

Blurring Boundaries and Getting Real: Exploring the Impact of On-screen Teachers on
Real World Classrooms

by

Laurel Brach
BA, University of Victoria, 2004

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of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

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This thesis explores how teachers are shown on-screen by asking the following questions: do on-screen, fictional portrayals of high school teachers affect student perceptions of their own teachers and further, how do these perceptions affect student-teacher relations and expectations of the classroom experience? Ten high school students in grades eleven and twelve were interviewed using surveys, one-on-one interviews, and a focus group. The findings revealed that fictional representations affect students in a multitude of ways, namely in student's expectations of teachers and schooling and in how individual identities are formed and fostered. This study also found that while the participants demonstrated many critical literacy skills, they were noticeably lacking in others, thus speaking to the need for increased critical literacy education in our schools.

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Dedication

This paper is dedicated to my parents. To my father Gerry Brach who I never remember complaining while he completed his masters, despite having two small children and working full time; and to my mother Elizabeth Brach who always believed that I was smart enough.

Chapter 1: The Conception of My Inquiry

The presence of television and movies are ubiquitous in contemporary life. How individuals are affected by these mediums is seldom a simple question. Preconceptions based on previous media exposure and prior experience, in combination with perceptive skill, determine how such media informs and influences viewers. Like all mediums of communication, however, television and film transmit messages that challenge or confirm viewers conceptions of identity, both their own and that of those around them. Messages conveyed on-screen often reflect real life and elicit reflection in viewers. Through my research I explored how teachers are shown on-screen by asking the following questions: do on-screen, fictional portrayals of high school teachers affect student perceptions of their own teachers and further, how do these perceptions affect student-teacher relations and expectations of the classroom experience?

I first saw the TV show *Glee* last summer and was immediately hooked by the catchy singing and campy portrayal of high school life. I was drawn into the drama of the charismatic and attractive teachers and the tormented yet optimistic students. As the show quickly rose in popularity it became a point of conversation, both with fellow teachers and with my students. While many students and teachers were as hooked as I was, there were also those that would roll their eyes when the show came up in conversation, exclaiming that they just “didn’t get it”. They didn’t “get” why the cheerleaders always wear their uniforms, the jocks always wear their letter jackets, and why all the characters appear so stereotypical. The show sparked my interest in many ways. It was entertaining to watch and I felt it was well-crafted, but was also concerned about what other people thought of the show’s depiction of high school life. Did they believe this

portrayal was accurate? Did the school life depicted influence what they thought of contemporary teachers, students, and their interrelationships? Were their own ideas of education affected by what they saw?

Of course the show is a blatant parody. On the surface, it draws heavily on stereotypical portrayals of its characters. It would seem that the function of the stereotypes is to distract and disarm the audience. In the same way that cartoons and fairy tales depict very unreal worlds, yet still have the capacity transmit real-to-life messages, *Glee* is adorned with a campy and almost cartoonish façade that signifies a departure from the real world. At first glance, the stereotypes dominate, but with further viewing, the multidimensionality of the characters becomes apparent. The audience, caught unawares, is lured in with an oversimplified portrayal of teacher and students, but is quickly immersed in the trials and tribulations of high school life. Certain truths about the turbulence of teenage life are exposed; that this is a challenging time, that young people, like most of us, are looking for a way to fit in and be accepted, and that the intensity of high school illuminates and amplifies this experience. While the show is set in a high school and like shows of this kind, focuses on teenage drama, the adults in the show also play a prominent role. Indeed, the show's main character is a teacher.

Being a high school teacher, I was interested in the amount of time that the show spent focusing on the teacher characters. This isn't your typical high school drama such as *Gossip Girls* or *90210* where the teachers form the periphery of the school back drop. Such representations of on-screen teachers are a much studied area Brehony, 1998; Burnaford & Josep, 2001; Fisher, Harris & Jarvis, 2008; Schwartz, 1960; Swetnam, 1992 have all examined on-screen teachers and have found that the representations are largely stereotypical and one-dimensional.

The portrayal of teachers as multidimensional is rare in television shows that feature high school students. A historical look at on-screen teachers reveals that most teachers are shown as stereotypes at best and, at worst, caricatures. There are the uninspiring and tortuously boring teachers, such as the teacher played by Ben Stein in *Ferris Beuller's Day Off* (1986) rebel teachers subverting the system and paying the price for it, such as Robin Williams as Mr. Keating in *Dead Poet's Society* (1989) and saviour teachers who attempt to liberate their students from "poverty and ignorance" such as Michelle Pfifer as Louanne Johnson in *Dangerous Minds* (1995). These classic examples encompass the main roles that teachers have traditionally been shown in.

Watching *Glee* I am struck by the multidimensionality of the teachers. While, on the surface the teachers all fall into stereotypical categories, these characters are more than what they initially appear. Mr. Shuster, our classic hero figure, is indeed flawed, and Sue Sylvester, the archetypical villain is continually surprising with her unnoticed altruistic actions.

These out of character moments make *Glee* unpredictable and, in itself, out of character with the type of show it initially portrays itself as being.

The phenomenon of showing teachers as real people, as in *Glee*, has become more common over the past few years. Examples of multidimensional representation can be seen in the recent movies *Half Nelson* (2006) and *The Class* (2008), and on TV in the HBO series, *Hung* (2009), and AMC's *Breaking Bad* (2008). These recent depictions are beginning to show teachers in a broader scope. The teachers here can be hard working and caring, but also cruel and thoughtless. They struggle with disease, addiction, financial woes and marital problems. Ultimately, we begin to see them as human first. These are dynamic individuals who also happen to be teachers.

As a high school teacher I often overhear and participate in discussions with students regarding the popular culture they consume. Discussions about who the Bachelorette chose to date, what hockey teams made it to the playoffs or what characters are dating on *Glee* are common place. It is often these side conversations that foster a classroom culture in which the students and I feel we have a common ground for connecting. I also frequently reference popular culture to help connect students' understandings of topics covered in class to current issues and events. While popular culture does not always find a welcome place in high school classrooms, I am a strong supporter of multiliteracy philosophy that supports the valuing and incorporation of issues and events that youth value. To me, it makes sense to incorporate as much youth culture into the classroom as possible in order to help foster student interest and to render learning as relevant as possible. Incorporating youth culture into the classroom offers the opportunity to view and discuss the issues presented by these media in a critical context, thus fostering within students the ability to be critical consumers of the media that is so ubiquitous in their lives.

It is this core belief about the importance and value of popular culture that ultimately led to my interest in how students and teachers are affected by pop culture. As a teacher I am often drawn to on-screen representations of teachers by a curiosity to see how my profession is being represented. Schooling is such a common experience in North America with the vast majority of people spending a minimum of 13 years in schooling institutions. Because school is such a common experience, it is a space that most people feel they are experts on. Interestingly, despite our common experiences, how schools are represented on TV is often very different from what the experience is like in reality (Burnaford & Josep, 2001).

What does Popular Culture have to do with real life?

As a student in high school I was often struck by the rude and disrespectful manner in which some students treated teachers. These students, often perfectly reasonable and caring people to their friends suddenly became cruel when in the presence of a teacher who, for whatever reason, they did not respect. As a child of two teachers, this behaviour was something that I felt acutely on a personal level. It was clear to me, that many young people did not “see” their teachers as real people. To these students, teachers belonged in a strange category of real, but not really real; people who they were forced to interact with but who had no real connection to their lives. While luckily I have never encountered the blatant cruelty I witnessed while a student, I nonetheless saw many examples of students not interacting with me as a real person. A common example of this would be when I encountered students outside of our school setting, in the mall or at a grocery store. While some students were friendly and did not have a problem bridging the divide between the two environments, others were noticeably awkward when meeting me in an unfamiliar location. I have often spoken to my students in class about this awkwardness and students readily admit to being uncomfortable seeing teachers “out in the real world.” I have even had students admit that when they were younger, they assumed that teachers slept at the school! I have also had students comment about meeting teachers outside of school and finding out that the teacher was, “actually nice when I talked to her about things that didn’t have to do with school.” For students to understand that teachers may have a full life outside of the confines of school is sometimes a big leap and one that not all are able to make.

Looking over the literature on how teachers are represented on film and television, it is not difficult to draw a connection to how some students have a difficulty seeing teachers as real people. In a school setting teachers often become completely absorbed into their teacher role and

as a result often avoid showing themselves as real people with interests, and a life outside of the classroom. Adding to this is that on the shows young people typically watch teachers are typically shown as one dimensional and existing exclusively in the realm of the school.

In my research I plan to explore this relationship to hopefully uncover how deep the influences of screen media extend in influencing how students view their teachers.

Chapter 2: Overview of the Literature

Classrooms are co-constructed environments that develop unique personalities and characteristics. These personalities and characteristics can create a positive and rich learning environment or a negative one that hinders rather than fuels learning. The world of a classroom is a strange one. There are implicit and explicit hierarchies and expectations that reside deep in our psyche, laid from our past experiences, the experiences of our family members, the media and countless other influences. Of course there are many influences that affect how individuals perceive the classroom and how they act within it: world events, family issues, school policies and district politics all play a role in influencing people and in turn the learning environment. Another influence is popular culture.

In researching how teachers are portrayed in popular culture and the effects of these portrayals I came across many articles discussing how specific film and television shows deal with the roles of teachers. I also read numerous studies outlining the effects of the media on young people. Interestingly, I could find nothing connecting the portrayal of teachers to how these representations may be affecting students. In fact, out of the many articles I surveyed, I found no research in which students were ever asked about their perceptions of on-screen teachers. I found it curious that despite the research and discussions that exist around the portrayal of teachers there would be an absence of such a key component of education, namely, students. For my research I will be looking at fictional, on-screen representations of teachers, however, there are many other ways that teachers are publicly represented: YouTube videos, documentaries, cartoons, novels, music, and music videos are just some of the other mass media

sources that portray teachers and may contribute to how students construct their ideas on who and what teachers are.

Teacher Identity

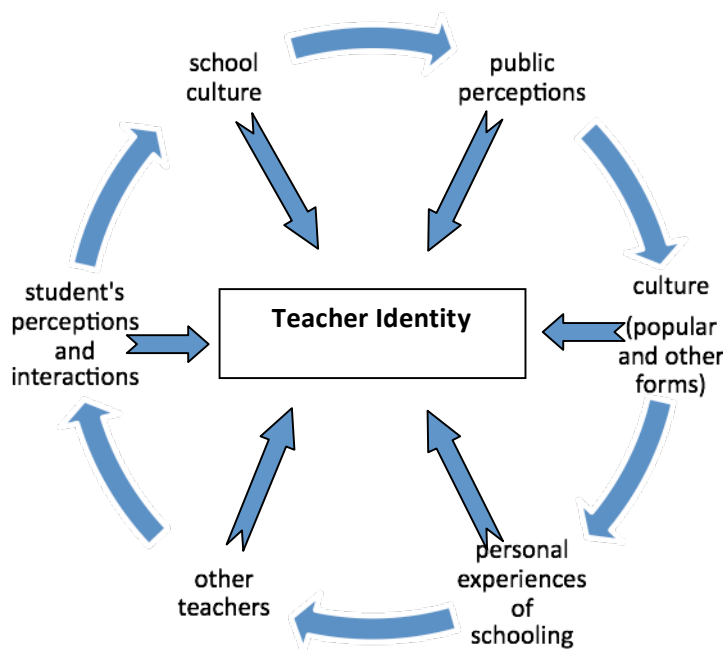
How we see ourselves and how others see us largely contributes to what is commonly called identity. Many researchers have suggested definitions as to what exactly identity is and how it is formed. For purposes of this research, I will be relying largely on James Paul Gee's definition in which he draws on ideas from Mead (1934) and Erikson (1968) to find that:

Identity is not a fixed attribute of a person but a relational phenomenon. Identity development occurs in an intersubjective field and can be best characterized as an ongoing process, a process of interpreting oneself as a certain kind of person and being recognized as such in a given context (107) (Gee, 2001, as cited in Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop 2004).

