

## The Cinematic Representation of the Personal and Professional Lives of Teachers

By James D. Trier

For years, I have been interested in a genre of popular films that can be called “school films.”<sup>1</sup> Generally, I define a school film as a movie that in some way—even incidentally—is about an educator or a student. This broad definition has allowed me to conceptualize the school film genre as being comprised of well over one-hundred movies (Trier, 2000). Examples of very well-known school films are *Dead Poets Society*, *Stand and Deliver*, and *To Sir With Love*. Examples of lesser-known school films are *Maedchen in Uniform*, *Small Change*, *Waterland*, *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, and *Zero for Conduct*.

My long-standing interest in school films eventually began informing my research projects and teaching practices as a supervisor of practicum students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. My main goal as a supervisor is to engage preservice teachers in a critically reflective practice, which I will define here by drawing on Zeichner (1990), who contrasts critical reflection with benign or generic conceptions of reflection. Critical reflection involves not only focusing one’s attention inwardly, on the more technical aspects of teaching, but also focusing one’s attention “outwardly at the social conditions in which [individual and collective teaching] practices are situated” (p. 59). A critically reflective

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tive practice explicitly challenges the notion that teachers can “remain neutral about pedagogy, curriculum, and classroom organization and management,” and it foregrounds the expectation that teachers will continually critique the institutional contexts in which they work “in order to see relationships between daily practices in the classroom and issues of schooling and society.” Zeichner argues that teacher educators should attempt to develop this “relational thinking” in their work with students “by deliberately focusing students’ attentions on particular kinds of issues connected to their everyday teaching activities that raise questions of equity and social justice” (p. 58).

The main challenge in having practicum students raise questions of equity and social justice about issues that connect to their everyday teaching activities is that the students have done very little “everyday teaching,” so they have very few actual teaching experiences to raise questions about. Though the students do acquire more experience during the practicum, it’s not much more—they are placed in classrooms for only a nine-week period during a semester, just three mornings a week. Compounding this constraint of a lack of teaching experience is another constraint: the students and I have very little time together. We meet only once a week for a one-hour seminar. The major effect of these constraints on my goal of engaging students in critical reflection is that the course readings and the weekly seminars take on a special importance. Early on, I realized that what I assigned students to study outside of the seminar, the activities and projects that they did as part of the practicum, and the discussions that took place all together had to carry most of the burden of creating opportunities for students to engage in critical reflection.

What I began doing in the seminar was occasionally drawing on school films to supplement certain assigned print readings. For example, while discussing “Preparing Monocultural Teachers for a Multicultural World: Attitudes Toward Inner-City Schools” (Aaronsohn, et. al., 1995), I focused on how nearly all of the students who Aaronsohn studied<sup>2</sup> had negative images about inner city schools. To suggest that these images were perhaps partly the effect of how popular films depict inner city schools, I showed scenes from the inner city movies *The Principal, 187*, and *The Substitute*. Each scene depicted violence involving male students of color. One showed a white principal being badly beaten by a gang of black students; another showed a black teacher being repeatedly stabbed in the back by a black student; and another scene showed a white teacher using martial arts maneuvers to subdue and disarm two Hispanic male students in a classroom. After viewing these scenes, students engaged in a rich discussion about the negative depictions of inner city schools and students in films and other media. Some students admitted that their own images of inner city schools were probably derived from having watched such films as these.

After a few more casual supplemental uses of scenes from different school movies during other seminars, I decided to incorporate these movies into the practicum in a more central way. Part of the process of conceptualizing how to take

up these films involved reading what film critics, film historians, and teacher educators have written about such films.<sup>3</sup> Especially valuable for me, though, were accounts by teacher educators.

