

Urban Legends: Representing the Urban Teacher in Urban Teacher Film (1955-2007)

Joseph Flynn, Carla Cooper Shaw, and Nina Dorsch
Northern Illinois University

Abstract

This study examines the trends in representations of urban teachers in urban teacher films from 1955-2007. Using a textual analysis (McKee 2005), ten films that focused on the lives of urban teachers were analyzed. The findings show clear trends and the development of a “grand narrative” about urban teachers and teaching. Understanding these trends and narrative can help challenge the assumptions preservice teachers have about urban teaching that result in avoiding those school contexts.

Introduction

Film possesses a psychological and political force, derived in part from its nature as visual stories and Western audiences’ conditioning to particular story structures, themes, and values (Shaw and Nederhouser 2005; Zavarzeduh 1991). The subconscious power of movies also comes from the vicarious experiences they provide (Bandura 2002; Author and Nederhouser 2005). Just as beliefs about teaching are often formed at a subconscious level during childhood, impressions about teaching may be developed subconsciously while viewing films, especially as represented across the genre of teacher films (Shaw and Nederhouser 2005).

The power of film has been harnessed as a teaching tool in teacher education (Dalton 1999; Giroux 1997). Film offers members of a teacher education course a common text and examples to critique, rather than sharing idiosyncratic stories from their personal and pre-professional lives

(Trier 2001). Wrestling with a common text provides the opportunity for the whole class to reflect on personal experiences and assumptions about the nature of teaching and teaching in urban schools particularly (Grant 2002). Through film, students find that images of experiences and ideas will resonate and conflict with their own, and in the process of exploring these issues, students gain new insights about sociocultural and political issues, identity, pedagogy, and teaching practices.

Brunner (1994) used school films to offer preservice teachers stories with which to think about schooling in concrete ways. As she explains, “Making a leap from abstraction to situation can be difficult without a bridge... [school films] can provide such a link and may be the key to making meaning” (p. 71). Trier (2001) also used school films to help preservice teachers consider the personal and professional lives of teachers. Using a combination of articles and key scenes from school films, Trier provided his students with experiences they otherwise were not able to have. Not only did this kind of engagement offer a common experience, it also facilitated his students’ understanding of a source of cultural myths. As Trier put it, “Their own images ... were probably derived from having watched such films...” (p. 128).

Similarly Grant (2002) showed preservice teachers filmic representations of urban schools, as portrayed in *Dangerous Minds* (1995), *Stand and Deliver* (1988), and *187* (1997). Grant led her students in critically examining representations of urban teachers and schools in order to challenge

preservice teachers' assumptions about teaching and learning in urban contexts. As she states:

The stories in these movies, although they contain grains of truth about schools and teaching, also reflect and affirm many of the myths and distorted understandings that future teachers have about urban students, urban teachers, urban schools, and urban communities (p. 79).

Grant's observation highlights school films as a potentially influential source of cultural myths about urban teaching.

The challenges of teaching in urban schools are many and well documented (e.g., American Federation of Teachers 2007; Fischman, DiBara, and Gardner 2006; Kincheloe 2007; Marvin 2006; Smith and Smith 2006). Urban schools are often hard to staff with "highly qualified teachers," especially in discipline-related shortage areas, such as special education and secondary math and science (Illinois State Board of Education 2005). So challenging is the role of the urban teacher that Haberman (1995) devised a STAR selection process based on 14 functions of effective teachers in urban classrooms, including building relationships with students, approaching teaching with stamina, and remaining focused on student learning. These teachers are undaunted by *at risk* labels applied to students of color and poverty. With their success in urban classrooms, STAR teachers represent an ideal to which teachers might aspire.

More pervasive, and perhaps compelling, in the minds of potential urban teachers than the functions of STAR teachers are the cultural myths that shape teachers' and society's views of effective teaching (Britzman 2003). Britzman notes, "Cultural myths provide a set of ideal

images, definitions, justifications, and measures for thought, feelings, and agency that work to render as unitary and certain the reality it seeks to produce" (p. 222). That is, cultural myths are ideal images that are so pervasive they become expectations that are internalized. The question is not necessarily whether or not these myths are true or false, accuracies or distortions, but the expectations they emit become sacrosanct in the minds of viewers and thus shape individual expectations about what teaching is and what it takes to be a good urban teacher.

Britzman's ethnography of preservice teachers uncovered three cultural myths that act as barriers to acquiring new knowledge and perspectives about teaching and learning: (1) everything depends on the teacher, (2) the teacher is an expert, and (3) teachers are self-made. These myths have informed prospective teachers' notions of good teaching and are extremely resistant to change. The last myth, in particular, can be seen as having the most potential to influence would-be urban teachers. For the novice teacher, this cultural myth gives rise to a belief in "a kind of social Darwinism ... in which only the strong survive" (p. 230). The myth of the self-made teacher leads into the myth of the teacher-as-hero (Marshall 2007), and these myths likely are furthered through popular film.