In this way people may have numerous identities depending on the situation they are in. Beijaard et.al. (2004), further contribute to this definition in stating that to discover a person's identity is to answer the question, "[W]ho am I at this moment?" (107) For a teacher, who they are in the classroom could be very different from who they are when with their family or when interacting with a group of friends.

As most people in western society have at least some experience of attending school, the teacher is a common and powerful symbol. In this way, teachers are seldom neutral characters. Teachers of course bring their own ideas of what teachers should be into their roles in the classroom and this is inevitably combined with the expectations that their students come with. To

help make sense of this complex system of what may contribute to the construction of teacher identity I have created the diagram below.



While there are many factors that contribute to a teacher's identity, for the purposes of this research I will be focusing on the interplay of popular culture and students and, in particular, how popular culture influences how students' views of teachers both real and fictional. Gee (2001), drawing from the work of Taylor (1994), argues that in order to develop and define an identity there must be some sort of interpretive system to first recognize and give shape to an identity. Gee discusses how culture, traditions and communication with others may all contribute to this interpretive system. On-screen representations also have the power to contribute to this interpretive system as they help create schemas, mental frameworks for how people understand and interpret the world. In his exploration of how popular culture contributes to literacy identity, Bronwyn T. Williams (2007) comments that media "reproduce[s] dominant cultural attitudes" just as "individual audience members respond to such narratives based on their own experiences, values and assumptions" (682). It is this relationship between the messages that the media

produces and how these messages are interpreted that I will be exploring in my research questions.

What is Cultural Studies?

Cultural Studies as an area of academic studies offers a lens through which to carefully examine and critique not only culture but also the forms and representations that a particular culture creates. As television and film play such a large role in contemporary culture they are often used as reference points through which to study a cultural phenomenon and then can further be used as a means of reflection back on the culture from which they were created (Steinberg, Parmar & Richard, 2006; Williams, 2007).

Giroux (1994) writes that, “cultural studies is largely concerned with the critical relationship among culture, knowledge and power” (279). The term culture itself is highly nuanced and typically refers to the commonly held beliefs, values and knowledge of a group of people. Culture also is often used to imply excellent examples of artistic works, typically what would be considered the “high” arts. Furthermore, in defining culture, the idea of power has to be mentioned. Culture, as Giroux alludes in the above quote, is a term that reflects those who define it, and in terms of high culture or the most common forms of culture this is largely determined by people and institutions in power. In this context I will be referring to Steinberg, Parmar & Richard’s (2006) definition of culture in which they find that culture, “includes the traditions, languages, practices, beliefs, education, and politics of a given group [and] is in fact historically specific, and very much concerned with which group has the power to define and be reflected in that culture (4)”. Youth culture is intimately connected to and yet distinct from the

specific culture from which it emerges. Youth culture is often seen as a reaction to or a pushing against the dominant culture (Steinberg et.al. 2006).

Schools, as sites for cultural transmission are a place where we “teach” the values and norms of our society as much if not more than we teach literacy and numeracy. Young people spend enormous amounts of their lives in educational institutions and their experiences within these institutions unquestionably influence them for their entire lives. Schools as institutions of learning are in the knowledge business. In schools we learn not only about historical battles and mathematical formulas, but also what it means to experience failure or success. In this way schools hold an incredible amount of power over who, in the future will hold power. It is schools that largely determine who is “good” at Science or English or neither, and it is schools that early on in a person’s life begin the streaming process determining who will not be deemed able to graduate or receive further education or rather, who will continue their schooling and often as a result of this obtain a larger income and consequently more power in society. Schooling and how it is represented on-screen contains the potential to influence those directly involved in education. This relationship between viewers and what they watch is by its very nature reciprocal in that those creating the representations are undoubtedly drawing on their own experiences of schooling when they create their on-screen texts. Giroux (1994) further explains this relationship stating “[E]ducators whose work is shaped by cultural studies do not simply view teachers and students either as chroniclers of history and social change or recipients of culture, but as active participants in its construction” (278).

It is my hope that my research will add to the body of literature on the effects of television and film and will help further our understanding of the complex relationship that exists

between what we view on-screen and the impact of those images and ideas particularly in relation to schooling.

Why Study Popular Culture?

In today's highly mediated world popular culture is everywhere. Popular culture in this paper is defined loosely as all culture that appeals to the masses rather than the privileged few. More specifically the definition put forth by Ray Brown (1972) still holds stands as a touch stone. Brown defines popular culture as:

all those elements of life which are not narrowly intellectual or creatively elitist and which are generally though not necessarily disseminated through the mass media. Popular culture consists of the spoken and printed word, sounds pictures, objects and artifacts.

'Popular Culture' thus embraces all levels of society and culture other than the Elite (21).

This year an Ipsos Reid poll reported that the average Canadian spent 16.9 hours a week watching television and 18.1 hours a week online. Our mass exposure to this medium is undoubtedly affecting the ways in which we view and experience the world. Much research has been done on the effects that the media has in influencing an individual's world view (Farber, Provenzo & Holm, 1994; Slater, 2007; Williams, 2007; Williams & Zenger 2007; Wroblewski & Huston, 1987; Zillman 2002).

Given the pervasiveness of popular culture in our society it is important that these mediums are examined. Cultural studies provides a lens through which to view this media and in doing so, provides a forum for critical discussion and examination of the situations and events it examines. Further, in looking more specifically at education and schooling, popular culture raises important questions about what schools are, and what they could be. When examined,

popular culture has the potential to illuminate our own ideas and misconceptions about what education looks like.

Claudia Mitchell and Sandra Weber (1999) state that:

popular texts wouldn't be popular unless they managed to tap into the particular desires of many readers. In that sense, they serve as a kind of mirror for society, and have something very important to reveal to us about ourselves (167-168).

The authors support the idea that when examined, popular culture can reveal a deeper understanding about the culture in which it is formed and consumed. This quote also refers to the idea that popular texts have the capacity to serve a role in identity development. In watching media the viewer has the opportunity to challenge or confirm notions about both themselves and about others. The media is also a site to vicariously experiment with different behaviours and lifestyles. In this way the media can be a powerful tool in identity formation. Further to this, Mitchell and Weber (1999) find that viewers in the media can use these images as sites for self-reflection stating:

It is easier to be critical of a fictitious teacher than we could otherwise be of ourselves or our colleges. And yet, if we persevere and probe the popular in the service of self-study, we eventually find this initial distancing can be turned as a social spotlight on our private teaching selves, helping us to understand and even act on how we are shaped and situated by the popular (164).

Weber and Mitchell point out the advantages of studying popular culture particularly in reference to educators; they recognize that teaching is an intensely consuming and personal experience. Developing professionally and examining one's own practice is critical, but also challenging as it is often difficult to be critical of something so tightly connected to our own identity. Examining

the education practices of fictional, on-screen characters as I will be doing with the participants in my research, offers the opportunity to reflect on teaching practices in a way that is meaningful but not so intimately tied to a particular individual.

In *Schooling in the Light of Popular Culture*, (1994) editors, Farber, Provenzo and Holm, also support the examination of popular mediums arguing that “a democratic society cannot be indifferent to the way common understandings of important social and institutional phenomena are formed, modified and transmitted.” (4) This quote further speaks to the importance of examining popular culture from a critical stance. As shown above, people are exposed to media in large amounts, it is therefore important to be able to critically reflect upon these influences, in order to better understand and evaluate what is undoubtedly having a large impact on the ways in which we interpret the world. Cultural studies provides such a venue for examination.

Does Popular Culture influence people?

Williams (2007) writes that, “popular culture forms reproduce and distribute the most powerful narratives and iconic images that dominate our lives” (680). The connection between media and influence is not a simple cause and effect relationship, but rather much more complex and nuanced than it may initially appear. Slater (2007) and others before him, (Brown, 2000; Klappner, 1960), support the idea that people with certain dispositions are often attracted to specific media that will reinforce or support already present tendencies and beliefs. Slater (2007) describes this complex and interconnected relationship between individuals and the media they consume as, “reinforcing spirals.” He suggests that factors such as gender, age, class, etc... can all affect what types of media we choose to consume. He further explains this theory saying that “the attitudinal or behavioural outcomes of media use can be expected to influence selections of

and attention to media content. This process can be conceptualized in terms of mutually reinforcing spirals akin to positive feedback loops in general systems theory” (281). This theory resonated strongly with me and helped to inform my analysis.

In *Televised occupations stereotypes and their effects on early adolescents: Are they changing?*, Wroblewski and Huston (1987) conducted a study in which they interviewed fifth and sixth graders to gain an understanding of how the media influenced their ideas on gender and occupations. They found that television was influential in effecting the world views of the children, in particular by either supported existing schemas or influenced a change to that schema. More specifically, they concluded, “that early adolescents glean a considerable amount of occupational information from TV” (295). The authors further stated that their, “findings suggest that changes in the images presented on T.V. can influence schemas, attitudes, and aspirations of early adolescents.” (296) This study is particularly relevant to my work which will also examine how students viewing habits may or may not affect their schemes of teachers.

In her literature review of the media’s influence on sexuality, Brown (2002) also found that a relationship existed between people’s television viewing and subsequent beliefs about sexuality and sexual practices. She cites numerous studies, from a 1990 study examining the effects of Madonna’s, “Papa don’t preach” music video to Zillmann’s research on how young people’s views on sexuality are influenced by exposure to erotica. In her comprehensive review, Brown comments on various theories which may help explain why the media has such a powerful effect on people. She cites three theories that largely influenced my perspective on the relationship between viewers and the media. The first of these theories is agenda setting and framing, which purports that the media informs viewers about what is important in the world and illustrates how viewers should then understand what they see. Cultivation theory is also

presented as a perspective that helps to create and perpetrate the power structures that exist in a society and in this way influences viewers and creates a “shared set of conceptions and expectations about reality” (44). Lastly, cognitive social learning theory explains how the media can act as a site for social learning in which certain behaviours are repeated or not repeated depending on how they are shown as being received by others. These theories offer highly plausible explanations for why people seem to be so easily influenced by their interactions with what they view in the media.

Multiliteracy

The term multiliteracy was first coined in 1994 when a group of researchers gathered in New London, New Hampshire to discuss and debate the changes that were taking place with literacy, and how this related to education. Multiliteracy is a highly nuanced term and as such many variations of definitions exist. Luke and Freebody (2000) define literacy as, “the flexible and sustainable mastery of a repertoire of practices with the texts of traditional and new communications technologies via spoken, print and multimedia” (9). The recognition that literacy involves being able to navigate more than print texts expands this definition to recognize not only traditional print literacies but also multiliteracies, and included in this of course is the media. This definition is appealing in that it focuses on the dynamic nature of literacy and it specifically includes multimedia as a means of communication.

