in one's teaching. Simply stated, this very article can be used to get ideas for particular scenes to take up in one's teaching because I have described many specific scenes from various episodes, and I have also identified the episodes in which the scenes occur. For example, an instructor who wishes to discuss the negative effects of the regime of standardized testing that NCLB has instituted can skim through episodes eight ("Corner Boys") and nine ("Know Your Place") to find the scenes in which Prez wrestles with the necessity of teaching to the test. These scenes alone would be enough to spark a discussion about NCLB, and the suggested readings I give could also be taken up. This very selective approach to showing specific scenes can be taken for the other issues I have addressed, such as that of tracking. The scene in which Colvin articulates his "stoop kids/corner kids" analysis to Parenti and Mrs. Sampson (episode 5, "Alliances") can be shown to students, and the readings I have suggested can be assigned, which together is enough to introduce the topic of tracking and generate subsequent discussions about the issue.

I would add that for instructors who are likely to take this approach to showing just selected scenes from *The Wire*, they can read other articles I have written in which I explain how I have engaged in this very process of relying only on specific scenes in my teaching. For example, I have taken up selected scenes from the film *The Paper Chase* and articulated those scenes with selected readings by Foucault (1977) and Gore (1998) to engage students in thinking critically about "techniques of power" and the various ways power operates relationally in schools (Trier, 2003). This is one of a number of such accounts that could be useful in conceptualizing further how to take up selected scenes in one's teaching (see also Trier, 2002, 2005, and 2007).

Conclusion

In this article, I have partially discussed the two main education storylines of season four of *The Wire*, and I have shown some of the ways that both storylines are impacted by the regime of standardized testing as a result of NCLB. I have also more briefly touched upon two other important storylines, and throughout, I have offered some pedagogical suggestions for engaging students in activities and analyses of the storylines. One point that I want to make is that I am certain that many other ways of taking up the series can be conceptualized. Another point is that in having set myself the task of focusing mainly on the education storylines, coupled with the "no spoilers" approach, I have really only scratched the surface of all that remains to be analyzed and articulated about season four, and I look forward to seeing published accounts of others' critical encounters with *The Wire*. What I hope I have accomplished is to interest readers enough in *The Wire* so that they will view it to discover if it has any possibilities for being taken up as part of their teaching.

Notes

¹ With its focus on a popular culture representation of education, this paper contributes to the existent literature that explores such popular representations—i.e., representations of teachers, students, principals, and “schooling” in general. Within this literature are books and book chapters that analyze what can be called the “school film” genre, such as Considine’s (1985) *The Cinema of Adolescence*; Reed’s (1989) “Let’s Burn the School”; Farber, Provenzo, Jr., and Holms’s (1994) *Schooling in the Light of Popular Culture*; Shary’s (2002) *Generation Multiplex*; Dalton’s (2004) *The Hollywood Curriculum*; and Bulman’s (2005) *Hollywood Goes to High School*. Also within this literature are ideological analyses of representations of teacher saviors, such as Ayers’s (1994) critique of the entire subgenre of the teacher savior film, Giroux’s critiques of the pedagogy of Miss Johnson in *Dangerous Minds* and Mr. Keating in *Dead Poets Society* (in Giroux, 2002), and Banks and Espisito’s (2002) critique of educators in the television series *Boston Public*. Another vein in this literature is made up of articles and book chapters by academics who discuss how they have incorporated school films as texts to engage preservice teachers in a variety of critical projects (for example, Robertson, 1995 and 1997; Weber and Mitchell, 1995; Paul, 2001; Freedman and Easley II, 2004; and Trier, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005, 2006 and 2007).

² More examples of critics describing the novelistic or literary quality of *The Wire* include O’Rourke (2006), who noted “the remarkable narrative compression” of the series, explaining that, “as in the best novels, there is a sense that every detail has a purpose.” Kulish (2006) described *The Wire* “as the closest that moving pictures have come so far to the depth and nuance of the novel,” adding that films “are far too brief, akin to good short stories” (p. 11). Other critics have compared *The Wire* to great literature: Stanley (2008) called the show “Dickensian” and also likened it “to a sprawling 19th-century novel, as lurid and engrossing as *Bleak House* or *Little Dorrit*”; Kehr (2004) saw the series as exhibiting “the dimensions of a Zola novel” (p. 3); and Tyree (2008) described it as being “closely akin to Greek tragedy,” but possessing “a more epic quality,” being “a contemporary version of *Crime and Punishment* without the inevitability of redemption. Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* and the school of American Naturalism, especially its pulp version in film noir, seem apropos” (p. 36).

³ For these biographical details about Simon and Burns, see Guensburg (2007), Lanahan (2008), Talbot (2007), and Wilson (2008).

⁴ At the end of this article, I discuss the situation of a reader who would like to take up *The Wire* in his or her teaching but, for a variety of reasons, is unable to assign the entire fourth season. So, I will answer the logical question: “What if I only have time in my course to draw upon selected scenes from various episodes—what do you suggest?” In answering, I will be able to leverage much of the content that comprises this article.

⁵ These examples in brackets are my own, not Hynes’s (2006); also, the numbers in parentheses identify the six clichés of teacher savior films.

⁶ This quote (along with others in the following paragraphs) concerning the clichés of the teacher savior narrative is from the above passage by Hynes (2006).

⁷ Though students could be involved in these activities before they begin viewing season four, I think doing so risks focusing students’ attention too narrowly at the outset on the teacher savior theme. Instead, I think it would be best to introduce the teacher savior theme after episode five, when students have had the opportunity to develop a diversity of impressions about the characters and the action up to that point.

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⁸The commentary begins with creator and chief writer David Simon telling the viewer that the season's theme is education, and that it is fitting that co-writer Ed Burns is doing the commentary with him "because it really is Ed's season in the sense that he taught for seven years in the city school system and this really is rooted in his experience."

⁹This line of dialogue seems to be a rare error for *The Wire* because the test is given at the end of the first semester.

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