How, then, do school films portray teachers in urban schools? This question guided the current investigation, the purpose of which was to identify trends, if any, in the portrayal of urban teaching. Under this guiding question a few other essential questions arose. Do the representations of the urban teacher follow a particular set of trends? What approaches to curriculum and instruction are largely evident in these films? What are the prevailing stories that are furthered through this genre of film? Because many pre-service teachers have seen these films

and the representations can sharply influence how individuals construct expectations, pedagogy, and practice, these questions merit examination.

Method

As teacher educators who teach courses about the representations of teachers in film and utilize film for cultural analyses in courses for pre-service and inservice teachers, we sought to conduct an analysis of trends in the ways filmmakers—and by extension moviegoers, including prospective and practicing teachers—have represented urban teaching in the United States over the past half century. To identify trends, a text analysis was conducted.

Text analysis, according to McKee (2003), is an appropriate method for seeking “to obtain a sense of the ways in which, in particular cultures at particular times, people make sense of the world around them” (p. 1). In text analysis, a variety of documents, productions, and objects can serve as texts, so long as they are “... something we make meaning from” (p. 4).

Deciding the criteria for choosing films to examine was not as simple as one would assume. Although many films are set in schools, relatively few feature teachers in urban school contexts as the protagonists. Filmographies constructed by Bulman (2005), Dalton (1999), and Nederhouser (2000) reveal that school films typically focus on the experiences of students, not teachers. Three criteria, consistent with the study’s focus on myths of urban teachers, guided the selection of films for analysis.

First, the story must be set in an urban school. To qualify as urban, the setting must include customary images of the *inner city*, such as explicit indications of poverty in both the school and the surrounding community, such as dilapidated or burnt-out buildings, minimal resources, housing projects, and gang-related

graffiti. In representations of urban schools, students often, though not always (e.g., *To Sir, with Love*), are predominantly Latino and/or African American. These attributes eliminate some movies which at first glance appear to be set in urban schools. *Teachers* (1984), for example, contains images commonly associated with inner-city schools—low achievement, chaotic classrooms, apathetic teachers, unruly students, incompetent administrators—but the students of *Teachers* and their community do not show clear indications of poverty. Rather, *Teachers*, which was released one year after *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983), satirized the lamentable condition of U.S. education, in general, in the 1980s. If we were examining the general representations of teachers then *Teachers* would without doubt be a key selection; however, since this study deals specifically with the representations of urban teachers, there are no clear indications, based upon our criteria, that qualifies this particular film.

Second, the protagonist must be a teacher, rather than an administrator, coach, or student. Finally, to reflect film’s potential to impact the development of cultural mythology, the movie must be a feature-length film rather than a documentary or film short. The texts included in this inquiry, listed by release date, include: *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), *To Sir, with Love* (1967), *Up the Down Staircase* (1967), *Stand and Deliver* (1988), *Dangerous Minds* (1995), *187* (1997), *Music of the Heart* (1999), *Half Nelson* (2006), *The Ron Clark Story* (2006), and *Freedom Writers* (2007).

Text analysis took place in two broad stages. First, trends related to components of teacher identity and elements of story structure were identified. Then, based on the trends that emerged, a deeper narrative analysis was

conducted. Initial analysis of trends employed a version of text analysis similar to that used by Nederhouser (2000) in her analysis of 100 teacher movies. Nederhouser analyzed each film and its featured educators according to particular fields derived from a review of the literature related to images of teachers in film (e.g., Burbach and Figgins 1991; Burbach and Figgins 1993; Swetnam 1991) and categories that emerged during viewing. We agreed upon both *a priori* and emergent fields, basing our decisions for field selection on relevant literature (Burbach and Figgins 1993; Dalton 1999; Grant 2002; Nederhouser 2000; Swetnam 1992), extensive viewing of school films, and experience using this genre of films as a teaching tool. The *a priori* fields included: release date, ethnicity of teacher, ethnicity of students, gender of teacher, true story, and career stage.

After identifying *a priori* fields, we individually screened the ten films, taking notes and making preliminary conclusions related to the targeted fields. Then we engaged in lengthy discussions about the movies, closely comparing and contrasting our individual interpretations. We reached consensus regarding the analysis of each film and in so doing enhanced validity. According to Bernard (1994), “Validity itself [of text analysis] depends on the collective opinion of researchers” (p. 43). During this deliberation we identified additional fields that were evident across all the films: approach change, epiphany, cost of teaching, and benefit of teaching. Figure 1 shows all fields, both *a priori* and emergent—with definitions, when needed, and coding options.

Figure 1: A priori and emergent fields—with definitions, when needed and coding options

Field*	Definition (if needed)	Coding Options	Qualitative Coding Options (if applicable)
<i>Release Date</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A
<i>Ethnicity of Teacher</i>	N/A	African American Latino White	N/A
<i>Ethnicity of Students</i>	N/A	African American Latino White Mixed	N/A
<i>Gender of Teacher</i>	N/A	Female/Male	N/A
<i>True Story</i>	N/A	Yes/No	N/A
<i>Career Stage</i>	N/A	Neophyte/Veteran	N/A
Approach Change	Teacher’s change in curriculum or pedagogy, or both, and/or in interaction, or relating to students based on caring and concern	Yes/No	<i>Curriculum Approach</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intellectual traditionalism • Social behavioralism • Critical reconstructionism • Traditionalism <i>Interaction: varies</i>
Epiphany	The moment that catalyzes insight on the teacher’s part. From this point forward the teacher responds in a markedly different way to students.	Yes/No	Varies
Cost	What the teacher loses	Yes/No	Varies

*A priori options italicized.