For example, Diane Brunner (1994) used school films to engage preservice teachers in examining their assumptions about a range of educational issues. She had students view films “in parity with professional texts” (academic journal articles, books, and book chapters) for the purpose of questioning and dismantling the “preconceived assumptions about teaching” that the students might have held (p. 69). Brunner explains that whereas professional texts are effective in naming particular educational problems, stories of schooling, such as those told in school movies, illumine these problems in ways that professional texts cannot, mainly by inviting us to experience situations vicariously through dramatic forms. She explains that for preservice teachers, “making the leap from abstraction to [an actual educational] situation can be difficult without a bridge,” but stories of schooling, such as those told in school films, “can provide such a link and may be the key to making meaning” (p. 71).

The idea that films invite us to experience situations vicariously has also informed the work of Judith Robertson (1995), who analyzed the emotional investment that a group of female preservice teachers made in “certain scenes, characterizations, and investments of teaching” while they viewed school films. To discover their emotional investment, Robertson focused the student teachers’ movie viewing by asking them to record in writing the “strong personal impulses they felt during viewing (for example, tears, laughter, agitation, strong memories)” (p. 38). Robertson’s hypothesis is that “images of teaching are used as screens” for student teachers who, “through reading and writing play out unexamined desires concerning knowledge in teaching” (p. 54). Working from a psychoanalytical framework, Robertson analyzed the student teachers’ journals, as well as the transcripts of interviews she conducted, to trace the students’ desires, longings, and fears through the repetitions of words, phrases, and ideas.<sup>4</sup>

I find Brunner’s and Robertson’s accounts valuable as evidence of the potential that school films have for inviting preservice teachers to experience situations vicariously and for engaging students in examining their assumptions, beliefs, and knowledge about a range of educational issues. With these same purposes in mind, as well as many others, I designed dozens of activities involving school films. I’ll briefly describe a few of these in order to create a context for my main discussion of how I have drawn on school films to engage pre-service teachers in critical reflections about the relationship between the personal and professional lives of teachers.

One activity, which I call “The ‘Resentment’ School Film and the ‘Lullaby’ School Film,” calls for pre-service teachers first to read Cameron McCarthy’s essay “Educating the American Popular: Suburban Resentment and the Representation of the Inner City in Contemporary Film and Television” (1998). McCarthy argues that television and popular film fulfill “a certain bardic function” in society, singing

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back to white America lullabies that maintain the suburban myth of security and economic plenitude, while simultaneously creating “the most poignantly sordid fantasies of inner-city degeneracy and moral decrepitude,” as in a movie such as *Falling Down* (p. 32). The practicum students read McCarthy’s article as an introduction to “resentment” and “lullaby” school films. The former are inner city school films; the latter are suburban school films—for example, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *Sixteen Candles*, and *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*. After reading McCarthy’s essay, students choose from a variety of activities. One is to analyze how inner city school films construct “inner city” students, teachers, schools, and the surrounding communities, and then to write an essay comparing these cinematic constructions with their own assumptions, beliefs, and knowledge about so-called inner city schools (few pre-service teachers at the University of Wisconsin have ever been in an inner city school, but all of them have notions of what they are like).

In another activity, I have drawn on the work of Claudia Mitchell and Sandra Weber as they describe it in *Reinventing Ourselves as Teachers: Beyond Nostalgia* (1999). Among the many projects they describe relating to reading popular texts is one that focuses students’ viewing of a school film with one of the following questions:

Describe the scene or event that gripped or affected you the most. What is it about that particular scene that ‘gets to you’? How does it connect to you or to your social or political contexts? Describe the scenes or elements . . . that ring true to you, and explain why they seem realistic and plausible. Do they remind you of any real life experiences? What images or stereotypes of teachers, students, or schooling are introduced or perpetuated? Why do you think this [film] has become popular? Whose point of view or gaze is presented or dominates? How are power or cultural issues related to class, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, or age played out? What messages or images do you take away from this [film] and how might they relate to your professional life? (p. 173)

Practicum students who have followed these focus questions have produced provocative and insightful analyses. For example, one student viewed the movie *Teachers* with this question in mind: “What images or stereotypes of teachers, students, or schooling are introduced or perpetuated?” The student noted that all the teachers in the film are incompetent, that the administration is viewed as inept and cowardly (in the face of a lawsuit), and that this mid-1980s movie perhaps should have been titled *Bashing Teachers* for how it demeaned the profession. In her seminar presentation, the student teacher drew on research she had done to situate the film in its historical context, noting that the film came out during the Reagan years, when teaching and teachers were routinely held responsible for the many problems facing public education then (much like today).