In today’s world, reading and writing are no longer the only means of being literate, and what was traditionally defined as a text continues to expand (Alvermann, 2004).

By using television and movies as the central texts in my study, I recognize that these texts contribute largely to how people, especially young people, obtain information, learn and interact

with their world. Television and movies are an extremely popular form of entertainment, and as such, must be recognized as legitimate and powerful texts worthy of and requiring academic examination. Using alternative texts also connects to my core beliefs and academic foundation in multiliteracy and New Literacy philosophy that recognizes that literacies taught and practiced within school are equally as important as literacies learned and practiced outside of school. In light of this belief, a study of popular culture and, in particular, the engagement of youth in popular culture is appropriate and promising in terms of the literacy skills, or lack thereof, such a study will reveal. Being capably literate of the aural and visual texts of film and television must go beyond the mere ability to understand what is being said. Meaningful decryption requires critical thinking. Genuine understanding of the messages conveyed in any text requires critical literacy.

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is a perspective that directly connects to both multiliteracy and to my research. Where multiliteracy recognizes that the multitude of ways in which we communicate ideas must be recognized as valuable forms of literacy, critical literacy adds to this the importance of being able to critically reflect and examine those modes and further the implicit and explicit messages within the communication. As with multiliteracy, there is no cookie cutter definition for critical literacy, however, researchers and experts in critical literacy agree that at its core critical literacy recognizes the power of literacy and its importance in education to promote in young people the ability to analyze, understand and question the various messages within texts (Hagood, 2002; Kellner & Share, 2007; Mclean, Boling & Rowsell, 2009). Jones (2006) notes that critical literacy as a perspective, “is building a way of life through active engagement *with*

life- a way of noticing ‘What’s wrong with this picture?’, a way of asking oneself, ‘How is power exercised here and how does that shape what we’re doing?’” (68)

At its root, critical literacy is interested in empowering students. Mclean, Boling & Rowsell (2009) affirm this stating that critical literacy is “a way to raise questions and confront social issues, and promote action against injustice” (159). They further argue that schools can and should be seen as “sites for interrogating social conditions and through open discussion, questions, reflection and action” (159). Hagood (2002) further argues the need for an education steeped in critical literacy explaining;

Through work in critical literacy with students, critical educators and researchers believe they will effect social change by developing students’ critical consciousness and their abilities to question texts so as to transform their own identities and constructed realities as literacy users (253).

Paolo Freire, a leading critical literacy theorist and educator, believed that, “literacy is grounded in the belief that if learners are to transform themselves and their environments, teaching and learning must directly reflect their words and worlds” (159) (Freire,1998, as cited in Mclean, Boling & Rowsell, 2009). In this way, it is the obligation of teachers to teach material that is relevant and that connects to the world of their students. At the root of critical literacy is the idea that all texts are loaded, and that education and literacy in particular, holds the potential to convey the important skills of questioning, interpreting, and deconstructing the messages about power, social issues or inequalities that exist in society and are illuminated through texts (Mclean, Boling & Rowsell, 2009).

In using television and film in this research I am recognizing the importance of the media as an often overlooked text, one that does not necessarily find a place in educational settings.

Kellner and Share (2007) note: “critical media literacy brings an understanding of ideology, power, and domination that challenges relativist and apolitical notions of most media education in order to guide teachers and students in their explorations of how power and information are always linked” (61). It is my hope that examining the images of on-screen teachers and their impact on students and educators alike will contribute to a better and more nuanced understanding of the complex messages these media forms are imparting and the potential ways in which they may be impacting all of us.

“The new technologies of communication are powerful tools that can liberate or dominate, manipulate or enlighten and it is imperative that educators teach their students how to use and critically analyze these media” (62) (Kellner, 1995 as cited in Kellner & Share, 2007). I hope that this research will help to highlight the need for critical literacy education in our schools and show the value in using non-traditional texts as sites for examining deeply embedded cultural power structures, assumptions and inequalities.

Chapter 3: Approach to Study

Methodology:

Qualitative Research:

I used a qualitative approach in conducting this research. In framing my research question I was concerned with examining the why and how of human experience. The data that I collected was not able to be categorized into numbers. Rather, I examined and reflected on the responses of young people in response to how their ideas of teachers and schooling was impacted by on-screen representations of teachers and schooling. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) define qualitative research as being “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world.” (3) They describe the transformative nature of qualitative research through its potential to “make the world visible.” (3) As a teacher and researcher it is my hope that my work will have a positive impact on the world, or at the very least that through it I will be able to better understand both my own teaching practice and myself. In conducting this research I appreciate that there are many ways of interpreting and representing meaning.

Case Study

I used case study as my research methodology in this study. The case study is an in-depth examination of a particular instance, or case with the intent of uncovering understandings that then may have the potential to be transferred to other situations. Case studies are useful in that they have the potential for an in depth exploration of a subject that can ultimately illuminate deeper cultural phenomenon. John W. Creswell (2007) describes the case study as,

a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audio-visual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes. (73)

The case study approach appealed to me as it was my aim all along to provide a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the thoughts and opinions of the students participating in this study. Using case study allowed for me to spend more time with my participants and probe my research questions more intensely. This method also aligned with my personal belief that researchers involving young people as participants and examining the effects of the media need to spend more time actually talking to young people and giving voice to their thoughts and opinions. The case study method allowed for me to more profoundly connect with both the participants in that the time was spent listening and to them and encouraging them to share their thoughts and ideas, as well, this approach also will allow for a deeper connection with my intended audience, i.e. teachers. By interviewing students and using their words as much as possible in my findings and analysis it is my hope that their thoughtful responses will help provide an authenticity and insightfulness more likely to connect to the experiences of other educators. Furthermore, due to the time needed to adequately question and explore the ideas presented by the participants and given that a multitude of data sources were collected including surveys, interviews and discussions, case study was ultimately the methodology that was best suited.

The Inquiry:**Participants:**

The participants in this study were drawn from a Grade 9 to 12 school in Victoria, British Columbia. The population of the school is slightly over 1000. The school has a diverse population both ethnically and socioeconomically. English teachers of grade 11 and 12 were asked to read out an invitation to participate to their classes and participants were students who responded to the invitation and volunteered to participate. (See Appendix A for invitation to participate). English classes were specifically chosen because English is the only course that all senior students are required to take. My hope was that selecting participants in this manner would help ensure that my participants were representative of the school population. This did turn out to be the case, and the participants represented a broad academic and social spectrum.

In total there were 10 participants, six female: Zoe, Mai, Jan, Lexi, Rose and Lise and four male: Phillip, Kirt, Julian and Eli, all names have been changed in order to protect confidentiality. Out of the ten participants nine were grade 12 students and one, Phillip, was in grade 11.

Phillip is a young man who likes the social aspect of school but often finds the academic side challenging. He has a designated learning disability but finds that as long as he keeps up with classwork and asks for help when needed he can get by. He is funny and is not afraid to express his opinions in groups. Outside of school he likes hanging out with his friends and is an avid video gamer and movie watcher.

Zoe is a self-proclaimed TV addict. She loves both TV and movies and this is the main reason she was interested in participating in this research. As well she is a natural athlete and plays softball at a competitive level both on a school team and in a city league. She is not sure

exactly what she wants to do after she graduates this June, but thinks she will most likely apply to university.

Mai is a bright young woman who easily makes insightful connections between her own life and what she views on-screen. Interestingly she does not see herself as being “school smart”. Throughout her interview she brought up many insightful observations about the education system and how it is failing many of its students. After graduation Mai plans to travel to Europe. She is curious about the world and eager to find a place for herself within it.

Kirt is heavily involved in theater and this year is playing the lead role in the school musical. Like many others his age he is passionately committed to the things that he is interested in and rather disengaged from areas he does not find interesting or immediately relevant. Kirt nonchalantly informed me that this semester he is failing all of his courses and plans to upgrade next year. He is funny and likeable and has a large social circle.

Eli is a serious and mature student. He describes himself as being “a little quiet” in class. Despite being quiet he nonetheless is not afraid to share his opinions or ideas. Eli is not sure what he wants to do for a career but thinks that it will most likely involve the arts or social sciences. He plans to attend university but has not yet decided which one.

Julian, like Kirt is also involved in the school theater program. Rather than acting, he stage manages and spends most of his free time helping out with various production aspects of the theater. He is highly articulate. He speaks with a rapid cadence that makes him compelling to listen to.

Jan is a quiet and thoughtful young person. She does well in her courses, but finds most of them to be boring and irrelevant to her life. She is creative and her alternative and typically

brightly colourful style of clothing reflects this. She is eager to finish high school and see what else the wide world has to offer.

Lexi is an articulate and highly motivated student. Along with her high school courses she is taking a first year astronomy course at the University of Victoria. She loves learning and is very excited to attend university next year. She is not entirely certain of what career path she will pursue but currently is considering physics. She thinks that she might eventually like to teach at a university. Along with being highly intelligent she is also involved with several philanthropic organizations outside of school. Lexi is thoughtful and a natural leader; during the focus group discussion the other students respected and responded favourably to her comments.

Rose and Lise are good friends who have much in common. Both are interested in film making and are part of a group of five girl friends who make a hobby of putting together short films that they write, direct and act in. Both young women are well liked by their peers and have a large social circle. Both have plans to pursue post-secondary education. Rose plans on becoming an elementary teacher and Lise, while passionate about film making is leaning towards nursing. Lise has explored film school but finds the high cost of tuition prohibitive. Both Lise and Rose are open and friendly.

The students were all keen to participate in this project expressing reasons such as an interest in research, a curiosity about what being a participant involved and the opportunity to learn more about how the media affected them. The participants all knew of each other, but only a few were from the same social groups.

Method:

For my research I explored whether on-screen, fictional portrayals of high school teachers affect student perceptions of their own teachers and how these perceptions affect student-teacher relations and expectations of classroom experience.

I began by having participants individually answer a short survey about their television and film viewing habits (see Appendix A). I did this in order to establish a point of comparison between participants and also to gain a better understanding about their viewing habits as well as their ideas about how they were impacted by what they watch on-screen. The survey questioned students about what they expected high school to be like and where they believe these expectations originated. It asked students to list all the movies and television shows that they watched that involved teachers or education. Students were then asked for their impressions on how teachers are portrayed in these shows and whether or not the students think the portrayals are realistic and relatable.

The surveys were completed individually in order to decrease direct peer influence of student answers.

After the questionnaire, I showed a ten minute montage highlighting famous teachers from contemporary popular culture. In choosing contemporary images, I wanted to ensure that the images presented were ones that the participants would be familiar with and subsequently would be able to connect most to, thus garnering the most amount of critical reflection. I choose video clips from *Glee*, *Summer Heights High*, *Half Nelson*, *Freaks and Geeks* and *The Simpsons*, all shows that I had previously discussed or heard discussed in my regular classroom. After viewing the montage together as a group, I facilitated a discussion in which the students discussed the images and their impressions of these images, how they felt they were affected by

them, what most stood out to them and why. Participants were also encouraged to discuss the questions from the survey as well as other topics that arose through the course of conversation regarding television shows and movies involving teachers. The focus group discussion was audio recorded. The names of all participants were changed in order to protect participant anonymity.