We were aware that many of the cinematic teachers underwent changes in their curricular approaches—and we wanted to explore those changes. Curriculum is a complicated, contested terrain with numerous approaches and strategies (Flinders and Thornton 2004; Pinar 1995). In order to see how curriculum and pedagogy play out on screen, Schubert's approaches to curriculum (1996) was particularly helpful. He delineates four approaches to curriculum and instruction that are concise and helpful in thinking about the approaches utilized by cinematic urban teachers. First, he posits the *Intellectual Traditional* approach. This approach is seen through an emphasis on the classics, intrinsic rewards, Socratic dialogue, and critical thinking. Next, he constructs the *Social Behavioral* approach. Measurement of learning, extrinsic rewards, and training in life skills mark this approach. The *Experiential* approach uses active, hands-on methods to connect student learning with their lives and communities. Schubert's final approach is the *Critical Reconstructionist* approach. Critical interpretations of content, empowerment of oppressed groups, and liberatory pedagogy are characteristic of this approach. We added a fifth approach, the *Traditional* approach, characterized by conventional content and methods, such as lecture and drill, as a sort of baseline approach typically seen in urban school films and reminiscent of the methods used in urban schools in the wake of *No Child Left Behind* (Darling-Hammond 2007; Neill 2005).

Any teacher can display a combination of these approaches at any time. How teachers' approaches to curriculum are represented in film is no different. As a matter of fact, most of the teachers examined in the selected films displayed either a transition from one approach to another, or consistently displayed a combination of

approaches. For example, Mr. Dadier of *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) began his teaching utilizing a staunchly traditional approach. As the film nears its climax his approach began to fuse a social behavioral approach with an experiential approach, as seen in Figure 2, which presents qualitative coding of the emergent fields.

In the process of completing Figures 1 and 2, predictions about trends arose. Once the matrices were complete, we began testing predictions by cross-referencing particular fields, as Nederhouser (2000) did in her analysis of trends. From this cross-referencing phase of the analysis process, findings regarding trends in the films' depictions of urban teaching emerged.

A distinctive narrative structure became apparent in which the protagonists experience chaos, an epiphany, and then transformation. By virtue of its prevalence and persistence among the films under investigation, we came to see it as a dominant cultural discourse, a grand narrative, worthy of further examination. At this point, the second phase of text analysis began. Delving more deeply into narrative structure we uncovered significant trends in the representations of approach change, gender, race and ethnicity of teacher and students, career stage, and costs.

Findings

To derive the study's initial findings, selected fields were cross-referenced, with combinations of fields constituting permutations. For each permutation, the field of *Title* was held constant. When a permutation yielded 50-60%, 70-90%, or 100% of the movies under consideration, a moderate, strong, or very strong trend, respectively, was deemed to exist. The order in which the following permutations and their results are presented approximates the researchers' process of discovery.

Figure 2: Data summary of qualitative coding options

Title (Gender of teacher)	Release date	Approach Change*	Epiphany	Cost	Benefit
Blackboard Jungle (male)	1955	Traditional>Social behavioral+Experiential	Discovery of students' robbery plot; discovery of a student's musical ability	Physical safety	Discovery of teaching as true calling
To Sir, with Love (male)	1967	Traditional>Social behavioral+Experiential	Discovery of sanitary napkin in furnace	Dignity	Discovery of teaching as true calling
Up the Down Staircase (female)	1967	Traditional>Experiential	Discovery of how intimidating students can be	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal relationships Physical safety 	Discovery of teaching as true calling
Stand and Deliver (male)	1988	Experiential>Traditional	Shock of the chaotic first day of class	Physical health	Vindication of methods
Dangerous Minds (female)	1995	Traditional>Social behavioral>Experiential+ Intellectual traditional	Shock of the chaotic first day of class	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal life Money 	Discovery of teaching as true calling
187 (male)	1997	Experiential	Discovery that his watch has been stolen by a student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationships Sanity Life 	None
Music of the Heart (female)	1999	Curriculum: Traditional Interaction: Brusque>caring	Discovery that student has a physical challenge	None	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discovery of teaching as true calling Personal salvation Vindication of methods
Half Nelson (male)	2006	No substantive change	None	None	Relationship with student as salvation
The Ron Clark Story (male)	2006	Curriculum: Traditional+Social behavioral+Experiential Interaction: Defensive>Vulnerable	Girlfriend's remark	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Heath Dignity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vindication of methods Romantic relationship
Freedom Writers (female)	2007	Traditional>Experiential	Interception of student-drawn racist caricature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marriage Time Money 	Discovery of teaching as true calling

* (>) indicates a change. (+) indicates a combination of approaches.