Along with designing projects around school films, I also draw on certain secondary texts, which John Fiske (1987) has described as including criticism and publicity that surround a primary text, such as a film. In the case of school films, the

video box covers found on the shelves of video rental stores are one form of secondary text. For an activity titled “Video Box Covers as Secondary Texts,” I have made color photocopies of over 100 video box covers, and I have used these photocopies to design a number of activities that engage student teachers in a variety of critical readings of these rich, ideologically-laden, visual-print publicity texts. For example, in analyzing the box covers of inner-city and suburb school films, students found that the inner-city box covers are dominated by dark colors—mainly pitch-black and blood red—and feature male teachers or principals as the central figures, usually in aggressive poses (holding a baseball bat, standing behind a desk where an automatic weapon rests). In contrast, the “suburb” covers glow with bright reds, greens, purples, blues, and pinks, and the central figures are nearly always young, white teens smiling, holding one another, laughing, kissing, and so on. Pre-service teachers have also observed how the inner city films are typically serious dramas that often involve violence and death (*Zebrahead*, *Class of 1984*), whereas the suburb films range from being light-hearted romances (*Pretty in Pink*), dark-humor comedies (*Heathers*), celebratory youth-rebellion movies (*Pump Up the Volume*), and supernatural thrillers (*Carrie*). These “genre” observations have produced various stimulating seminar discussions stemming from questions such as: Why are the inner city films always about death and violence, but the suburban films are not? Why are youthful rebellion, romance, and the wonder of being a teenager celebrated in the suburb films but not in the inner city films?

At this point, I’ll discuss how I have drawn on school films to engage students in reflections about the issue of the relationship between the personal and professional lives of teachers. This is a topic that inevitably emerges as the many demands placed on the pre-service teachers begin to take their toll as the semester unfolds. The pressures that students experience lead to seminar discussions about how students will be able to deal with a full-time teaching job when preparing to teach just one practicum sometimes involves hours of preparation. What kind of a personal lives will they have when preparing and teaching all the lessons for each subject every day, sitting on committees, evaluating students’ work, meeting with parents, attempting to establish good working relationships with other teachers and with principals, and keeping up with the bureaucracy involved in teaching? To explore this relationship between the personal and professional lives of teachers, I have drawn on particular school films that offer a variety of cinematic representations of this relationship.

Many school films primarily represent only the professional lives of teachers, with few personal life scenes in them. Examples include *To Sir, With Love*, *Up the Down Staircase*, *Dead Poets Society*, and *Dangerous Minds*. Some films, such as *This Is My Father* and *Rachel, Rachel*, deal almost exclusively with a teacher’s personal life. Another variation includes films that move back and forth between scenes of a teacher’s professional life and his or her personal life. Typically in these films, one aspect of the teacher’s life is in turmoil because of the other. For example,

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in some films, problems occurring in a teacher's personal life flood into his or her teaching, as in *Waterland* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, whereas in other films, the teacher's professional life disrupts his or her personal life, as in *The Blackboard Jungle*, *The Class of 1984*, *Stand and Deliver* and *187*. In what follows, I will discuss a few of these films, emphasizing how pre-service teachers have read the films in the context of the issue concerning the relationship between a teacher's personal and professional lives.

As mentioned above, some school films mainly depict the professional lives of teachers, with only a few (if any) personal life scenes in them. In such films, the teacher is the central figure, and nearly all of the action takes place in or around the school, or in some kind of relation to school affairs. When we do see the teacher outside of school, we usually see him or her engaged in activities directly related to teaching, such as grading papers or visiting the home of a student.