Following the focus group session on a separate day, I conducted one-on-one interviews with each of the participants in hopes of getting more in depth responses to the questions previously explored in the focus group and on the questionnaire. The interview questions were emergent and were drawn from the survey and from the focus group, as well, many questions were previously determined (see Appendix A). The questions were designed to be open-ended and semi structured in order to best allow participants to be expansive with their answers. The questions further explored students perspectives on how they believe themselves to be affected (or not) by what they watch on-screen and their impressions of how teachers are portrayed and inquired into how students view teachers in general. The interviews allowed for an opportunity to further question the students in an environment where participants did not have to be concerned about peer influence or reactions and they also provided the opportunity to further garner information about their thoughts and ideas on how they personally are affected by what they watch on-screen. The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed in order to analyze the data. To see a copy of the questions students were asked please see Appendix A.

The methodology I have just described was a good match for my questions because it allowed for an in-depth analysis of the student responses. As I have previously stated, in doing this research I am primarily interested in the how and why of human experience, and I believe that in order to best explore these ideas it was important for participants to be able to fully express themselves in an interview type environment rather than being constrained by something

such as a set multiple choice questionnaire. This specific methodology allowed me to spend an extended time with the participants, listening and learning from their ideas and experiences, and further for the student's voices to be front and center in the research. Throughout all of the interviews and focus group, I tried to distance myself as much as possible in order to allow for the students to voice their own opinions about the media and its influences.

Chapter 4: Findings

When I started this inquiry, I had two main questions guiding my research: how are young people affected by the images of teachers and schools they see on television and in the movies and how do their impressions affect what takes place in the classroom? Knowing how connected young people are to media, I wanted to explore this topic to see if there was any connection between the fictionalized and the actual classroom, both places students spend significant amounts of their time.

In conducting this research, I did not want to analyze television shows simply from my own perspective or from the perspective of other teachers. As evidenced by the literature review, much research has been previously conducted from this point of view. I wanted to talk to young people to uncover their opinions about how they are affected by what they watch. In research on the impact of media on young people, the voices of young people are silenced simply by not including their voices or own words to explain how they personally are impacted. Unfortunately, this silencing happens in our education system as well. In using data gleaned through interviews with high school students, I wish to validate the voices of the participants and learn from their insights.

Another direction this study could have but did not explore was semiotics; the relationship between images and their symbolic representations. As so much of what I discussed with the participants was based on visual texts, i.e. television and movies, I am sure that investigating this area at some other time from a pragmatic perspective would prove interesting and valuable.

I initially focused my research on the two questions posed above, and found that indeed there are many ways that young people are affected by the images of schools and teachers that they see on television and in the movies and this does have an effect on what takes place in classrooms, these many connections and impacts are explained in the following findings sections and further explained in my analysis.

In conducting this research I quickly realized that the ten participants had much more to say about the impact of media and the institution of public education than I had anticipated. I had designed my questions to be open-ended in hopes they would stimulate multifaceted and personal responses. Throughout my research I was continually impressed by the participants' understanding of the complexity of mass media, and their role in relation to it. Often our conversations went in directions that I had not expected and uncovered a mature and nuanced understanding of the impact of media and its relation to schooling.

Throughout the research several prominent findings emerged. In this section I will discuss these findings using the students' own words as much as possible. I will also offer my own insights and observations as a teacher and researcher to help frame participant responses. As author of this thesis, my voice will inevitably be present. As a teacher, the primary goal of this research is to reflect on, listen to and learn from the information the participants share. My hope is that the findings will help inform my practice as well as the practice of other educators.

Finding 1: High School as a Scary Place

“I think that if you’re not in high school and you’re watching all these shows about how terrible life is there, then you’re going to expect that.” - Jan

I began this research by having each participant complete a survey. The first questions I asked were: “Before you came to high school what did you think it would be like” and “Where do you think you got those ideas?” Students openly acknowledged that they were indeed affected by what they saw on TV and in movies. Interestingly, many of the participants commented that they were more affected by these images of high school and teachers before entering high school.

When asked the above questions, one participant Mai, a grade 12 student, answered:

I thought it would be a lot of fun and new experiences. It sounds cheesy, but I knew it would be four years of changing. Actually, I was expecting high school to be pretty hard core. Fights and drugs and parties and crazy shit. As a naive little grade eight who lashed out to be taken seriously, I WANTED high school to be hard core. Or at least I wanted to be hard core in high school.

I love the intensity and honesty of this response. It summarized so much of how many of my participants responded in terms of seeing high school as a place where they imagined themselves to finally be stepping into the world of adults. A place where they would be able to experiment with the trappings of adulthood or at least what they imagined to be adulthood. Mai’s response seems to focus more on the more extreme portrayals of high school, where “fights, and drugs and parties and crazy shit” are common place. Of course, these things do take place at high school, but usually not to the extent to which they are represented on-screen. When asked to think further on her expectations of high school and questioned on where she thinks these ideas

come from, Mai responded that her ideas came largely from movies. When other participants were asked this same question, they all responded that their ideas came from one or more of the following categories: media, television and movies, siblings, parents, and older friends. Eight of the ten participants listed the media, TV or the movies as one of the originators for their ideas, four also listed siblings, two cited their parents, and three mentioned older friends as the source of many of their preconceptions.

Elaborating on her “movies” response, Mai answered that her ideas came from:

Lots and lots of movies. And teenage stereotypes. When adults talk about school, about their past and their growing up; their awkward years and what defined them in their youth: they talk about high school. High school was always seen as a big deal. Not elementary, not middle, not junior high. High School. It was the real thing. “Oh in high school I was such a geek” “In high school I did so much crazy shit!” “Back in my high school days...” I got these Ideas from everything I’ve ever heard about growing up. Teenage rebellion, “kids these days”, bullies, puberty, drugs, sex, alcohol... Now that I think about it, you can tell that I got all my high school ideas from media because none of my assumptions are of school work, assignments, homework, textbooks... it’s all about the social politics of high school. (sic)

Like Mai, many of the students remarked that television and movies had contributed to many of the false ideas they had about what high school would be like, particularly in terms of the social aspect of school.

Another participant, Eli commented that he thought high school would be, “scary, intimidating and complicated”, however that when entering high school there was much less drama than what he had anticipated. He commented:

I remember going to high school for the first time and being totally surprised. I thought it would be a lot more difficult and complicated and there would be a lot more social issues.

When asked to expand on what he meant by complicated, Eli answered:

I mean like navigating around the teachers’ personalities and stuff, as well as there’s always the social aspect of high school and they always blow it out of proportion on TV and in movies and real life is more of a balance.

Many participants’ expectations, coming into high school, fell into stereotypical categories clearly influenced by what they saw on-screen. Kirt commented, “I thought that I would be pushed into lockers and picked on by seniors. I thought it wouldn’t be a nice place. I also thought that there would be a jock group, a nerd group etc...” Here we can see that even the language that Kirt uses to describe his high school expectations is influenced by the media. In the high school that these students attend, neither the students nor the faculty use the terms “seniors” or “juniors” to describe the students. This language, however, is typically used on television and in movies, particularly American representations of high school.

Mai, Eli and Kirt’s comments all highlight sentiments expressed by many of the students in this study. All felt that what they expected high school to be like was much different than what it was actually like, and most (eight out of ten) believed that the media played a role in influencing this skewed vision. In relation to my research questions, we see that on-screen

representations affected students' preconceived ideas and associated emotions such as the excitement and fear of entering high school.

Finding 2: TV VS the Real World

“My parents sometimes ask if that’s what school’s like and I’m like, no, that’s not what it’s like at all.” -Zoe

Participants' comments made it clear that they recognized the impact of what they watched on television and the movies. While self-reporting that they were influenced, participants were also able to critically reflect upon much of what they were watching. When I asked why television and movies often portray schools and teachers in an unrealistic manner, student's responses demonstrated a high level of understanding, both about themselves as consumers of media and about the media as an entertainment industry. The following dialogue came from the focus group interview. (Some of the dialogue may appear disjointed as students often interrupted and added on to what others are saying.)

Phillip: You don't want to watch a show that just shows what your average day is like

Zoe: or just like real life.

Mai: Yea, you want to watch something that isn't realistic, you want to live someone else's life.

Julian: I watch TV to escape, to get out of normal life, if there were just all these really, really old characters then you wouldn't want to watch it, it just reminds me of my day, I don't want to feel like I'm at school when I'm watching TV

Mai: My sister asked me yesterday why I like watching crappy shows. About rich people who do unrealistic things, and I was like, cause I never do that! I'm never going to do that, I'm never going to go there or say that to that person, and it's crazy, it's amazing and I love watching it!

This dialogue highlights the participants' understanding that television and movies are a form of entertainment. In many significant ways students are able to distinguish between what happens on-screen and "real" life. It also shows that young people are aware that through watching characters on-screen they can experience a form of escapism and vicariously experience a world very differently from their own.

When Lise was asked in a one-on-one interview how she felt she may be personally influenced by what she watches on-screen, she responded somewhat hesitantly that, "I think that it could be that if you watch these shows then they influence how you act." She then continued on with more confidence to say:

Well, actually, yea, because you see mean or popular girls talking meanly to people and I actually then think, gee, I really hope that I don't look like that when I'm talking to people. Or you watch a TV show and you see someone who is mean, well obviously you don't want to be a mean person, so when you see someone being really nice to someone really dorky then you're like, oh that looks really cool, and I want to be like that.

This response demonstrates the many ways on-screen media can influence viewers. Not only does Lise watch television and movies for entertainment, but her reflection on the portrayals and experiences of the fictional characters also influence her actions. After this comment I asked her if she thought that TV provided an opportunity to reflect on her own life. She responded: “yea, I think so.” And then insightfully added “although, someone else could watch something and think something different from it, like see a mean girl and think, oh that looks cool, I want to be like that.” Lise’s insightful responses indicate a high level of self-reflection. Not only does she use television and movies as a site for social learning, but she also demonstrates critical literacy skills in her understanding that others viewing the same shows may have an entirely different experience of the program based on their own individual experiences or personalities.

Adolescence is recognized as a time of profound growth, neurologically as well as emotionally and socially. During this time, when young people experiment with different roles in an attempt to discover who they are most comfortable being, many look to television and movies to help them navigate from adolescence to adulthood.

In a one-on-one interview with Julian, when asked about the possible effects of watching shows about schools had on him personally, he, like Lise, indicated that he uses television and movies as sites for vicarious social learning. He said:

Shows that are about high school are always showing conflict and to me they always look really stressful. It’s fun to watch if I put myself into the show, which is what I do when I watch, then I think that it [high school] would just be really stressful and unpleasant.

When questioned further about how he thought other students might be affected by what they watch, Julian responded:

I don't know, if they put themselves in the character's shoes then they would be affected by it and find it stressful, but if they are watching for entertainment which is why shows are created then its fine, I guess it really just depends on how they are watching the show.

Similar to Lise, Julian's comments suggest an understanding that different people utilize and interact with media in a variety of ways and a variety of purposes. While his interaction with media functioned as both entertainment and to gain a vicarious experience, he recognized that others may watch and have entirely different experiences.

Another similarity between Julian and Lise was that their ability to put themselves into the character roles they saw on-screen was done from a very personal point of view. Julian imagined what it would be like to experience what he saw on-screen, while Lise wondered how enacting what she saw on-screen—like the demonstrations of kindness and cruelty she mentioned—would be perceived and interpreted by others. Neither participant commented on how the characters to which they had no personal connection might think or feel. Their connection to the shows as they reported here was entirely linked to themselves or characters that were in some way similar to themselves.

