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Why Bad Teacher is a Bad Movie and Where the Real Crisis Is: Implications for Teachers and Teacher Education

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**Why *Bad Teacher* is a Bad Movie and Where the Real Crisis Is:
Implications for Teachers and Teacher Education**

J. P. McGrail and Ewa McGrail

In this chapter, we analyze and critique the film *Bad Teacher* (Miller & Kasdan, 2011). In our view, it cynically panders to the worst aspects of contemporary pessimism toward educational outcomes in the US (Beck, 2012; Thomsen, 1993; Vandermeersche, Soetaert, & Rutten, 2013). We argue, however, that *Bad Teacher* is actually consonant with Hollywood's well-known narrative memes of redemption of the fallen (Carter, 2009; Reyes & Rios, 2003). In the past, however, the persons usually occupying the role of the rescuable fallen have been the "unfortunate" students, many of whom have been nonwhite and who had to be "saved" by a middle-class, often white, educator representing traditional authority and American values (Grant, 2002; Matias, 2013). In the film *Bad Teacher*, on the other hand, the redeemed is a stunningly inappropriate, reprobate teacher who is herself inept, yet sneers at the professionalism and decorum of her peers and ignores the welfare of her students. Yet, at the conclusion of this ostensible comedy, she becomes the school's guidance counselor.

In our analysis, we consider the ways in which the representation of teachers, such as the one depicted by Cameron Diaz in *Bad Teacher* (Miller & Kasdan, 2011), may influence preservice teachers' professional beliefs and attitudes and perceptions of self-efficacy (Grant, 2002; Kaşkaya, Ünlü, Akar, & Sağirli, 2011), as well as those held by Americans in general. We suggest opportunities for preservice teachers to examine their own beliefs and conceptions about teachers and the teaching profession, based on *what actual teachers do and are called to do*,

versus what the public, including preservice teachers, may encounter in movies. We conclude that the film evinces a view of teaching that is at least as misleading as the iconic, heroic portrayals of the near past.

Problems with Hollywood Teacher Depictions

Scholarly examinations of the depictions of teachers have frequently noted the unrealistically heroic nature of teachers in popular American films such as *Dangerous Minds* (Bruckheimer, Simpson, & Smith, 1995), *Stand and Deliver* (Musca & Menéndez, 1988) and *Dead Poets Society* (Haft, Witt & Weir, 1989), in which the protagonists valiantly strive to inculcate youth with the all-American values of intellectual curiosity, thrift, sexual moderation and interpersonal courtesy (Carter, 2009; Harris, 2009; Matias, 2013). Some critics argue that, while such heroic characteristics may seem to be desirable modeling for a teacher of today, they may also “feed on a collective-anxiety-type drama” by, for example, “subjecting a fresh-faced young teacher to public humiliation at the hands of unruly teens of color” (Gillard, 2012, p.5). Gillard points to the movie trailer for *Up the Down Staircase* (Mulligan, 1967), in which a green teacher walks past groups of African American and Latino students in Spanish Harlem with a concurrent voiceover intoning “‘What’s a nice girl doing in a crazy place like this?’” (Gillard, 2012, p.5).

Even when a film strives to avoid subtle racism in its depictions of teachers, as in, for example, when the teacher is Black [Morgan Freeman in *Lean On Me* (Avildsen, 1989)] or Latino [Edward James Olmos in *Stand and Deliver* (Musca & Menéndez, 1988)], some critics have pointed out that the unrealism of these films lies in an unstated philosophical approach that such

teachers seem to take: that schools are inherently corrupt (Krausz, 2003), and that only a highly individualistic maverick can rescue students from the uncaring maw of mass education (Beck, 2012; Kelly & Caughlan, 2011). Beck (2012) explains the latter point of view in these words, stressing how this position relieves administrators and policy makers from actually addressing the real problems directly and systematically:

Problems can be handled only because of the special gifts of the single person, and no social reforms can or need be made. It's a good thing, too, because there seems to be no chance of such reforms being made, not of creating social justice, nor of revising the distribution of wealth or opportunity or normative approval, nor of the introduction of more humane relationships among people. The high expectations and sentimental honor we assign to teachers in popular culture is complementary to the continuation unchanged of the real world outside of school. We need not change because heroic teachers will change our inner predispositions. (p. 90)

However, the problem with most film characterizations of teachers is that they create unrealizable expectations for real world teachers (Marshall, 2007): "With some exceptions, films that center on teachers tend to show them as almost superhuman, capable of permanently changing lives in a short period of time" (Farhi, 1999, p. 157). Remarkably few day-to-day professional details are depicted. These details include both teaching strategies (e.g., planning, homework support and test preparation) and non-teaching matters and events (e.g., hall duty, parent-teacher conferences, calls to students' homes, unit and department meetings). Unsurprisingly, these latter activities often compete with teaching preparation time. Such details

are, however, swept away as probable detractors from the cinematic myth of the “superteacher”. And, “by forcing them to compete with their cinematic counterparts, the superteacher myth places an impossible burden on real teachers” (Farhi, 1999, p. 157).

Analyzing Hollywood Depictions of the Profession and Teacher Education

Research has pointed out the problems in portrayals of teachers in mass media, especially film and television, as sources for teacher identity formation and teacher pedagogy modeling. One critic, Gregory Marshall (2007), has said that popular movies and television series “are not well suited as a medium for accurate pictures” (p.21) because they reproduce “recycled stereotypes” that “mislead, confuse, and impoverish [teachers’ and students’] evaluations of and expectations about the nature of genuine education” (p.7).

Vandermeersche, Soetaert and Rutten (2013) offer a differing perspective. Instead of discrediting movies and television programming as appropriate sources for school and teacher identity representations, they recommend that teacher education programs use them as a “basis for critical discussion in classes for pre-service teachers” (p.89). The viewpoint of these researchers was inspired by Wayne Booth’s (1988) advice that “if the powerful stories we tell each other really matter to us—and even the most skeptical theorists imply by their practice that stories do matter—then a criticism that takes their ‘mattering’ seriously cannot be ignored” (p. 4). *Bad Teacher* is therefore prime for such critical analysis and evaluation.

Perhaps as a result of the 15-year “education wars,” propagated by recent presidential administrations (Kumashiro, 2012; Rochester, 2013), the movie seems to presuppose a reservoir of bad feeling about education in the hearts and minds of the American public (Beck, 2012). Against this presumed backdrop of contemporary, cynicism and criticism of the worth of today’s teachers (Beck, 2012; Thomsen, 1993; Vandermeersche, Soetaert, & Rutten, 2013), *Bad Teacher* appears to confirm the lay public’s worst fears about the profession: that a slovenly, sexually profligate, emotionally shallow woman with substance abuse issues and a complete lack of professionalism might be educating its children.

In this chapter, we take on the semantic and symbolic perspectives of production and reception in film analysis (Mikos, 2014) to “observe how the structures of film function in the framework of the communication processes they are bound up in” (p. 410). Structures are “the means a film employs to communicate meaning with viewers” and they include “content, acting, dramaturgy, narrative and aesthetics” (p. 410). For this short analysis, we focus primarily on plot, characters and their representation through the art of acting. In our analysis, we are interested in exploring how that which is being communicated by a film about teachers reflects - or does not reflect - real teachers and teaching in the classroom and how such depictions may influence preservice teachers’ professional beliefs and attitudes, as well as their perceptions of self-efficacy (Grant, 2002; Kaşkaya, Ünlü, Akar, & Sağırlı, 2011). Secondly, we are concerned with the impact such a distorted and exaggerated portrayal of teachers might have on the public at large.