For example, much of the action in *To Sir, With Love* takes place in Sir's classroom where we see him at first struggling to implement the prescribed curriculum, meeting the students' many open challenges to his authority, enduring racist comments from some students, erupting in a volcano of anger directed at a group of girls, throwing out the textbooks and (arguably) making the curriculum more relevant by engaging students in discussions about real life, negotiating the crush that Pamela has on him, having a talk with Pamela at the request of her distraught mother, and so on. When Sir is not in his classroom, he is nearly always situated in relation to some other school locale, engaged in school business. We see him in the teachers' lounge talking with teachers; in the headmaster's office making a case for taking his students on a field trip; in the hallways talking about school-related matters with the principal, teachers, and students; in the gymnasium, on the school grounds, on the school bus returning from the trip to the museum; and so on. In effect, we see Sir almost exclusively in his professional world throughout the film.

The only scenes of Sir's personal life show him briefly in his apartment (opening mail or ironing a shirt), walking through the market (being greeted as "Sir" by the parents of his students), meeting his students at the home of one student whose parent passed away, or getting off a tram on his way to school. These few fleeting glimpses into his personal life create the impression that Sir really has no personal life outside of the school. And when *To Sir, With Love* is considered with *Up the Down Staircase*, *Dead Poets Society*, and *Dangerous Minds* (all of which focus almost exclusively on the teacher's professional life), one powerful impression these films create is that good teachers, those with a special gift, are devoted solely to their profession, seemingly at the expense of having any kind of personal life.

Pre-service teachers who have viewed this film by focusing on how it represents Sir's personal and professional lives have produced a variety of readings. One pre-service teacher viewed Sir as an example to follow, hoping that she would be able to "give as much time to [her] work as a teacher as Sir did." However, most students' responses echoed one student who thought the film "makes it seem like a teacher

shouldn't have a personal life" because of the way that Sir "never seems to be thinking about anything else except for his students." Many pre-service teachers related *To Sir, With Love* to other "teacher savior" films, such as *Conrack*, *Stand and Deliver*, and *Dangerous Minds* (which are on a list of films to watch in relation to *To Sir, With Love*). One pre-service teacher who watched all three of these films thought they played a role in creating a certain image of the teacher among the public. She stated that such films

are all the same—the teacher comes in, gets rid of the textbooks, and uses his [or her] charisma and "gift" for teaching to save kids who are heading nowhere. . . . The problem with this is that real life teaching can't be like that. Teaching isn't about saving people, though I guess that does happen sometimes. . . . [However,] films like this probably cause the average American to think that a teacher should be some super teacher ready to give up his [or her] life for the profession. Nobody expects this from other professionals. . . . If you have to have a "gift" to be a teacher, then why bother being in a [teacher training] program? I love teaching, but I don't know if I have some special gift. What I do know is that I work hard trying to learn as much as I can in order to be the best teacher I can be.

In the above response, the pre-service teacher touches on a number of important issues related to societal expectations and perceptions of what it means to be a teacher. She assumes that films have an effect on shaping what might be called "the Public Imagination," which would put her in agreement with McCarthy (1998). She also proposes an oppositional reading (Hall, 1980; Fiske, 1987) of the film, interpreting Sir's gift for teaching as a cinematic representation that is perhaps impossible to live up to in the world of real life teaching. In opposition to the gift image of the teacher, she offers her own view of how one becomes skilled in one's profession: through "work[ing] hard" to develop the many skills and to acquire the layers of knowledge that come together to produce a "good" teacher. She also implies that it would be detrimental to "give up" one's personal life in order to live up to the cultural model of the "super teacher."

Now I'll turn to a different kind of school film: those that deal almost exclusively with a teacher's personal life. One such film is *This Is My Father*, a film about a high school history teacher named Kieran Johnson who lives and teaches in a working class suburb of Chicago. There are only two classroom scenes—one at the beginning, and one at the end. In the first one, we are presented with a portrait of Kieran in his professional life as a teacher. Kieran stares blankly out a window as a student moves through a halting, flat oral report about her family tree. When the student finishes, Kieran continues to stare out the window, oblivious to his surroundings, until another student intentionally drops a book to the floor, startling Kieran back into the present. This student then informs Kieran that the students do not care at all about the subject matter and that they think Kieran is a poor teacher. Kieran keeps his cool and the scene ends. The preferred reading of this scene is that though Kieran might have once been a good teacher, he now is not. He has no interest

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in or connection with his students, and he has as little interest as they do in the history he is being paid to teach them.