Upon reflection, I wonder if the student responses are characteristic of a developmental stage in which adolescents are more focused on themselves and how they fit into the world. While participants responded to questions about on-screen teachers and made connections to their teachers in real life, their ability to imagine themselves in the roles of and empathize with the characters they viewed on-screen was limited to portrayals of students like them. Empathizing with teachers was never mentioned. Teachers seem to be firmly defined as the

“other”, since students did not report having imagined themselves in the place of an on-screen teacher.

Finding 3: Teachers On-screen: Fact or Fiction?

“When I watch shows about school I think ohh I would never want to be a teacher.” –Zoe

When asked the question, how are teachers shown on-screen, the participant’s answers were surprisingly similar. The responses demonstrated that the participants were not only affected by what they saw on-screen, but that these effects were indeed influencing their experiences and expectations in their classrooms. Zoe, a self-admitted television addict, answered this question with, “teachers are shown as like really old and unattractive, or really attractive, a seventy five year old women versus Dan Dunne or Mr. Shuster.” (Dan Dunne, played by Ryan Gosling is the teacher featured in the film *Half Nelson*, while Mr. Shuester, played Matthew Morrison, is a teacher in the television show *Glee*.) Lexi responded to this question commenting: “I think that most show teachers as really awful, or really nice, I don’t find that a lot of shows just have a midway.” She added to this comment further in her one-on-one interview commenting that, “teachers are definitely villainized on television; they are either shown as that super best friend with the shady morals or that super strict person.” Julian answered this question with, “teachers in shows are just teachers who don’t care at all about the students, or the teacher is just an unimportant very flat character who no one can really relate too.” Kirt commented that he thought “the media portrays them [teachers] as almost robotic.”

Students easily pointed out examples from television and film where teachers were seldom shown as having any sort of life outside of school and usually portrayed as stereotypes.

The word stereotype came up repeatedly in both the focus group and in the survey and interviews when referencing the roles that fictional teachers typically occupy. Wanting to probe this question further I asked: “Do you think that TV and movies show what schools and or teachers are really like?” Again student’s answers were multifaceted and insightful. Eli answered this question with:

No. I think that TV and film does a terrible job of portraying teachers. [The media] humour and shape the resentment felt by students towards their teachers. Instructors resembling Mrs. Crabapple (sic) are far and few between.

The teacher Eli refers to is the cartoon character Edna Krabapple, the bitter and unhappy fourth grade teacher featured on the television show *The Simpsons*. Answering another question related to this topic he said, “for the most part teachers are there because they want to help kids. If they didn’t, they wouldn’t be there in the first place.” What I find most interesting about his comment is that Eli clearly distinguishes between the fictional world of on-screen teachers and teachers in real life. He uses concrete examples to demonstrate that teachers in reality are typically much different than how they are shown on-screen. For example he says that on-screen teachers are, “typically shown as dull, mean, resentful and unrealistically radical.” Whereas he points out that in reality, “there are certainly dull teachers, well, Mrs. _ and they can be mean and resentful like Mr. _ but they are never like as dull or mean or harsh as they are on TV.”

His comments offer further insight into how young viewers are affected by what they watch. While he himself does not comment on being influenced, he astutely points out that the negative stereotypes which often define onscreen teachers may create and influence how students

come to feel about their teachers in real life, as seen by the comment “they humour and shape the resentment felt by students towards their teachers.”

When exploring why teachers are often shown in a negative or stereotypical fashion students responses were often both critically reflective and illuminating. Rose thought that shows tended to display teachers as being, “really awful or really nice” because when shown this way they are, “more exciting to watch” Mai commented that “You don’t want to watch a show that just shows what your average day is like”. Julian, a student highly involved in theatre and whose comments often reflected a high level of understanding about how media operates answered:

TV shows and movies about school tend to be aimed at the demographic of people who are still in school, so the teachers often become the antagonist and are made out to be very strict, mean or have some really awful fault... Shows about school tend to make the teachers out to be the antagonist but in real life teachers aren’t opposing us, in fact it’s their job to help us to succeed.

Julian recognizes the importance of the audience to which a show is aimed. Television and movies aimed at young viewers will often portray teachers negatively in order to appeal to their audience and to perhaps play upon some of the anxieties or fears students have towards teachers.

Wanting to question students about the unrealistic fashion in which teachers are shown in the media in comparison to how other professions are fictionalized, a difference I have noticed, I asked specifically how and why teachers might be shown differently from people in other professions, for example doctors or lawyers. Teachers are often shown to be exaggerated caricatures, who we seldom see having any sort of outer, or for that matter, inner life. While if you look at popular shows featuring lawyers and doctors such as *House*, *ER*, *Ally McBeal* or

The Good Wife, much of the action of the show focuses around the characters at work, but their personal and inner lives also play a key role. Furthermore, these characters are shown in a variety of roles. They are people with complex personalities, are not entirely “good” or “bad”, and ultimately tend to be shown in a more realistic light than are teachers. The following dialogue is how students in the focus group answered this question:

Eli: I think it’s because everyone has had a teacher

Julian: and they are catering to kids.

Zoe: Teachers are more resented because they are an authority figure.

Julian: Yea

Lexi- and everyone thinks that doctors and lawyers are sort of noble, but everyone, even parents, can relate to having shitty teachers in high school.

Zoe: Yea no one’s never not had a bad teacher.

Lexi: It’s a profession that’s not as respected.

Julian: Yea definitely

Zoe: Being a doctor you just automatically think of respect

Julian: Yea, you have to go to school for a long time so people think that you must be really smart

Lexi: whereas teachers you think, ohh, they must like kids...

This dialogue demonstrates what I also believe about why teachers are often shown in limited, stereotypical roles. The audiences of these shows are often students, who in their everyday lives, view teachers in a peripheral role to their social milieu. As well, and perhaps more importantly, the students indicated that a reason teachers are shown in limited roles may have to do with the minimal level of respect that exists in society towards teachers. While most

people associate doctors and lawyers with intelligence, teachers do not always conjure the same associations. Perhaps the profession is demystified due to the majority of us having had prolonged personal experiences with teachers during our own time in school. Or could it be that the ways in which teachers are shown on-screen influence how we come to see them? Whether the media reflects sentiments that already exist in the culture or vice versa is up for debate. Regardless, the on-screen message that teaching is not a respected profession is reflected in the participants' responses and in our culture in general. Although it would be nearly impossible to determine exactly where these ideas originated it is clear that students' sometimes negative view of teachers is reflected in the media that they watch.

Lexi later shared an anecdote from her life that relates to how teachers are viewed by society at large. Her interaction demonstrates that teachers themselves can even be responsible for propagating notions of teaching as a second class career choice. In this comment she tells of a conversation between herself and her physics teacher:

The minute I didn't want to be a teacher was when Mr. ___ was telling me about going to university and doing like all these cool courses on physics and astronomy and stuff and so I asked him, why did you decide to become a teacher and he was like, because I wasn't the brightest in my class, I figured there was nothing left to do but be a teacher.

Rose: That's depressing.

That is depressing. If teachers see their own career choice negatively, how do they expect others to think about them?

While the participants' comments mainly focused on the negative and limiting stereotypes that define teachers in the media, several students also commented about teachers

who were shown positively on-screen. Mrs. Frizzle, the cartoon teacher from the television show *The Magic School Bus* came up repeatedly as an example of an ideal teacher. Interestingly this show is written for an elementary school audience. Lexi commented:

I think when you are little, school is shown as exiting and learning is fun, like Ms. Frizzle, in *The Magic School Bus*, but when you are older, school gets sort of sidelined and other things are shown as more important. School isn't exciting anymore; it's just a place you have to go.

This comment made me wonder: What if more of our television shows featured schools as stimulating places that young people wanted to go, where teachers were respected and learning was valued? Would this in turn affect how students, teachers and society in general feel towards education? Or is it more likely that these shows would simply not be watched, deemed to be unexciting or too unrealistic?

Finding 4: Teachers as real people?

“I think seeing a teacher out and behaving like a normal person would be very strange.” -Lexi

Not surprisingly, there are many connections between the stereotypical ways in which teachers are portrayed on-screen and how students view their own teachers in real life. Julian reported:

Teachers [on-screen] are basically just pushed aside and are like really flat, side characters and you just think, oh I don't want to be like them, and you don't ever really know anything about them so you don't connect with them at all.

As highlighted in finding three, teachers on television and in movies are often depicted as stereotypes or unimportant supporting characters. They tend to make up the back drop of shows featuring high school and there is little attention paid to their lives outside of the classroom. The students were adept at pointing out the stereotypes and unrealistic manner in which teachers on-screen are shown; however, when referring to teachers in their own lives, many of the participants reported having difficulty seeing their own teachers as entirely real. While of course they know that their teachers must have lives outside of the classroom, this was not always expressed. Not thinking of their teachers as complex people with lives that exist beyond school may contribute to the students' feelings of disconnect between themselves and many of their teachers.

After I spoke with the students in the focus group and noticed the recurring idea that teachers were not truly seen as real people, I wanted to probe this topic further in the one-on-one interviews. In the interviews I asked the following questions, how do you feel when you encounter a teacher outside of school, like in the grocery store or the mall and why do you think you feel that way? The students' responses were quite telling. The words "weird", "strange" and "awkward" appeared frequently in the answers to this question. It was clear that encountering a teacher outside of school was often uncomfortable, and typically something that many of them tried to avoid. Lexi answered these questions saying:

It's really weird, it's been glorified. It's like that moment when you see them outside of their natural environment. It would be like seeing some kind of zoo creature wandering the streets, especially if it's a teacher that is not often open with students.

When questioned further she expanded on her response saying:

It's like everything is about routine, and if you are in the same environment day after day and you see that person and you associate them with different things. Like seeing your parents going clubbing or something would be really strange because you don't associate that with them like at all.

From her answers several ideas emerge. Lexi finds it strange to see teachers out in the world because she so strongly associates teachers with school. Seeing them outside of school puts them into an unfamiliar context. She later explains herself more fully, discussing that the awkwardness she feels when encountering a teacher in an unfamiliar context can often be directly related to the relationship that she has with the particular teacher. Lexi explains:

Where some teachers, it's almost more like a peer, you can feel comfortable talking openly and stuff, but some it's like a dominant relationship if that makes sense? I think that some teachers treat you more like peers and others don't and there is a big line between you. It's like old school and new school.

If Lexi encounters a teacher outside of school who she has a stronger personal relationship with, then seeing them out of the confines of school is less strange. A possible explanation for this discrepancy of experience may be that when meeting a teacher who she sees as being more "real" it is not such a large cognitive leap to imagine the teacher with a life outside of school. Another interesting point she makes is the idea that it is often the teacher who creates a line or

barrier between themselves and their students. Ultimately, if the teacher is someone who is open and treats the student as an equal then there is also less discomfort for the student when encountering the teacher outside of school.