Characters and Their Representation

The protagonist of *Bad Teacher*, Elizabeth Halsey, is portrayed through a carefully orchestrated series of plot events as being spectacularly ill-suited to the teaching profession. She is an attractive, but calculating and foul-mouthed young woman who is “temporarily” a middle school teacher, following her ouster from an engagement to a wealthy man. Teaching is merely a way to support herself while she schemes to marry a fellow teacher who is a wealthy heir. She also attempts to raise enough money for breast implants, in order to compete with what she calls the “Barbie Doll types” that she believes are out-competing her for marriage to wealthy men. A chance remark by a fellow teacher lets Halsey know about a contest that awards \$5,700 to the top scoring teacher on a high stakes state test. Because winning would permit the impecunious Halsey to get the breast implants she wants, she blackmails the state test administrator to get a copy of the test answers. Her scheme appears at first to be successful, and she is given the winning check.

However, her colleague Miss Squirrel suspects, and then confirms, that Halsey has cheated and notifies the principal and the school superintendent. The quick-thinking Halsey turns the tables and successfully accuses Miss Squirrel of being a drug user. During the course of all this, the gym teacher, Russell Gettis, takes a liking to Halsey but she scoffs at his attentions because he isn't wealthy. Nevertheless, his persistence pays off and she finally agrees to date him. The final scene shows Halsey leaving the classroom to become the school guidance counselor.

While Halsey is brash and resourceful in a street-smart sort of way, her colleagues are portrayed as timid, doctrinaire, out of step social misfits. The rather-too-pointedly named Amy Squirrel is at first presented as an over-energetic friend to all of her students with non-standard, more “fun” ways of reaching them. She is soon revealed to be mentally unstable, with an unnamed incident in her past marking her professional career in a negative way. When Halsey expresses disbelief at her unusual name, Miss Squirrel does an impression of a squirrel eating a nut, confirming her own acceptance of her unusual moniker. Squirrel is depicted throughout as having a surfeit of energy and a self-professed teaching acumen, which she is only too happy to foist upon other teachers, particularly Halsey, whom she mistakenly views at first as being merely too timid in her approach to educating her students. Part of the plot turns upon her gradual realization that Halsey is merely completely uninterested in educating her students, at least in the beginning of the film.

One of the film’s tropes is that many characters in the film have names that are connected to their personalities or desires, such as the aforementioned Squirrel. Another example of this is the gym teacher, Russell Gettis, who becomes romantically interested in Halsey, succeeds in dating her at the end of the film, and thus might be said to “get his,” as per his name. Two of the middle school students also have gimmicky names; a smitten boy who writes poetry is called “Garrett” and the object of his affections – a middle school girl who spurns him – is called “Chase.”

Bad Teacher and Real Teachers

In studying students' perceptions of quality instruction and quality teacher student interactions, Läänemets, Kalamees-Ruubel and Sepp (2012) reported the following traits and behaviors students expected of good teachers: “[being] friendly; being understanding and caring; being calm or balanced, and being joyful or positive” (p. 29). In addition, students appreciate when teachers are kind and “are able to listen to students and understand them” (p. 30). In terms of skills and expertise, the students in the study underscored that good teachers are knowledgeable; “make learning interesting, exciting, or diverse; they can explain everything so that you can understand; and they can teach their subject well” (p. 29).

Unfortunately, none of these personal and professional traits and behaviors were evident in the portrayal of Elizabeth Halsey. Instead of being “friendly; being understanding and caring; being calm or balanced, and being joyful or positive” Halsey frequently scowls at students and writes comments on their papers such as, “Are you f#\$%ing kidding me?”. Instead of being “able to listen to students and understand them” Halsey declares one “hopeless” and opines that another will not lose his virginity until age 29. Instead of making “learning interesting, exciting, or diverse; [so that] they can explain everything so that you can understand; and they can teach their subject well” Halsey plays movies in her classroom in lieu of lesson plans, in one scene particularly so that she can surreptitiously avail herself of a stash of hard liquor in her desk. However, Halsey's *modes d'emploi* change drastically when she realizes that if her class gets the highest scores on a high stakes test, she will personally receive a check for nearly \$6,000 and the breast implants that she believes she needs will be within reach.