Perception of Reality in Portrayal of Urban Teachers

Interested in the extent to which urban school movies may be seen as reflecting reality, we checked the permutation, *Title x True Story*. Five of the 10 movies are based on accounts of real teachers, suggesting a moderate trend. This trend is presented in Figure 3. This moderate trend is highly important because it offers legitimacy to the stories told and the images of urban teachers represented. Furthermore, it calls into question exactly what identities are in fact being constructed and do they actually reflect the reality of the teaching force today?

Figure 3. Trend: Perception of Reality in Portrayal of Urban Teachers

Trend	Strength (ratio: percentage)
Movies portraying urban teachers are based on real teachers' accounts.	Moderate (5/10: 50%)

Components of Teachers' Identities

We then investigated permutations pertaining to components of teacher characters' identities. *Title x Gender* revealed that in 60% of the films, males portray teachers, suggesting a moderate trend. The reality of this is that female teachers are approximately 75% of the full-time teaching force (National Center for Educational Statistics 2009). The notion that most films portray the stories of men in urban teaching contexts further highlights urban schools as dangerous environments and plays to stereotypes of both place and gender. Although this may add drama, the stories of neophyte teachers struggling to find their way are even more compelling.

Title x Career Stage yielded 70% of the movies as portraying neophytes, a strong trend.

Arguably, Ron Clark—as a veteran teacher, but a neophyte urban teacher—fits the trend as well, thereby slightly strengthening it. With the exception of *Music of the Heart*, which also covers Roberta Gaspari's later career, these films are devoted exclusively to teachers' first years in urban classrooms. *Title x Teacher Ethnicity* identified 70% of films with teachers who are White, indicating a strong trend.

To explore the relationship between teachers' ethnic identities and those of their students, we checked *Title x Teacher Ethnicity x Student Ethnicity*. In 80% of the movies, teachers are of a different ethnicity than the majority of their students, indicating a strong trend. These movies are *To Sir, with Love*, *Up the Down Staircase*, *Dangerous Minds*, *187*, *Music of the Heart*, *Half Nelson*, *The Ron Clark Story*, and *Freedom Writers*. With the exception of Mark Thackeray and his students in *To Sir, with Love*, these eight teachers are White and their students are of color, predominantly African American and/or Latino. Trends associated with components of urban teacher identity are presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Trends: Components of Teachers' Identities

Trend	Strength
Urban teachers are portrayed as male.	Moderate (6/10: 60%)
Urban teachers are portrayed as neophytes.	Strong* (7-8/10: 70-80%)
Urban teachers are portrayed as White.	Strong (7/10: 70%)
Urban teachers (White) and their students (of color) are portrayed as being of different ethnicities.	Strong (8/10: 80%)

* The "strong" strength remains the same whether or not Ron Clark is included as a neophyte.

Approach Change and Epiphanies, Costs and Benefits

Trends related to gender, career stage, teacher ethnicity, and student ethnicity highlight relatively static, immutable components of identity. To investigate whether teachers change as the stories progress, we checked *Title x Approach Change*. In eight of the 10 movies, teachers change their approaches, indicating a strong trend. Figure 2 summarizes the nature of these changes. Jaime Escalante in *Stand and Deliver*, for example, starts experientially. In the first teaching scene, he facilitates students' understanding of fractions by cutting an apple with a butcher knife, and soon after he takes students on a field trip. Once he gets students' attention through experientialism, he adopts a more traditional approach—goading students into chanting, “A negative times a negative equals a positive,” and explaining how to solve problems on the board. More often, a teacher hits on experientialism after traditionalism has failed. That is, the teacher who employs a *banking method* (Freire 2000), whereby the teacher sees students as depositories for the wisdom she wants to dispense, finds this approach to be unproductive, marginalizing the teacher from the class community. Louann Johnson in *Dangerous Minds*, for instance, starts traditionally with an unsuccessful attempt to get students to conjugate verbs. She soon moves to social behaviorism as she tosses candy to students who participate. When participation becomes the norm, she abandons this tangible reward. To students' objections, she replies, “Learning should be its own reward.” This pithy edict is a key tenet of intellectual traditionalism (Schubert 1996). To bolster the message, she engages students in the experientialist Bob Dylan-Dylan Thomas contest in which students experience the thrill of research and of finding reflections of their own lives in the

poets' words. At some point in the teachers' development, usually later, experientialism comes to play a strong role, often in combination with other approaches. It is noteworthy that despite students' impoverished backgrounds, teachers whose approach changes do not employ critical reconstructionist approaches which would encourage the students to challenge the social, cultural, and economic factors that shape their lives.

To explore what prompted changes, we considered epiphanies, or moments in which teachers experienced seemingly sudden insights that marked turning points in their approaches. Checking *Title x Approach Change x Epiphany*, we found that in all eight movies in which teachers change approaches, epiphanies take place, indicating a very strong trend (Figure 2). In most cases, these stimuli provoked teachers' perception of their students' humanity—the felt understanding of students' reality and perspectives. For Erin Gruwell in *Freedom Writers*, who has tried approach after approach to little avail, insight comes with her interception of a student-drawn racist caricature. In *To Sir, with Love*, the moment arrives for Mark Thackeray, who has been struggling to maintain a temperate demeanor with his insolent students, when he discovers that students have put a sanitary napkin in the classroom furnace.