In subsequent scenes, we learn that Kieran is a widower (in his late 50s, no children) who lives alone and helps his sister take care of their bedridden mother, who has had a stroke and seems no longer cognizant of the world around her (as Kieran seemed in the classroom scene). At one point, Kieran discovers at his mother's house a book of poems that a man had given to her when she was a young woman growing up in Ireland. The book is inscribed, "To Fiona, the loveliest of all the lasses. I would love to be your man. Kieran. June, 1939." There is also a photo of the man with his arm around Kieran's mother. We learn that Kieran never knew his father and that his mother had never spoken of him. Suddenly presented with the possibility that he might still find his father alive in Ireland—or at least learn something about him—Kieran decides to travel to Ireland during spring break, which has just begun.

In Ireland, Kieran eventually meets an old woman who remembers in vivid detail his mother and father's tragic love story. Most of the rest of the film then takes place in the past, with the old woman telling this story in episodic fashion. Kieran ultimately discovers where his father's grave is, which he visits before leaving Ireland. Near the grave, he says in apostrophe, "I'm glad you're a father. . . . Sorry the world was so harsh to you. . . . I wish—I wish it wasn't. . . . I think—I think you'd make a real good father. And . . . I think you would have liked me. . . . I think you would have liked me." The next (and final) scene in the film, which is the only other classroom scene, suggests that as Kieran had wept beside his father's grave, a spiritual transformation seems to have begun for him. This very short scene opens with a close-up of a student holding the framed photo of Kieran's mother and father. In slow-motion (and with Irish music playing to the image), we see the photo being passed back to the next student, who looks at the photo and in turn passes it back. Then we see a final image of Kieran sitting relaxed on the edge of his desk, smiling with a look of contentment. The scene implies that his profound discovery of his own history has led to a radical change in his sense of himself as a teacher.

How have pre-service teachers read this film, in the context of the question about the relationship between a teacher's personal and professional lives? One student insightfully inquired about Kieran's decision to become a teacher:

Why did Kieran become a teacher in the first place? He now seems uninterested and cut off from his students. . . . However, maybe what he said at his father's grave explains [his original motivations for becoming a teacher]. He says two times, "I think you would have liked me." Maybe that was his reason, to be liked by his students, to get what he did not get by [not] having [had] a father. . . . So, this need to be liked and at the center [of] someone's life [like a child with his or her father] might explain why he became a teacher. . . . I know that I want my students to like me. *This is something in my 'personal' life that is also part of my 'professional' life as a teacher. And being a teacher seems to involve a special relationship with*

*other people that you don't find in, for example, being a lawyer or stockbroker or something like that. . . . [emphasis added]*

I interpret the pre-service teacher's response to the film as foregrounding certain deep assumptions about the relationship between a teacher's personal and professional life. She suggests that there are other, more complex reasons for becoming a teacher besides the standard "I love children" explanation; she wonders if Kieran's not having known his father has created some psychological, emotional need in him that he perhaps had hoped would be fulfilled by becoming a teacher. Astutely noting that Kieran says twice at his father's grave, "I think you would have liked me," she relates this desire "to be liked by his students" to Kieran's decision to become a teacher. She then seems to use the film as a screen upon which to project her own desires as a teacher (Robertson, 1995), saying, "I know that I want my students to like me." Also, she succinctly expresses what is to me a valuable bit of knowledge for a pre-service teacher to acquire: the knowledge that "being a teacher seems to involve a special relationship with other people that you don't find" in most other professions.