The imbalance of power as a source of awkwardness was an idea brought up by other students as well. Eli astutely points out: “well it’s weird because in school the teachers have authority and then you see them in real life and they don’t have any authority over you. It’s kinda weird because they treat you like equals and you’re just so confused.” Eli’s comments complement Lexi’s by highlighting the idea that in school there is a clear hierarchy, while outside of school this does not exist. Eli further adds to his statements by bringing up the idea that another reason students may be uncomfortable with teachers outside of school is that the students do not always treat or view teachers as real people. He says “if you are disrespecting them at school, then you see them somewhere like the mall or something, you don’t really think about them like a real person, or having lives outside of school, then it’s really weird.” I asked Eli to explain his comments, in particular why he thinks that students wouldn’t see teachers as real people and he answered this question with: “it just doesn’t really occur to you because they have one role in your life only, so when you see them outside of school they have a different role.” He added to this comment later when discussing seeing a particular teacher out of school: “it makes you think about their life outside of school and you think about what they might be doing for the rest of the day, you know, other than marking tests.”

These comments highlight the cognitive dissonance, or uncomfortable tension experienced when people have opposing thoughts about the same subject, and seemed to be often experienced by students when seeing a teacher in an unfamiliar role. While for some students the reasons for this dissonance may be the disruption of the power imbalance that schools enforce,

for others it is clearly an issue with coming to terms with the idea that teachers can occupy more than one role in life. Zoe shared an anecdote about being at work one day and seeing two of her teachers come in together. These two teachers recently entered into a relationship with one another. Her comments further support the idea that cognitive dissonance is created when students are forced to see teachers as real people, with real lives. Zoe said: “One time at work, Mr. _ and Ms. __ came in together, and I’ve had them both as teachers and now they are dating. That is strange.” I asked her to elaborate on what was strange about that experience for her and she replied, “I don’t know, it’s just weird because you don’t think about them like that, and they have both been my teachers. It’s just strange because they both are teachers.” Zoe was unable to fully express what about this experience was so “strange” to her. However, from her comments it is clear that the romantic lives of her teachers were not something that she typically thought about. Seeing her two teachers together forced her to think about them in a context outside of her comfort zone. Thinking about her teachers’ personal lives aroused previously unconsidered questions, which in an attempt to answer, likely elicited the sort of empathy many of us normally reserve for friends, relatives, and even strangers, but less often for those with whom our interactions and relations have been limited to institutional settings and prescribed roles. To balance these two identities and still maintain both the utilitarian function of the institutional in the face of the natural poses a cognitive and emotional dilemma that is difficult to articulate, yet acutely felt.

When answering this question, Rose and Lise were the only students who did not find it awkward to see their teachers outside of school. However, they both reported that when younger, they definitely felt uncomfortable when this would happen. I asked why she does not feel as awkward now when compared to when she was younger, Lise responded, “well, I think now I

see teachers more as people because I am more of a person, and we just do more of the same things.” Lise’s ability to see her teachers beyond their roles in the classroom seems to have a direct impact on her also seeing them as real people. Rose, a student who plans to be a teacher, answered similarly saying, “I remember in elementary school that [seeing a teacher out of school] would have been really weird because you know, you think teachers live at school, but now I know teachers don’t live at school.” I asked her if when she was younger, she truly believed that teachers lived at school and she responded, “It was more that you just didn’t think about it, like I saw them at school, and then I left and then I wouldn’t see them again until I was back at school.”

As much as many fictional teacher characters in television and movies only form the periphery of school life, many teachers in reality, despite spending large amounts of time with students, only seem to impact the periphery of student’s lives. Perhaps because of this, teachers are often seen by students as one dimensional and not entirely real. During the focus group Julian, Zoe and Eli offered the following insights when discussing teachers on-screen,

Julian: I find that if they humanize the teachers and do show them outside of the class that you feel much more of a connection to them.

Zoe: They are more likable characters if they are shown outside the classroom. That’s just like teachers we have, if they open up about their personal lives and say, ‘you know, me and so and so,’ you like them more, they become people, not just,

Eli: authority figures,

Zoe: exactly, people telling you what to do.

These comments offer telling insight into how teachers can connect to and build relationships with students. While I don't think that it is appropriate to tell students all the intimate details of our personal lives, and nor do I believe students would want to know these details, if teachers are able to find ways to connect personally and be real with students, students are in turn are going to be able to better relate and ultimately see teachers less as just, "people telling you what to do" and more as real people.

Finding 5: Teachers and Gender

"Female teachers are always the mean, psycho ones, the ones who freak out" –Rose

When starting this research I had not initially planned on investigating how male and female teachers were represented on-screen. However, this topic emerged naturally from the conversation with the students in the initial focus group and as a result; I chose to question participants on this topic in the one-on-one interview.

When discussing the topic of how male and females are shown on-screen, students quickly commented on the many incongruities that exist in these representations. Julian commented that in the media:

Men are shown to be super sexy and awesome and female teachers are all old and mean. They only show the extremes, well I guess some shows have hot female teachers, but not that many. You never have really average looking teachers. I think this may sound sexist, but girls are more likely going to say, 'oh that guy is hot, I'm going to watch that show',

where guys don't really care if there is a hot teacher, guys don't really have the same motives for watching shows.

While I agree with Julian that some men and women may have different motives in choosing what shows to watch, his supposition that females are motivated to watch something because of an attractive character does sound sexist. Julian is, however, an intelligent and thoughtful individual. His comment is disconcerting in its revelation of a deep-seated gender stereotyping that is prevalent among both male and female students. Most problematic about this stereotyping is that it is so frequently unchallenged or critically examined.

During the one-on-one interview with Jan and Eli, similar ideas emerged. They also found that male teachers are often shown more favourably on-screen and many of their comments also reveal the existence of a deeper gender prejudice.

Jan: I think they [males and females] are definitely shown differently, I think that if it's a show about the younger grades, elementary school, then the female teachers are always shown as nicer and they are more of a mom figure and once you reach high school they become like the worst teacher you could think of, like really witchy and naggy, like a terrible mom.

At this point I asked Jan and Eli how they thought that male teachers are represented on-screen, they responded,

Jan: they always seem to be the buddy buddy teacher in high school and in elementary school I can't even think of a male teacher that is shown.

Eli: Yea it's always a female teacher in those roles.

Researcher: What do you think it is actually like when you come to school, do you notice a difference between your female and male teachers?

Jan: I think so, but that varies for everyone.

Eli: Yea, like if you are a guy then you can relate more to a male teacher and if you are a girl to the female teacher.

Jan: I disagree with that, like I've had the opposite experience. I think I relate more to my male teachers, but then there are way less female teachers that I've had. I think that it's easier to see the female teachers as naggy, because you relate back to home and think about how your mom is, but male teachers can be really mean, like the harshest, and raising their voices and stuff and you don't really see that on TV, you see more of the buddy buddy male teachers. They are the ones that get furiously angry with students.

In the focus group Lexi observed that the media often glorifies the role of male teachers in a school, not only because of their positions, but also in terms of the subjects that they teach. She pointed out that the subjects which society often views as being more respected are typically shown on-screen as being taught by male teachers. She said, "I feel like they also cater to like math teachers or science teachers, like at the senior levels. They are more respected than kinda like an English teacher or something." When I asked the group why they thought this might be the case, several students responded,

Lexi: Well, I think it's society

Eli: It means you're smarter if you teach it.

Julian: Really?

Eli: Well yea

Lexi: It's a stereotype though

Rose: It's not fair.

Zoe: I wonder how teachers like Mr. R [a teacher several of the students had in middle school] would be affected like if they had a different sex, like if he was a woman.

This conversation highlights several things. Firstly the participants are easily able to point out that gender inequalities do exist, both on-screen and in their own lives. While able to recognize that the stereotypes exist, unfortunately the students appeared to be complacent towards them or like Rose, felt this was unfair but nonetheless distanced themselves from being responsible for any stereotyping that they might personally be responsible for.

As a female teacher I have often wondered about whether I would be treated any differently by my students if I was male. This is a topic that I have heard many other female teachers discuss in passing conversations. The idea that males have more natural authority and are better able to control a classroom is a subject that often arises among female colleagues. I often find this line of thinking questionable and curious. While there are males who use their stature and lower, louder voices to command attention, this is neither a style of authority that I am able to adopt given my smaller stature nor one with which I am personally comfortable. The idea of males having more natural authority than females appeared again in a one-on-one interview with Lise and Rose. I asked the participants if they thought that males and female teachers are shown differently on TV and in movies, and they responded,

Rose: When you look at the teachers that are shown as life changing they are all men.

Lise: I'm trying to think of cool teachers that everyone likes and they are all men, I can't think of any women.

Rose: Women are always considered bitchy.

After commenting on how teachers are represented on-screen the participants connected what is shown in the media to their own lives. After listening to their conversation above, I couldn't help but wonder if their impressions were in any way influenced by what they were seeing onscreen, especially as they were finding that what they were watching on-screen closely resembled their experiences in real life.

The participants continued the discussion adding,

Lise: Guys are like chill, easy going, [she proceeded to tell a story about teacher-on-call (TOC) who was in her classroom earlier in the week. The TOC, a young, attractive male, was popular with the students] and I can't see a women teacher being like that, I think she would be more like, "these are the rules and we should follow them".

Rose: It might be an authority thing; they might be scared that they are going to be taken advantage of.

Lise: And men already have that right off the bat, like they are the authority figure.

I asked if it was possible for women to get authority and if there are any female teachers that they know of who have it? Lise's response was telling. She commented, "I think that male teachers just have that authority like right from the get go, but can lose that authority, but female teachers have to gain that authority, gain that sort of respect." Whether the students' impressions about male and female authority came from past experience or from the media is difficult to

determine. The students recognized this power imbalance between the sexes reflected in both real life and on-screen and assumed its presence to have roots in history or nature. I asked the participants why they thought that men have more authority, and they responded saying,

Lise: Just from the ages.

Rose: Or history I guess, they just have it naturally I guess.

Again, I find the evidence of this ingrained stereotype disturbing. It seems that such notions of authority with respect to men and woman are not something students are, at this point, inclined to question. While not necessarily its fault, the media does seem to play a role in perpetuating this already existent prejudice.

In my own analysis of on-screen teachers I can think of many inspiring and life changing female teachers, women such as Louanne Johnson from *Dangerous Minds* and Erin Gruwell from *Freedom Writers*. It is interesting to note that both of these women are young and attractive, while males in similarly inspiring roles do not seem to require the same appealing physical characteristics. I wonder if this sexualization of females in powerful roles takes away from how seriously they are considered by their school-aged audiences. Does the sexualization of the female characters overshadow these inspiring examples of teaching?

The topic of teachers and gender evoked some revelatory conversation. Ultimately it led to more questions than it did answers. The questions of teachers and gender, both in-class and on-screen certainly warrant further research. The discussion highlighted a recurrent question about the media and society; does the media reflect society or does society reflect the media it consumes?

Chapter 5: Analysis

In codifying this data I personally transcribed all of the interviews as well as the focus group and survey. As I was transcribing I made notes on potential themes. As I continued to transcribe and listen to the audio recorded conversations I would add to or expand on existing themes. After the transcription was complete I spent many, many hours over several days reading and re-reading the transcriptions in order to fully immerse myself in the ideas and language of the participants. While reading I would add to or expand on previously identified themes. The themes were further identified using a colour coded system.