As noted in Figure 2, Roberta Gaspari of *Music of the Heart* and Ron Clark of *The Ron Clark Story* do not change their approach to curriculum and instruction. They do, however, evidence change of another sort—how they relate to students. Soon after Roberta begins teaching violin she regularly teases and taunts her students. As she prods one little girl to stand up straight, Roberta pokes the student's leg and discovers that she wears leg braces and has a physical disability. After this epiphany, Roberta's approach to

interacting with students becomes more obviously caring. Comparably, Ron Clark, who has tried approaches that presumably worked in his previous school but are failing with his urban students, feels helpless in the classroom. A friend's comment—"You feel helpless? They feel that way everyday."—serves as an epiphany. Thereafter, he takes pains to make his own vulnerability apparent to his students. It can be argued that all teachers who change approaches to curriculum and instruction also change how they relate to students, and both changes contribute to positive outcomes. For Roberta Gaspari and Ron Clark, however, their changes in relating to students seem sufficient for transforming the trajectories of their stories. Leading up to their epiphanies, teachers struggle prodigiously—with themselves, students, fellow teachers, administrators, and other naysayers in their lives,—and must begin to weigh the costs of being urban teachers. To explore the costs paid by teachers as a result of devotion to career, we checked *Title x Approach Change x Cost*. The result indicates a strong trend, with 88% of the filmic teachers who evidence changes in approach paying substantial costs (Figure 2 and Figure 5). In *Blackboard Jungle*, for example, Rick Dadier's physical safety is compromised when he is beat up by students. Louann Johnson of *Dangerous Minds* apparently has no time for a personal life, and she, like Erin Gruwell, pays out of pocket to enhance students' learning opportunities.

To further explore costs, now as they pertained to gender, we checked *Title x Approach Change x Cost x Gender*. Of the teachers who change approach, four are male and four are female, and most pay substantial costs. On the surface, then, no trend emerged regarding differential costs paid by male and female teachers. Figure 3 reveals that males and females tend to pay different kinds of costs. Three of the

four male teachers experience threats to their physical health or well being: Rick Dadie of *Blackboard Jungle* is attacked by students, Jaime Escalante of *Stand and Deliver* suffers a heart attack, and Ron Clark comes down with pneumonia. Throughout their travails, these men enjoy the affection and support of significant others. In contrast, each of the three female teachers takes a hit in their personal lives, and they take it without the support of romantic partners. Sylvia Barrett of *Up the Downstair Case* and Louann Johnson of *Dangerous Minds* have no scenes whatsoever suggesting personal lives unrelated to school. *Freedom Writers* contains scenes of Erin Gruwell's personal life, but she begins her first year of teaching with a husband and ends it without him. Because three, or 75%, of the male teachers under consideration experience costs associated with physical health and well-being, a strong trend is indicated. Because three, or 75%, of the female teachers under consideration pay costs related to their personal lives, a strong trend is indicated. Roberta Gaspari of *Music of the Heart*, unlike the other three female teachers, does not pay a cost to her personal life due to devotion to teaching. On the contrary, her immersion in teaching appears to provide an escape from romantic entanglements and their potential for failure, and her relationship with her sons continues to grow.

What, we wondered, do teachers gain from their struggles and sacrifices? What is the pay-off? To explore benefits, we checked *Title x Approach Change x Cost x Benefit*. The result indicated a very strong trend, with all seven teachers who change approaches and pay substantial costs also gaining substantial benefits, which are summarized in Figure 2. If Roberta Gaspari, who does not pay a substantial cost, is taken into account by checking *Title x Approach Change x Benefit*, a very strong trend emerges,

with all eight teachers gaining significant benefits. The major benefit for six of these eight teachers is the discovery of teaching as their true calling, indicating a strong trend. Jaime Escalante and Ron Clark appear already to have arrived at this conviction, but they do find vindication of their controversial methods by story's end. In both cases, vindication comes in the form of students' scores on standardized tests. Ron Clark gains an additional benefit—a girlfriend who seems won over largely by his devotion to his students. Roberta Gaspari finds personal salvation in teaching and like Escalante and Clark, finds vindication of her contested methods. For her, vindication comes with the success and expansion of her music program. Trends related to approaches, epiphanies, costs, and benefits appear in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Trends: Approaches and Epiphanies, Costs and Benefits

Trend	Strength
Urban teachers are portrayed as changing approaches, favoring experientialism.	Strong (8/10: 80%)
Urban teachers who change approaches are portrayed as also experiencing epiphanies.	Very Strong (8/8: 100%)
Urban teachers who change approaches are portrayed as paying substantial costs.	Strong (7/8: 87.5%)
Urban male teachers who change approaches are portrayed as paying costs related to physical health and well being.	Strong (3/4: 75%)
Urban female teachers who change approaches are portrayed as paying costs related to their personal lives.	Strong (3/4: 75%)
Urban teachers who change approaches and pay substantial costs are portrayed as gaining substantial benefits.	Very Strong (7/7: 100%)

Trend	Strength
Urban teachers who change approaches are portrayed as gaining substantial benefits.	Very Strong (8/8: 100%)
Urban teachers who change approaches are portrayed as discovering teaching as their true calling.	Strong (6/8: 75%)