Another pre-service teacher also seems to have connected Kieran's choice to be a history teacher to his own search for his personal history:

Even though the movie has just two scenes of the teacher [in the classroom], it was still a 'teacher' movie because it's about his [personal] life, which has totally affected his teaching [life]. His personal life has played a big role in his teaching life. . . . In the first [classroom] scene, Kieran is not at all involved in his work, just looking out the window during a student's report of her family history. . . . He might even be thinking about his own family history, or his lack of one. . . . At the end of the movie I interpret the last scene as showing that Kieran has changed. The trip to Ireland brought him into his past. His discovery about his father and [his] own history have ended up changing his teaching of history. In the last scene, . . . he seems happy and at peace with himself. The students are passing around the picture of his father and mother, [and] we can interpret it as them seeing the change in Kieran as a teacher as he talks about his parents to them. . . . *He got something very serious in his personal life resolved, and it has made him a better teacher now. . . . His teaching [life] was completely connected with his personal life, which is probably how it is for all teachers, in some way or another. . . . [emphasis added]*

At various points within this response, the pre-service teacher seems to be expressing the important insight that, in some cases, choosing teaching as a profession might grow out of some essential need or desire in one's personal life that teaching can satisfy. When the pre-service teacher wonders if Kieran is perhaps "thinking about his own family history, or his lack of one" while staring out the window; when she remarks later that Kieran's trip "brought him into his past"; and when she interprets the last classroom scene as revealing that Kieran "got something very serious in his personal life resolved," she might be said to be linking Kieran's deeply personal (and sublimated) desires for acceptance and a sense of belonging to his

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decision to become a teacher. This “completely connected” relationship between the personal and the professional is, for her, “probably how it is for all teachers, in some way or another.” What I find most valuable in this pre-service teacher’s readings of the figure of Kieran is that through analyzing this film, she has articulated certain assumptions that she might otherwise not have had the opportunity to formulate and express, assumptions concerning the issue of the relationship between the personal and the professional.

Like *This Is My Father*, the film *Waterland* centers on a middle-aged history teacher, and much of the story is told in long flashbacks. However, *Waterland* is a quite different film in that it combines many classroom scenes with many personal life scenes (from both the teacher’s present-day personal life and a certain traumatic period during his adolescence). So, whereas *This Is My Father* focuses mainly on the personal life of a teacher and only suggests through two brief classroom scenes how the personal seems to relate to the professional, *Waterland* is a full treatment of the relationship between the personal and the professional. As it happens, it is a story about how a teacher’s personal life washes over into his professional life in a self-destructive way. Simply put, Tom Crick (the teacher) has departed from the prescribed curriculum and has been telling his students stories about his own past, stories intermingled with profoundly disturbing details of his very troubled personal life. These stories about his adolescence include many vignettes about sexual experiences, incest, murder, madness, suicide, abortion, and more. Tom injects these disturbing vignettes with sudden, profoundly personal revelations about his wife’s steady descent into madness.

At first, the students had found the stories engrossing and were able to still make tenuous connections between the personal stories and the larger story of history embedded in the subject matter that their teacher had still been making gestures toward teaching. However, as the stories became more disturbing, explicit, and personal, the students eventually sensed that Tom was transgressing certain pedagogical boundaries, and a group of his students finally made a formal complaint about his stories, a complaint that eventually led to his being retired (i.e., fired).

All of the teacher’s classroom storytelling ultimately forms a kind of case study that explains the profound crisis that he and his wife are now experiencing. In effect, the teacher unwittingly turned his classroom into a site of personal therapy: through his stories, he painfully—and pedagogically dangerously—explored the relationship between his troubled past and his even more troubled present life. The student teachers who have viewed and analyzed this film have found it to be not only disturbing, provocative, and intellectually engaging, but also a powerful representation of the relationship between the personal and professional lives of a teacher. For example, one student wrote:

This movie has had a big impact on me. It presents a teacher whose [extremely troubled] personal life takes over his teaching [life]. Things are so bad in his marriage

that he is unable to control certain parts of his teaching. . . . His stories are very powerful, they're about his own life when he was younger. That's an [e]ffective approach to teaching history—bringing things in from your own past. But he goes too far, becomes too personal and open about his life. . . . It's like he can't stop. The line that separates the two [his personal and teaching lives] gets crossed. He keeps getting more and more personal, and in the end he gets fired because of it. . . . The main reason this movie had an impact on me is that last semester, my cooperating teacher was going through a divorce and she sometimes couldn't function very well in the classroom. She got emotional often, left the classroom now and then, [and] even though I could see her struggling to keep things inside . . . . I remember thinking at the time that she should be stronger and keep her personal life out of it [her teaching life]. After viewing [*Waterland*], though, I can reflect on my [former] cooperating teacher in a new light. . . . Teaching is not an airtight box that you can keep the problems of your private life out of all the time.

Here, the pre-service teacher reads the film as a commentary about how there are boundaries between the personal and the professional that teachers must recognize and not cross (she notes that the teacher became “too personal and open about his life”), and about how it is not always possible to separate the two lives (“It's like he can't stop”). The student's analysis might be read as an articulation of what “professional” means: the ability to separate one's personal life from one's professional life, for the good of the students. The pre-service teacher also made connections between the film and her own experiences in the classroom, reflecting “in a new light” on a previous cooperating teacher's own troubled experiences negotiating the personal within the professional. She also arrives at an important summation of the issue of the relationship between the personal and the professional lives of teachers: “Teaching is not an airtight box that you can keep the problems of your private life out of all the time.”

In some films, the teacher's professional life disrupts his or her personal life, as in *The Blackboard Jungle*, *The Class of 1984*, *Teachers*, *Stand and Deliver*, and *187*. Though students have produced insightful readings about how each of these films portrays teachers whose personal lives suffer as a result of their professional lives, I'll discuss one film in particular: *Stand and Deliver*. This is among the most well-known school movies, and the figure of Jaime Escalante is as much of a cultural model of the committed and gifted teacher as that of Sir in *To Sir, With Love*. Most everyone is familiar with the story of (to quote the box cover of the video) the “math teacher at East Los Angeles' Garfield High who refuses to write off his inner-city kids as losers. Escalante cajoles, pushes, wheedles, needles, threatens and inspires 18 kids who are struggling with fractions and long division to become math whizzes,” which they indeed do, passing the Advanced Placement Calculus Exam.

As the story unfolds, we see how deeply Escalante is committed to teaching, always pushing himself and students to work harder. Most of the scenes take place in classrooms where we see Escalante engaged in his highly personalized, performative style of teaching. In the many summer school scenes, we see Jaime

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keeping his students late because they aren't working hard enough. We also see Jaime at home talking on the phone to a parent about a student during the Christmas holiday while his wife and two sons sit at the table that is set and waiting for his presence. His wife tells their eldest son the following: "Your father works 60 hours a week, then he volunteers to teach night school, for free." She then adds, "Now he's visiting junior high schools in his spare time." In other scenes, we see Jaime teaching a volunteer ESL class to adults at night, and then—and not at all unexpectedly, given the film's depiction of Jaime's driven, impassioned involvement with his students—we see him having a heart attack. But after some time in the hospital, we see him return to his calculus class just in time to help them review for their advanced placement test. As he tells his students, "I'm a hard-dying kind of guy."

When pre-service teachers view this "Rocky of the classroom" film (a phrase from the video box cover) through the lens of how the personal is affected by the professional, they typically produce oppositional readings. Whereas the film works hard at creating a heroic figure in Escalante, pre-service teachers have wondered if Escalante only reinforces the cultural model of the savior teacher who puts teaching at the center of his life, to the detriment of his personal life and his own health. For example, one pre-service teacher wrote:

When I first saw this movie years ago, I loved it. . . . Watching it again and paying attention to how drastically [Escalante's] personal life gets effected (sic) has changed my image of him. When his wife says he works 60 hours a week and is teaching at night, you're supposed to think, "That's how I should be" if you're a teacher, but in my opinion, nothing is worth risking your health and family over. . . .