My research pursued questions of how young people are affected by images of teachers and schools they see on television and in the movies and how these impressions in turn influence what takes place in the classroom. While there are many ways that on-screen portrayals of teachers and schools affect what takes place in the classroom, the findings of this study revealed several key themes that offer insight in response to the above questions. The three main themes, distinct yet intimately connected, are: 1. Expectations that the media creates around schooling; 2. Identity, in terms of how the media contributes to students' perceptions of themselves and others; and in relation to this, with a focus on gender, and 3. The discrepant critical literacy skills students exhibit in response to television and movies.

Expectations

The first key theme that surfaced from the findings was that students are indeed influenced by what they view on-screen. This influence is seen in their resultant expectations of teachers and of school in general. As James Fiske (1989) writes:

Many of the popular ideas about and images of life in schools, evident in diverse symbolic forms current in popular culture, are indeed comfortable. And they can be powerful as well, sometimes nourishing the imagination regarding what schooling is or might be and at other times affirming opinions that simplify, distort, or deny important dimensions of school experience. At any event, popular culture shapes the possibilities of what does and might take place in schools, by way of its impact on how we think about such things (15).

Fiske points out that popular culture contributes to and “shapes” not only how we think about school but also what actually goes on in school. Strong evidence that media contributes to how students’ view school and their teachers came up repeatedly in the findings.

The participants drew direct connections between what they viewed in the media and what they thought school would be like. Participants noted that high school in particular was depicted in the media as a negative place. While their expectations before high school rarely matched the reality of high school, students’ experiences are impacted by their expectations.

I have often wondered about the decidedly different attitudes that elementary students display towards learning and school in general compared to high school students. Having spent some time in elementary classrooms, both as a volunteer and as a teacher on call, I am always surprised by the exuberance and genuine excitement that elementary students generally have in

regards to education. This is in marked contrast to high schools where students are often derided by their peers for completing homework or being too “keen” in class. While it is impossible to know for certain how much high school students’ inner lives reflect exhibited behaviour, the culture and overall feeling of high school students towards education is typically one of resignation, with occasional open resistance and the odd glimpse of enthusiasm. If the messages students receive on a daily basis from the media show high school to be a largely negative place, it is not entirely surprising that their attitudes reflect this expectation.

The expectations that students have towards their teachers are also connected to the images that they see reflected in popular culture. While many students in this study had positive experiences of teachers, it was often the negative experiences that occupied more of their stories in the interviews. A common thread was that because teachers are authority figures in the school system, they are in a naturally oppositional position to students. That students pointed out the negative manner in which teachers are shown on-screen is no surprise. As Fisher et.al. (2008) point out, “ a degree of discomfort and resentment is almost inevitable, as teachers are employed to make people do things they would not necessarily choose to do at that point in time, even where there is a reasonable consensus about the general value of education”(63). This quote was echoed in students’ explanations of why they think teachers are often portrayed negatively on-screen. Such comments as, “it’s because everyone has had a teacher”, imply that given the many years most people spend in educational institutions, everyone is bound to experience a bad teacher. Participants also pointed out that “teachers are more resented because they are an authority figure,” and that, in society, “ [teaching is] a profession that’s not as respected.” The research confirmed that student expectations of school are shaped by the media and that students often draw on the media to help them understand their experiences in school. This reflective

relationship between the media and its consumers not only set expectations but contributes to identity formation.

Identity

Andrew Light (2003) comments that popular culture texts are powerful and informative sites that contribute to identity formation, not only influencing how we see ourselves but also how we come to see others. He finds that such texts do not “merely represent individuals and groups but also help to actually create understandings of who we think we are, how we regard others and how members of groups identify and understand their group membership and their obligations to that group” (99). Light’s comments strongly connect to the findings in this study in terms of the media’s influence on how young people come to see themselves and their place in the world. As stated in the literature review section, identity is not fixed but can, rather, be seen as changeable depending on the particular environment in which one finds oneself. Hagood (2002) writes that:

Identities are produced in texts- in discourses or interpellations. The common thought is that readers learn about their own identity from the identities they read about in texts, no matter if the text is a print text such as a novel, a visual text like clothing in a fashion magazine or attire worn to school, a spoken text such as subcultural slang, or a digital text like a webpage (251).

Many of the participants in this study commented on the ways in which they connected personally to the media that they consumed. While some indicated that they often watched shows for entertainment, others recognized they often connected with what they saw on a personal level

and even imagined themselves in the roles of particular characters. In this way, they were able to recognize that they used what they viewed as a practice ground or a site for social learning as described by Brown (2002) when she describes cognitive social learning theory which explains that viewers will often imitate or avoid behaviours they view in the media depending on if those behaviours are rewarded or punished. In this study I observed this in many of the participant's responses. Julian, for instance, commented that he enjoyed television and movies more when, "I put myself into the show, which is what I do when I watch". Lise reflected on her use of TV and movies as a site for personal reflection. Stating that she often noticed how characters on-screen behaved and that, depending on how she wanted to be viewed by others, she would either model or avoid such behaviours. She notes that when watching a show she often thinks to herself, "I really hope that I don't look like that" or adversely, "oh that looks really cool, I want to be like that." TV and movies were influential in helping Julian and Lise explore and experiment with their own identities.

Other participants, while emphasizing that they watched TV and movies for entertainment purposes, still suggested that these shows played a role in influencing their identity formation. Mai indicated that she watched particular shows purely for entertainment purposes, but non-the-less still reflected on the characters actions and how they related to her personally. She noted, "I'm never going to go there or say that to that person, and it's crazy, it's amazing and I love watching it." In recognizing the unrealistic and contrary nature of what she views in the media, Mai's identify formation is based on the negation of what she sees instead of the adoptive tendencies exhibited by Julian and Lise.

It is important to note that individuals watching the same shows may have entirely different experiences of that show. This was something recognized and commented on by the

participants. Lise and Julian both point this out, demonstrating a nuanced understanding of how individuals are affected by texts to which they are exposed. They found that where one person chooses to disregard a certain image, another may find the same image appealing. Different individuals may also focus and reflect on entirely different aspects of characters of the same program, depending on who they are and where their interests and tendencies lie. In this way the relationship between identity formation and television and the movies is complex and highly variable depending on the individual.

As Light (2003) points out, texts have the power to not only influence how we come to see ourselves, but also how we see others. This idea was also strongly reflected in this research. The participants noted many times that on-screen teachers are portrayed in a stereotypical fashion, often, as Julian says, as “unimportant very flat character[s] who no one can really relate too.” While the students were quick to recognize that these stereotypes existed in the media, their comments also revealed a tendency to view their teachers in a similarly stereotypical light. This was most noticeable when students were asked to discuss how they felt about seeing their teachers outside of the school environment. Their answers demonstrated a curious disconnect between an acceptance that teachers are not the “flat characters” they are often depicted as in the media and their own narrow conceptions of teacher identity, especially when it came to imagining who their teachers are outside of the school setting. They themselves often failed to recognize teachers as complete and multidimensional individuals. In fact, many of the participants considered teacher identity only in their professional capacity. Eli’s comments summarize many of the sentiments expressed by the participants when he says, “If you are disrespecting them [teachers] at school, then you see them somewhere like the mall or something, you don’t really think about them like a real person, having lives outside of school”.

As evidenced by Eli's comment, student conceptions of teachers are often as limited as media portrayals in that each is rarely explored below the surface and beyond the school setting.

It is not surprising that television and movies often portray teachers as one-dimensional and that this is also how many students see teachers in their own lives. This relates directly to the work of Farber, Provenzo, and Holm (1994) who find that "what individuals learn at a distance by way of mass media sources is increasingly fundamental to how they think about various aspects of their lives" (10). The portrayal of teachers as one-dimensional or in stereotypical roles also connects to the work of Fisher, Harris, and Jarvis (2008) who point out that teachers in popular culture tend to be portrayed in two basic ways; what they identify as the "good teacher" or the "sad and bad teacher". This binary opposition of stereotype is further supported in the work of Mitchell and Weber (1999), Daspit and Weaver (1999), and Moore (2004).

While students many not always recognize the ways they are influenced by the images they view, their comments reveal that they are influenced in a multitude of ways. The ways that students reacted to on-screen portrayals of females and males and how they evaluated their own male and female teachers provided evidence for the influence of media on conceptions of gender roles.

Gender Identity

Harry Judge (1995) writes:

“The images of teachers which we construct often reveal at least as much about us as about them. For that very reason the analysis of such images always uncovers a rich set of beliefs and assumptions. The expectations which we have of teachers reflect our own interpretations of the meaning of the dominant culture within any society, of the social patterns that should be preserved or challenged, of the nature of the family, of the placing of the boundary between the public and the private” (253).

I find this quote to be particularly telling. It highlights the importance of examining and questioning the texts that we consume. It also speaks to the implicit idea of critical literacy that all texts are loaded and convey messages. The messages that media conveys concerning gender can be particularly damaging in the limits they prescribe to both female and male teachers. The participants in this research made many strong comments about the role that gender plays in forming a teacher’s identity. While they were quick to identify the stereotypical ways in which men and women were represented on-screen, their perceptions of real life individuals were often not that different. The basic stereotype expressed by the participants can be summed up with Julian’s comment: “Men are shown to be super sexy and awesome and female teachers are all old and mean. They only show extremes”.

Participants repeatedly pointed to the polarized and simplified ways in which males and females were shown in the media. Many observed that when a show was aimed at an elementary audience, the teacher was almost exclusively kind, matronly, and female. However, as Jan reports, by the time students get to high school “[females] become like the worst teacher you

could think of, like really witchy and naggy.” Where does this polarized view of women teachers come from and how are students who view these programs influenced by what they see?

Interestingly, while adept at pointing out the stereotypes, students in this study fell short of critically assessing or questioning their own stereotypical assessments of teachers. In fact, when asked about their own teachers, participants’ views often coincided with the stereotypes presented in popular culture. Perhaps this is not surprising given Iyengar’s comments, that:

People use the stories they see both in the news and in entertainment media as reference points about what’s important and to compare what they already know, or think they know about what’s good and bad, and what should be done about problems. The results often reinforce stereotypes and help define what is considered appropriate and inappropriate behaviour in the culture (44) (Iyengar, 1991, as cited in Brown, 2002).

While able to identify stereotypes in the media, participant’s views appeared to be reinforced by what they saw on-screen. Jan confirms this in her comments, “I think I relate more to my male teachers [...] I think that it’s easier to see the female teachers as naggy.” She had previously identified this same difference between the depictions of male and female teachers in the media, and while she recognized it as unfair, she too applied the same blanket stereotype to her own female teachers. As an outside observer of these comments I wonder to what extent Jan’s media-influenced expectations create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Resigned to the belief that females are going to be “naggy”, it would appear that the on-screen depictions she reported viewing indeed influenced her ideas of real-life teachers.

Another disturbing way that participants reported a gender bias towards teachers was in the level of respect that students and popular culture afford male and female teachers. Lexi

observed that in the media, male teachers are often shown to be teaching more “respectable” subjects, such as science and math, whereas females tended to be shown teaching English, a subject that Lexi suggested was not as well respected and one that other participants seemed to think was a subject you didn’t need to be as “smart” to teach. These ideas are hardly new, and are commented on by Alsup (2006). She states:

Women educators historically have been associated with the bodily or physical and the emotional aspects of knowledge, whereas men have been identified as possessors of the superior intellectual or rational capabilities. These hypotheses of male/female teacher identity are clearly reductive in their binarism (26).