The Emergence of the Grand Narrative

Prompted by the consideration of approach change and the related fields of epiphany, cost, and benefit, we turned our attention to story structure. A particular and repetitive story arc began to materialize, initially termed *Story Arc 1*. Story Arc 1 hinges on the interaction between cycles of teacher perception and student reaction. That is, initially the teacher is a push-over, totalitarian, or clearly afraid. Students react with mistrust, resistance, and rebellion, and the teacher comes to see the class as an unruly, uncontrollable mob. The teacher's struggles are punctuated by an epiphany, which leads her to view students as individuals with unique needs; consequently, her approach changes. Once students perceive that the teacher respects them, they respond in kind. The teacher nurtures a respectful classroom culture and a learning community coalesces, one that supports dramatic improvement in student learning. In essence, the teacher's perception and students' reactions become interdependent; their energies feed off each other, creating a positive feedback loop. Stimulated by an epiphany, the process of change entails costs for most teachers and benefits for all. Checking *Title x Story Arc* we ultimately found that 80% of the films follow Story Arc 1, indicating a strong trend. Only the films *187* and *Half Nelson* diverged from Story Arc 1.

To flesh out Story Arc 1 as it relates to components of teacher identity, we checked *Title*

x Story Arc 1 x Gender. Of these eight films, four portray male teachers and four portray female teachers. At first glance, the data seem to suggest a trend toward even portrayal of male and female teachers within Story Arc 1. However, by looking at the whole pool of 10 movies, different trends emerge. Of the stories of the six male teachers in all 10 films, four, or 67%, follow Story Arc 1, suggesting a moderate trend. Of the stories of the four female teachers in all 10 movies, all, or 100%, adhere to Story Arc 1, indicating a very strong trend.

Further fleshing out Story Arc 1 with regard to teacher identity, we checked *Title x Story Arc 1 x Career Stage*. Of the eight films, seven portray teachers as neophytes, indicating a strong trend. If Ron Clark also is considered to be a neophyte in an urban school context, then the trend becomes very strong. As indicated in Figure 2, the two veteran teachers, Trevor Garfield of *187* and Dan Dunne of *Half Nelson*, do not change approaches with the majority of their students.

Looking at teachers' ethnicity within Story Arc 1, we checked *Title x Story Arc 1 x Teacher Ethnicity*. In the eight movies conforming to Story Arc 1, six of the teachers are White, indicating a strong trend. To investigate the relationship between teachers' and students' ethnicities within Story Arc 1, we checked *Title x Story Arc 1 x Teacher Ethnicity x Student Ethnicity*. In six of the eight films, teachers' ethnicities are different from the majority of their students', indicating a strong trend. These movies are *To Sir, with Love*, *Up the Down Staircase*, *Dangerous Minds*, *Music of the Heart*, *The Ron Clark Story*, and *Freedom Writers*. Trends related to the prevalence of Story Arc 1 and components of teacher identity appear in Figure 6.

Because approach change with epiphanies is the pivot on which Story Arc 1 turns, it is logical to assume that the trends identified for teachers whose approach changes also apply to teachers whose stories conform to Story Arc 1; these teachers are one and the same. Our assumptions were confirmed. Trends related to structural elements of Story Arc 1 are presented in Figure 7 on the next page.

Figure 6. Trends: Prevalence of Story Arc 1 and Components of Teacher Identity

Trend	Strength
Stories of urban teachers are portrayed as following Story Arc 1.	Strong (8/10: 80%)
Stories of urban male teachers are portrayed as following Story Arc 1.	Moderate (4/6: 67%)
Stories of urban female teachers are portrayed as following Story Arc 1.	Very Strong (4/4: 100%)
Urban teachers whose stories follow Story Arc 1 are portrayed as neophytes.	Strong / Very Strong * (7/8: 87.5% / 8/8: 100%)
Urban teachers whose stories follow Story Arc 1 are portrayed as White.	Strong (6/8: 75%)
Urban teachers, whose stories follow Story Arc 1, and their students are portrayed as being of different ethnicities. Teachers are White; students are of color, predominantly African American and Latino.	Strong (6/8: 75%)

* The "very strong" strength reflects Ron Clark's inclusion as a neophyte.

Figure 7. Trends: Structural Elements of Story Arc 1

Trend	Strength
Urban teachers whose stories follow Story Arc 1 are portrayed as changing approaches.	Very Strong (8/8: 100%)
Urban teachers whose stories follow Story Arc 1 are portrayed as experiencing epiphanies.	Very Strong (8/8: 100%)
Urban teachers whose stories follow Story Arc 1 are portrayed as paying substantial costs.	Strong (7/8: 87.5%)
Urban male teachers whose stories follow Story Arc 1 are portrayed as paying costs related to physical health and well being.	Strong (3/4: 75%)
Urban female teachers whose stories follow Story Arc 1 are portrayed as paying costs related to their personal lives.	Strong (3/4: 75%)
Urban teachers, whose stories follow Story Arc 1 and who pay substantial costs, are portrayed as gaining substantial benefits.	Very Strong (7/7: 100%)
Urban teachers whose stories follow Story Arc 1 are portrayed as gaining substantial benefits.	Very Strong (8/8: 100%)
Urban teachers whose stories follow Story Arc 1 are portrayed as discovering teaching as their true calling.	Strong (6/8: 75%)

Perception of Reality in Portrayal of Urban Teachers Whose Stories Follow Story Arc 1

At this point, we returned to our interest in the extent to which these movies may be perceived as conveying the reality of urban teaching—this time, with regard to Story Arc 1.