Even when she realizes her students have to excel for her to win the cash, Halsey's teaching practices remain highly questionable, due to her lack of pedagogical expertise and casual disregard for ethical and professional standards. In a scene probably designed to be comical, Halsey lines her students up in the gymnasium for a Q&A session on the material for the test. If a student responds with the wrong answer, she throws a basketball at the student's head (the student is not allowed to duck). If the student gets the right answer, the student is allowed to throw a ball at her. Passing over the fact that such a "learning strategy" is ineffective instruction (Ruan, 2015), such a method could hardly be contemplated by a sane adult, let alone a teacher. Indeed, in light of the Illinois Educator Code of Ethics (2014), Halsey's questionable technique in the gymnasium would have been found to be *per se* unethical conduct, likely calling for disciplinary action or dismissal.

It might be argued at this point that such an over-the-top scene was constructed by the filmmakers for comic or satirical purposes. Nevertheless, comedy – however black – requires an energetic excessiveness for its dart to make contact with the target. Consider the well-known example of Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729), wherein he proposes that the children of Ireland be served up as food to decrease the surplus population. Few critics, then or now, have entertained the belief that Swift's proposal was to be taken literally. In *Bad Teacher*, however, we are treated to scene after scene, but especially this one, in which the filmmakers seem to suggest that such distasteful events (and teachers!) might likely be real. Even if they do not

intend this, the filmmakers make abundantly clear their jaundiced view of teachers through such a scene and indeed, in many of the other scenes in which Halsey's antics are depicted.

To add insult to injury, Halsey also employs not-so-subtle racist and homophobic language in the film. When her students complain about her "drill and kill" techniques for the upcoming high stakes test, she opines, "Pathetic. This is why the Japs are overtaking us..." At another point, she misunderstands a friendly overture from Amy Squirrel as a sexual come-on and uses an offensive term to describe a gay sexual practice. Finally, she makes a subtly anti-Semitic remark when she says "Listen, I could take you day by day through my entire syllabus, but that's just not how I do things...So that's my spiel, as the Jews say."

Halsey's behavior would not avoid censure in the most permissive of schools, and in the most authoritarian, she would probably be fired, sued and have criminal proceedings brought against her. However, as stated above, all of her behavior is portrayed as being both possible and, in some sense, refreshing, juxtaposed against the ineffective practices of the other teachers. In addition to being unethical, Halsey's antisocial behavior, racist and homophobic language and "put-down" instructional practices are also in direct opposition to what students expect from good teachers and from their interactions with them in the real classroom. We would ordinarily think that to backlight the blanching unprofessionalism of Halsey, the filmmakers might choose to portray her colleagues as more effective, more moderate and more caring.

Instead, the filmmakers choose to gleefully lampoon Halsey's colleagues in different ways. We are initially led to believe that Amy Squirrel uses innovative techniques to awake learning in her

students but the screenplay pokes fun at what she does and portrays her as juvenile, naïve and, ultimately, unbalanced. For example in one class, Squirrel pretends to be an airline pilot, replete with pilot's hat and electronic megaphone, while her students are depicted as bored and empty-eyed.

Realistically – putting aside the wisdom of such overt theatricality in the middle school classroom - teachers in today's challenged classrooms would likely find it more difficult than Ms. Squirrel to employ such innovative techniques without some negotiations with their administration and leadership. Negotiation would involve the teacher needing to provide the reasons for using such a tactic and explaining the positive impact it might have on student academic progress. Finding different ways to engage students is nearly always encouraged, but today's emphasis on learning outcomes would likely cause middle school department heads and principals to be skeptical of what Ms. Squirrel attempted. The film is mute about the need for such negotiations, however.