While the ideas may not be new, they remain troublesome. The participants repeatedly commented on the different levels of respect that male and female teachers were given, both on-screen and in their own lives and, as with the above examples, they rarely seemed to question or reflect upon their own part in perpetuating and supporting these views. As humans, we naturally categorize the world around us and the tendency to stereotype is a feature of this organizational urge. This tendency, while having some positives, also lends itself to an over-simplification at times and ultimately leads to an underestimation of those who fall victim to its inaccuracies.

What struck me most significantly about many participant responses around gender and stereotypes was the contrast between their ability to identify stereotypes but their ironic inability to recognize or question their own perpetuation of the very same stereotypes. This glaring incongruity is likely rooted in a lack of critical literacy skills. While not entirely absent, student participants in this study demonstrated a definite need for improved skills in this area.

Critical Literacy Skills

As mentioned several times throughout this analysis, participants displayed some key critical literacy skills. They were, however, also noticeably lacking in some areas, namely in their ability to recognize how their ideas were informed by the very stereotypes they were able to critique in the media. As outlined in the literature review, critical literacy skills are essential in today's media-filled world. Being able to analyze, question, reflect on, and evaluate the texts that we encounter is vital if one is to participate autonomously in the world around them.

There were many ways in which the students in this study displayed a high level of critical facility when reflecting on the television and movies they encountered in their lives. For instance, participants understood that shows could be watched in different ways and for different purposes. They also identified that different people could watch the same show but have entirely different experiences of that show and in turn be affected in completely different ways. Participants were also adept at understanding that media is usually designed to entertain and generate a profit more so than it is intended to altruistically educate its consumers. They pointed out that different shows cater to different audiences and were easily able to point out specific shows and the different target audiences at which each was aimed. As seen in the identity and gender section, students were also skilled at identifying stereotypes within popular culture. However, while being able to identify stereotypes, they were less skilled at questioning and reflecting upon their own stereotypical attitudes.

It is widely understood that all texts convey messages. Some messages are straight forward while others are more subtle and underlying. While students were able to identify both types much of the time, they lacked the ability to recognize the influence of the more subtle

messages had on their own thinking. This was particularly evident in terms of students' conceptions of gender. It was clear to me in examining the findings that young people today have a wide array of critical literacy skills but lack insight in the area of self-reflection. While often adept at reading between the lines of the texts in front of them, the participants were less capable of perceiving the inscriptions such texts left on their own minds.

Kellner and Share (2007) point out that “critical media literacy brings an understanding of ideology, power, and domination that challenges relativist and apolitical notions of most media education in order to guide teachers and students in their explorations of how power and information are always linked” (61). It is exactly this use of critical skills that was absent from the students' responses and understandings of the on-screen media they consumed. While demonstrating a surface ability analyze texts, the students, did not appear to probe these same texts to identify ingrained notions of “ideology, power and domination” in their own minds. This self-reflective component of critical literacy needs to be examined. This lack of skills informs my suggestion in the summary section for a more comprehensive and reflective approach to teaching critical literacy skills in schools.

Chapter 6: Summary

Throughout this research I was continually impressed by the thoughtful comments and insight provided by the participants. At the start of this project I had hoped to gain further understanding into how young people are affected by the images of teachers and schools that they see on-screen, on television and in movies, and how these impressions in turn affect what takes place in the classroom. My research uncovered other questions as well. The main findings of my research were that television and movies do not accurately portray high school life and that while students are generally adept at telling the difference between reality and fiction, they are none-the-less, affected by what they see on-screen. In terms of how teachers are represented, the participants largely reported that teachers are not portrayed realistically, but are instead often stereotyped and featured as background characters who are rarely shown engaged in life outside of school. Interestingly, when reporting on how they view their own teachers, many students' comments reflected that they also have difficulty in seeing their teachers as entirely real. With respect to gender and its influence, participants reported that both on- and off-screen female teachers were often seen as having less "natural" authority, were taken less seriously, and given less respect than their male counterparts.

How Can these Findings Inform us as Educators?

The Need for Critical Media Literacy

This research has been hugely revealing to me as an educator. While many of the ideas expressed by the participants were not surprising, there were many more that have caused me to reflect not only on my own practice but also on the values and direction of our education system.

The need for schools to incorporate a critical media literacy program into the curriculum is glaringly obvious. Media education is a standard learning outcome in some provinces (Ontario is one example), but remains curiously absent from the British Columbia curriculum. As media forms an increasingly large part of our lives, critical media literacy skills are becoming more and more important in order to help foster and maintain an informed and democratic society. While my study focused on fictional television programs and movies, students are interacting with many more forms of media on a daily basis; the internet, magazines, radio, video games, and books constitute some but by no means all of the media that influence and reflect the realities of young people from a very early age. My findings reveal that many students can astutely decipher messages in the media; however, there still remained a noticeable lack of understanding and critical reflection in areas like, for example, how gender is portrayed on-screen. By incorporating critical media literacy skills into the curriculum, (and importantly, across the curriculum) schools will not only make learning more relevant to students' lives, but also be teaching crucial skills necessary to help navigate and participate in the 21st century.

The Need for Authentic Interactions

In real estate, location, location, location is a common mantra for wise property investments. In education, a comparable mantra could be relationships, relationships, relationships for teachers wishing to invest in successful learning environments. Time and again the participants in this study expressed the idea that in order for teachers to be seen as real people by their students they had to act like real people. While this may seem obvious to the outside observer, it is not always obvious or easily achieved. With all the pressure to ensure our students

meet curricular outcomes, to maximize student potential, to stay relevant with 21st century learning practices etc., many teachers forget that a key component to learning is the connection they have with their students. Students commented that they do not relate to on-screen teachers who are unexamined beyond their classroom roles. They connected this to their own lives and said that if they do not have any sense of who their teachers are beyond school that they are usually unable to connect to that teacher as a real person.

In closing, I will end with some sage advice from Jan, Lise, and Mai, advice that all teachers could benefit from following if they seek to develop authentic interactions with their students.

Jan: I like the teachers in Dead Poet's Society, Freedom Writers and Magic School Bus, because they actually care about their students as whole people, not just whether or not they do good in their class.

Lise: I think it's important for teachers to be able to talk to kids, sort of like friends, I think that's important otherwise they won't get respect.

Mai: I relate most to the kinds of teachers that can speak on the same level as students and have interesting things to say. The ones that are honest about what they think and don't filter things just to keep that gap between the students and teachers, and I think that is the same for anyone though. You get along best with people you can relate to.

The vast majority of teachers enter the profession because they care about young people. They care about playing a role, however small, in helping inspire and guide students into adulthood so that they will contribute to society and a positive future for all. So much of what we end up "teaching" in the classroom has nothing to do with curriculum goals. As teachers we

must not lose sight of the fact that we are constantly on display and that our interactions with our students also teach them valuable lessons; lessons about whose voices are heard or not heard, about how we value students' opinions, about gender and its implications, and about how to treat one another happen every day. How we behave and interact with students does have an impact, and the more we can reveal our humanity to our students, the more they will be able to connect with and learn from and with us.

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Appendix A

Invitation to participate in research

English 11 and 12 teachers: please read the following to your class.

Ms. Brach a teacher here at Reynolds is conducting research for her master's thesis through UVIC. She is studying how teachers and schools in general are shown or represented in TV and movies. In particular she is looking at how students your age are affected or influenced by what they see on-screen. She is looking for several people in grade 11 and 12 who would be willing to be involved in this research. There are no marks attached to this research it is purely voluntary and will take about two hours of your time. If you are interested in being involved in this research please meet Ms. Brach in room 138 tomorrow at lunch time to get more information.

Participant Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a study entitled: Exploring the Impact of On-screen Teachers on Real World Classrooms that is being conducted by Laurel Brach.

I am a Graduate Student at the University of Victoria in the department of Curriculum and Instruction and you may contact me if you have any questions at laurel_brach@yahoo.com. As a Graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a Masters of Arts in Education. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Kathy Sanford. You may contact my supervisor at 250-721-6570.

Research Goals: This research is exploring the ways that fictional teachers are shown on-screen in television and in movies and how these portrayals may affect how high school students see their own teachers.

Research of this type is important in that it can provide researchers and educators alike with valuable information regarding the impact of the media on young people. It can further provide insight into young people's opinions and impressions of their schooling experiences.

Informed Consent

I agree to take part in the above University of Victoria research. Being part of the research is voluntary and I can leave at any stage without being disadvantaged in any way.

I understand that agreeing to take part means that I am willing to:

- Participate in a focus group and an individual interview that requires me to respond to questions concerning how teachers and schools are represented on-screen in TV and in movies.

I understand that any information I provide is anonymous, and that no information that could lead to the identification of any individual will be disclosed in any reports on the project, or to any other party. Due to the nature of focus groups, I understand that my identity will be known to some other research participants.

Further use of data

I agree that the information provided can be used in the context of research theses, conference presentations and/or publication in academic journals associated with the University of Victoria.

Upon completion of this project, the researcher may want to use words and data collected from this project for other educational purposes including but not limited to presentations to peers at conferences, for further research or to students in lectures. By participating in the focus groups and/or individual interviews, you are consenting to the following statements:

- The words of my responses can be used for educational purposes.
- The words of my responses can be used in further research projects which have ethics approval.
- The data from my responses can be used in further research projects which have ethics approval.

I have had the project explained to me, and I have read the participant consent form which I keep for my records.

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

You may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the:

Human Research Ethics Office, University of Victoria

Phone: 250-472-4545

Email: ethics@uvic.ca

Survey Questions

Name:

1. Before you came to high school what did you think it would be like?
2. Where do you think you got those ideas?
3. In what ways was high school similar or different from what you expected?
4. What TV shows or movies have you seen that involve schools and or teachers? Make a list of all you can remember watching.
5. Look at your list from question 3, and describe how are teachers typically portrayed or shown in these shows? (For example, are they realistic? Kind? Mean? Etc...)
6. In what ways are the teachers that you listed above similar or different to teacher that you know in real life?
7. Which of the teachers that you listed in question 3 do you relate to or like the most? Why do you think you like these teachers the most?
8. Do you think that TV and movies show what schools and or teachers are really like? Please explain your answer.

Focus Group Discussion Questions

(To be asked orally by researcher and discussed by students)

1. After watching the video clips which images of teachers stand out most strongly to you?
2. Why do you think that particular image(s) or teachers stood out most to you?
3. Do you think that these portrayals show what teachers are really like?
4. Why or Why not?
5. Why do you think that movies and TV might not show teachers as real people in the same way they might when showing a doctor or lawyer for example?
6. Who do you think is writing the stories on TV and in movies? (Think about age, gender, socioeconomic status)
7. Why do you think the writers are writing the stories that we are seeing today?
8. How influenced do you think you are by what you see on TV or in movies?
9. Do you think that other people are more or less influenced in comparison to you?

One-on-one Interview Questions

NAME:

1. In TV/ movies, is high school shown as a positive or a negative or a neutral place? Explain?
2. Why do you think this happens?
3. What do you think the effect of this is on students watching the shows?
4. How do you think male and female teachers are shown differently on TV?
5. Why do you think this happens?
6. How do you feel when you encounter a teacher outside of school, like in the grocery store or the mall?
7. Why do you think you feel that way?
8. Would you ever want to be a teacher? Explain
9. Can you think of any way in which you someone else could be affected by what you see on TV or in movies?