Another student made this judgement of the film:

What I especially don't like is that most people probably think we [teachers] should all be replicas of Jaime Escalante. I don't think I should be expected to give up summers, work after school, and work on Saturdays [as happens in the film] in order to prove I'm committed to teaching. I've got a personal life, and I don't want to feel guilty about enjoying it.

As I mentioned earlier in the discussion of *To Sir, With Love*, I think such oppositional readings are valuable for pre-service teachers to make because when they eventually do become full-time teachers, they will inevitably be in situations where they will be expected to make personal sacrifices as teachers. They will be spending their own money to buy materials not in the school budget, sitting on committees without remuneration (except for some hour of compensation time here and there), attending parent-teacher conferences in the evening, heading up extra-curricular activities, spending evenings and weekends grading papers and preparing lessons, talking to parents on the phone after school hours, and so on. In light of this reality, I think it would be healthy for students to step back and assess if they are allowing their professional lives to govern their personal lives.

## Conclusion

My particular purpose in this article has been to explain how I have drawn on certain school films to explore with preservice teachers the relationship between the personal and professional lives of teachers. More generally, I have been suggesting that there exists a rich body of school texts for educators to explore in their work with student teachers. This same suggestion comes from a number of others (Bauer, 1998; Dalton, 1999; Faber & Holm, 1994a, 1994b; Joseph & Burnaford, 1994; Giroux, 1993; Joyrich, 1995; Keroes, 1999), all of whom would agree with the reasoning that Sol Cohen (1999) has articulated in his discussion about why historians of education should treat school films seriously as “texts about education.” Drawing on Bakhtin’s ideas of “text” and “intertextuality,” Cohen assumes that a “school film is a report on the world of education,” that it “occupies the same...cultural space with written texts about education,” and that school films and written texts “must be studied alongside each other” (p. 129). Cohen rightly observes that “film occupies a privileged space in our culture,” that individual films “are the chief carriers of historical messages in our culture,” that “our historical memory seems now to be determined primarily by film imagery,” and that “as teachers, we must talk to students, and their parents, whose access to educational discourse...is dominated by the image industry.” Careful not to privilege a film text over a written text, Cohen nevertheless argues that “a book cannot do what a film does” (p. 147):

Films can potentially carry ideas and information with more power...and more effectively than the written word. Thus, some school films capture the daily life, the personal relationships, the lived encounters of classrooms, in ways our written histories do not. They reveal things that we...cannot see (or choose not to see) or cannot see well, or see but not tell as well. [School films] provide encounters with teachers, parents, and adolescents and a thick description of...schools that histories of education cannot even approximate. We have not begun to exploit the possibilities of film. There is a rich archive waiting for historians of education to explore in film. (pp. 147-148)

Of course, I would broaden Cohen’s audience of “historians of education” to include not only teacher educators but also every teacher working at every educational site, all of whom can benefit from considering school films as comprising “a rich archive waiting” to be explored.

## Notes

1. I am using “popular” here not to mean a well-known box-office hit, but to mean a product of the pop culture industry—so, a “Hollywood” film that failed at the box-office would still be a “popular film.”
2. Most of the 80 student teachers in the study were young, white females “from homogeneous suburban communities” who had little, if any, experience in being involved with people

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- of color, and no experience teaching “inner city” children.
3. I found a number of worthwhile articles and book chapters with analyses (some quite serious, others very playful) about one or several films (Ayers, 1994; Bauer, 1998; Edelman, 1983; Giroux, 1994; Hill, 1995; Long, 1996). I also found a few valuable book chapters that have served as introductions to the “school film genre” (Considine, 1983; Farber & Holm, 1994; and Reed, 1989), as well as two dissertations on school films (Schwartz, 1963; Crume, 1988).
4. For example, Robertson explains how the concept of “composure”—constructed through the repetition of the word “composure” in student teachers’ responses to the film *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*—“may be seen to function as a screen through which the women play out hidden desire concerning feminine authority in teaching” (p. 47).

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