In addition, the film represents its more minor characters as personally ineffectual and immature. When Halsey sets her sights on marrying the effete, charming and wealthy teacher Scott Delacorte, Miss Squirrel, who is also smitten with the handsome but unsophisticated teacher, acts in a childish, “middle school” manner. Her hatred of Halsey is made complete when she accidentally discovers that Halsey has rigged the high-stakes test the school gives, and has walked away with the winning score and \$5,700. She reports Halsey to the principal, Wally

Snur, who tells Squirrel that she has begun to show signs of some kind of mental breakdown, in a scene played strictly for laughs.

Halsey's sidekick at the school, Lynn Davies, is portrayed as so naïve that she believes Halsey to be a "mover and shaker." Davies will seemingly do anything Halsey asks of her, including smoking marijuana and asking strange men to dance. Even the likeable gym teacher Gettis is portrayed as ludicrously flawed, as a pothead who cannot even climb the gym rope that he sets forth for his students. The principal Snur and the other teachers are also portrayed as timid and unimaginative, and their after-hours activities mark them as desperately "uncool," wonkish and dated.

Discussion and Implications

Halsey's teacher character asks us to believe two things: 1) that people like her might well be employed in our secondary education system and 2) that she is somehow an amusing (and effective) foil to the bland and uninspiring "professional" teachers who surround her. If the former is true, then it is clear that, at least to the producers and writers of this film, educators are far from heroic. If the latter is true, the film seems to accept the premise that teaching is the last thing an intelligent, creative person might do with her life. Indeed, at one point in the film, Halsey is actually asked, "What went so wrong that you ended up educating children?"

In this way, the film seems to give filmgoers and preservice teachers a choice. If one chooses the education profession, one is doomed either to be a sad, unhip, fearful rule-follower clinging to a low-esteem job, or – in the case of Halsey - a rigger of the system, who acts unethically but profitably and who is only interested in improving her economic outlook. As Dalton (2013) asserts, in *Bad Teacher* “every teacher is revealed to be a bad teacher operating within a corrupt educational system” (p. 79). Hence, just as the public (as well as aspiring teachers) may believe that the heroic traits of Jaime Escalante (Edward James Olmos) in *Stand and Deliver* (Musca & Menéndez, 1988) or LouAnne Johnson (Michelle Pfeiffer) in *Dangerous Minds* (Simpson & Bruckheimer, 1995) have been exaggerated but are at their kernel true, so it may be that the public and preservice educators might reduce in proportion, but fail to entirely eliminate from the realm of possibility, the existence of an Elizabeth Halsey (or even more than one) in the nation’s public schools.

While it may be harmless for the public (or, for that matter, preservice teachers) to imagine that some teachers are nearly or partly as heroic as Escalante or Johnson, the public’s assuming that some percentage of teachers regularly indulges in even a small number of the escapades of Diaz’s character in *Bad Teacher* (Miller & Kasdan, 2011) certainly would be a gratuitous error as well as a harmful one. It is deeply unconstructive, in our view, for the film to traffic in naturalistic yet distorted depictions of such unlikely characters in our nation’s public schools.

The damage to the reputations of teachers in the public eye is not the sole issue, however. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, there were 3.7 million full-time elementary and secondary teachers in 2012, the last year for which we have reliable figures (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Of these, 3.3 million are in public schools and each teaches an average of 23 students. Together, they therefore affect the lives of 76 million young people every year. Moving the needle of public and preservice teacher opinion, even if only a small degree, can matter inestimably to the careers and self-esteem of teachers who work in an educational system that the public has viewed as “in crisis” (Kumashiro, 2012) long before *Bad Teacher*.