By checking *Title x True Story x Story Arc 1*, we found that all five movies based on real teachers' stories fit within Story Arc 1, indicating a very strong trend. Our hypothesis about the persistence of Story Arc 1 was confirmed by checking *Title x Release Date x Story Arc 1*. Results reveal that over time, Story Arc 1 has proven robust. For over half a century—from *Blackboard Jungle* in 1955 to *Freedom Writers* in 2007—Story Arc 1 has provided the structure for eight of the ten films, indicating a strong trend. Figure 8 presents trends related to the perception of reality in portrayals of urban teachers whose stories follow Story Arc 1.

Figure 8. Trends: Perception of Reality in Portrayal of Urban Teachers Whose Stories Follow Story Arc 1

Trend	Strength
Stories based on real teachers' accounts follow Story Arc 1.	Very Strong (5/5: 100%)
Over time, Story Arc 1 provides the structure for portrayals of urban teachers.	Strong (8/10: 80%)

Conclusion

The prevalence of Story Arc 1 across films and across time suggests a sort of *grand narrative* that may serve as a source of cultural myths or urban legends, potentially shaping the ways preservice teachers, and the general public, perceive the reality of urban teaching. In this reality, urban teachers' personal struggles hover around issues regarding the struggle to make time for family and self, health, personal safety, and determining whether or not they really *want to do this job*. Urban teacher images are consistently juxtaposed against contexts that are seemingly insurmountable. They address issues like violence, teen pregnancy, low academic

achievement, and uncooperative, uncaring parents—issues rarely dealt with in suburban school films (Bulman 2005; McCarthy et. al. 2004).

The urban teaching context is depicted as a dead end of depravity that causes the viewer to feel much more enthralled by the seemingly superhuman teachers. In effect, the grand narrative may contribute to the reluctance to teach in urban schools because pre-service teachers look at the accumulation of images furthered through the grand narrative and wonder if they have the *stuff* to hack it. While discussing the films, we often questioned how many of our students, who are largely White, middle-class females, have no desire and even a fear of teaching in urban schools. The representations furthered through the grand narrative, without a vigorous critique, are difficult to see around. Grant (2002) points out teachers in such films more often than not are constructed as saviors who are the center of learning, deeply involved with students' personal lives, naturally authoritative, more enlightened than parents, and all-sacrificing for students and the profession.

Her point is that the films do not adequately portray the complexity of urban teachers and schools, and they “disregard the powerful political, economic, and social forces at play” (p. 85) in those contexts. Keser (2007) in a spot-on review of *Freedom Writers* argues:

Despite its compassion for kids born into situations they didn't make and the dog-eat-dog struggles happening on their doorsteps, the movie keeps mum when it comes to the real culprits—the brutal economic outlook for underclass members plus the systematic crippling of public education via underfunding. The untoward sympathy for the heroine plays badly next to its scant concern for the

students' need to support themselves in dead-end McJobs, nor is there much sign of behavioral pitfalls like drug and alcohol abuse (or even cursing).

(Retrieved November 17, 2009)

The reality of teaching in urban high schools, any high school for that matter, is that teachers teach multiple classes and can engage upwards 100-120 students daily. Clearly, the heroic actions of teachers in this genre are simply unsustainable as represented (Keser 2007), especially since these teachers operate largely in isolation from their colleagues and have little experience with pedagogy and practice.

The grand narrative represents many truths about teaching in urban contexts: repercussions of poverty, violence, inept administrators, naysaying careerist colleagues, progressive methods, etc. However, films of the grand narrative largely focus on the power of singular, heroic individuals in the interest of driving story and drama. Again, this is especially difficult since many of these stories are based on real teachers. The cultural myths that pervade the grand narrative, as Britzman (2003) pointed out, create expectations for the uninitiated that foster a sense of fear and loathing about teaching in urban contexts while never actually showing what a *typical* day looks like from the perspective of *real* (rather than *reel*) teachers, nor do these films show how teachers create coalitions of like-minded professionals for ideas, support, and action. Moreover, the grand narrative eclipses stories of teachers, administrators, and parents (i.e. communities) who work together to bring change in challenging contexts for all students and not just a few in one class.

As Moore (2007), a teacher in New York City, cautions in another critique of *Freedom Writers*, “... the most dangerous message such films promote is that what schools really need are

heroes. This is the Myth of the Great Teacher” (p. 1). Uninitiated in the real world of urban teaching, pre-service teachers likely interpret these films as portraying reality, given the very strong trend that all five films based on real teachers’ accounts follow Story Arc 1 (refer to Figure 3). Whether these dramatized accounts are perceived to be myth or reality, the grand narrative has proven compelling to moviegoers and profitable for moviemakers.