It is likely that the filmmakers of *Bad Teacher* (Miller & Kasdan, 2011) intended their film to be a satire of some sort. The smirking, world-weary tropes of cynicism toward educational mores and practices in which the film traffics seek out conspirators in the audience, as if to gleefully suggest, “I’d bet all of you know people like Miss Halsey.” The filmmakers, too, have an unlikely ally in the naturalism of their depiction, namely the relative unfamiliarity of American audiences with the contemporary status of public education. Few adults are personally familiar with what secondary school is like in the second decade of the 21st century, especially if they “haven’t been in one since 1975” (Flanagan, 2011 para. # 3). Flanagan explains this disconnect in these words:

I am not convinced that people have good filters for what’s true and what’s distorted when it comes to the reality of public schooling. I worry, a lot, about discernment—the ability to figure out who’s zoomin’ who on complex education issues (para. # 3).

Most films' depictions of teachers err on the side of heroism, but those about to enter the profession take these depictions with a grain of salt. (Beck, 2012; Harris, 2009). Despite the obvious flaws of such iconic depictions, Ryan and Townsend (2012) observe, "In teacher preparation programs, Hollywood films can help encourage future teachers to examine their beliefs and perceptions of teachers, construct espoused platforms about their own educational philosophies, and enact instructional methods that align with their educational goals" (p. 241).

Preservice teachers tend to be a media-savvy audiences. Indeed, in the collegiate education program at the first author's university, media literacy is a required course for preservice teachers. As Andersen (1992) points out in strongly advocating this literacy for teachers, "Media awareness can help [e]xplode stereotypes and misconceptions so they don't poison attitudes and interpersonal relations..." (para. #16). Preservice teachers, as shown above, seek out and are aware of teacher portrayals in popular culture (Trier, 2001), including those in *Bad Teacher*. Teacher educators have an opportunity to help them interrogate and question the troubling teacher portrayals depicted in *Bad Teacher*, and in doing so, enable them to develop a counter-narrative that they might wish to adopt. Such a counter-narrative would involve more truthful and realistic teacher and teaching profession representations for themselves and for their students.

Toward this goal, teacher educators can have preservice teachers conduct mini-ethnography studies of teachers and school cultures, paying attention to the ways in which teachers form and

enact professional identities, interact with students and administrators, implement the curriculum and negotiate the day-to-day demands associated with student and teacher accountability. Such work, coupled with discussion, reading and interpretation of educational law and ethics, is central to helping preservice teachers gain a full understanding of teaching and the teaching profession. It is also a reasonable assurance against them falling prey to the many teacher misrepresentations in popular culture and mass media, such as the ones depicted in *Bad Teacher*.

Pre-service teachers have also the opportunity to examine in this particular film the portrayal of adolescent students, their developmental needs, attitudes and behaviors and evaluate whether these representations are truthful to this age group. This is important because before they can teach adolescents, pre-service teachers need to understand adolescence and the physiological, social and emotional problems adolescents typically deal with during this stage of life. This understanding will help pre-service teachers know them and their culture, and understand their social and academic needs. As a result they will better be able to design instruction that will succeed with this age group.

Gordon (1997) also argues that understanding adolescent culture, which he defines as knowing “adolescents’ speech patterns, popular music, styles of dress, favorite movies and preferred places for recreation” (p.57), is essential to effective classroom management. He urges teacher educators to help pre-service teachers acquire such social insight into adolescence. *Bad Teacher*

is replete with scenes of adolescent culture that can be critiqued for their opportunity to gain such important insight or discard as unrealistic.

Analyses of films such as this one will also provide preservice teachers with recognition of the specific cinematic and televisual elements needed for them to critically examine mass media portrayals of teachers for realism, ideology, stereotypes, cultural memes, bias and other social constructions and representations. There are lessons to be learned for teacher education and preservice teachers, even from a bad movie. One is the opportunity to deconstruct and dismantle its profusion of cynically proposed half-truths that constitute what the filmmakers seem to view as the crumbling institution of public education. Those of us who seek fair portrayals of our currently beleaguered American teachers must not avoid the critical analysis of such flawed mass media portrayals of teachers and the teaching profession, but should counter-propose realistic and reliable representations of our own instead.

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