In Moore’s reference to the urban teacher as hero, we find a hint of the reason behind the grand narrative’s appeal. The mythical hero’s journey, then, warrants further examination. In addition, the story structures of the two films in this study that do *not* conform to the grand narrative are worthy of exploration—for they possess potential as counter narratives that can be equally as powerful and insightful as the grand narrative.

References

American Federation of Teachers. 2007. *Meeting the challenge: Recruiting and retaining teachers in hard-to-staff schools*. Washington, DC: American Federation of Teachers.

Bandura, Albert. 2002. Social cognitive theory of mass communication. In *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, ed. Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillman, 121-153. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002.

Bernard, H.R. 1994. *Research methods in anthropology: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*, 2nd edition. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.

Britzman, D. P. 2003. *Practice makes practice: A critical study of learning to teach*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Brown, J.L. and C.A. Moffett. 1999. *The hero’s journey: How educators can transform schools and improve learning*. Alexandria,

VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Brunner, Diane. 1994. *Inquiry and Reflection: Framing Narrative Practice in Education*. NY: State University of New York Press.

Bulman, Robert. 2005. *Hollywood goes to high school: Cinema, schools, and American culture*. NY: Worth Publishers.

Burbach, H. J., and M.A. Figgins. 1991. "Screen images of principals--a new vision is needed." *NAASP Bulletin* 75: 52-58.

Burbach, H.J., and M.A. Figgins. 1993. "A thematic profile of the images of teachers in film." *Teacher Education Quarterly* 20: 65-75.

Campbell, J. 1949. *The hero with a thousand faces*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Dalton, Mary. 1999. *The Hollywood curriculum: Teachers and teaching in the movies*. NY: Peter Lang Publishing.

Darling-Hammond, L. 2007. Evaluating No Child Left Behind. *The Nation*, (May 21), www.thenation.com/doc/20070521/darlinghammond.

Fischman, W., J.A. DiBara, and H. Gardner. 2006). "Creating good education against the odds." *Cambridge Journal of Education* 36: 383-398.

Flinders, D. and S. Thornton, eds. 2004. *The Curriculum Studies Reader, 2nd ed.* NY: Routledge.

Freire, Paulo. 2000. *Pedagogy of the oppressed, 30th Anniversary ed.* NY: Continuum.

Giroux, H. A. 1997. *Channel surfing: Race Talk and the Destruction of American Youth*. NY: St. Martin's Press.

Grant, P. A. 2002. "Using popular film to challenge preservice teachers' beliefs about teaching in urban schools." *Urban Education*, 37: 77-95.

Haberman, M. 1995. *STAR teachers of children in poverty*. West Lafayette, IN: Kappa Delta Pi.

Illinois State Board of Education. 2005. *Educator supply and demand in Illinois 2005: Annual report*. Springfield, IL: Illinois State Board of Education.

- Kincheloe, J.L., ed. 2007. *Urban education: A comprehensive guide for educators, parents, and teachers*. Blue Ridge Summit, PA: Rowan and Littlefield Education.
- Marvin, L. 2006. "Dancing between two worlds: A portrait of the life of a black male teacher in South Central LA." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 19: 221-242.
- McCarthy, C., A. Rodriquez, S. Meecham, S. David, C. Wilson-Brown, H. Godina, K.E. Supryia, and E. Buendia. 2004. Race, suburban resentment, and the representation of the inner city in contemporary film and television. In *Off White: Readings on power, privilege, and resistance*, eds. L. Weis, L. Powell Pruitt, and A. Burns, 163-174. NY:Routledge.
- McKee, A. 2005. *Textual analysis*. London, UK: Sage Publications.
- Moore, T. 2007. Classroom distinctions. *The New York Times*, March 3, Opinion section, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/19/opinion/19moore.html>.
- National Center for Education Statistics. 2008. *School and staffing survey*. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics. http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/tables/state_2004_19.asp.
- Nederhouser, D. D. 2002. *Reel teachers: A descriptive content analysis of the portrayal of American teachers in popular cinema*. PhD diss., Northern Illinois University.
- Neill, M. 2005. The No Child Left Behind Act is not improving education. In *Education: Opposing viewpoints*, ed. M. Williams, 162-168. Farmington Hills, MI: Greenhaven Press.
- Pinar, W. 2004. *What is curriculum theory*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Schubert, W.H. 1996. "Perspectives on four curriculum traditions." *Educational Horizons* 74: 169-176.
- Shaw, Carla Cooper, and D. D. Nederhauser. 2005. Reel teachers: References for reflection for real teachers. *Action in Teacher Education* 27:85-95.
- Smith, D.L. and Smith, B.J. 2006. "Perceptions of violence: The views of teachers who left urban schools." *High School Journal* 89: 34-42.
- Swetnam, L.A. 1992. "Media distortion of the teacher image". *The Clearing House*, 66: 30-32.
- Trier, J. D. 2001. "The cinematic representation of the personal and professional lives of teachers." *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 28: 127-142.
- Zavarzeduh, M. 1991. *Seeing films politically*. Buffalo, NY: State University of New York Press.