



Exploring educational taboos through school movies. A rhetorical analysis of student-teachers' reflections[☆]

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Fictional narratives complement narrative approaches to teacher identity.
- School movies can be introduced as tools for reflecting on educational taboos.
- Taboo narratives confront teachers with sensitive aspects of teaching.
- Taboo narratives offer a language for exploring complex teacher identities.
- The “detour of culture” helps pre-service teachers to discuss disruptive topics.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to explore how fictional narratives that focus on educational taboos can be introduced in teacher education to reflect on disturbing practices and sensitive issues. We conducted a study to examine how student-teachers engage in “discomforting dialogues” about teaching and teacher identity in response to school movies that deal with specific taboos, i.e. the failed teacher and teacher-pupil relationships. Based on a rhetorical analysis of student reflections, we argue that confronting student-teachers with disruptive school movies provides them with a language to discuss the complex, sensitive and (inter)personal aspects of teaching.

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1. Introduction

The notion of teacher identity is an essential element in the professional development of teachers and therefore needs close attention in teacher education research (for an overview see [Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009](#); [Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004](#); [Izadinia, 2013](#)). Robert [Bullough \(1997\)](#) argues that the exploration of teacher identity is one of the major principles of teacher education. He defines the concept as what beginning teachers believe about teaching, about learning and about the self-as-teacher. Building on the work of Bullough, John [Loughran \(2006\)](#) states in

Developing a Pedagogy of Teacher Education that student-teachers should examine their (teacher) identity in relation to their learning about teaching. He argues that teaching is not an ordered routine, but is characterized by a continuous confrontation of choices, dilemmas and tensions. Therefore, learning about teaching in teacher education should place methods such as disturbing practice and reflecting on what is problematic central ([Loughran, 2006](#)). Or, as [Hughes \(2013\)](#) puts it, teacher identity is developed through practices of reflection that create a “loss of the stable state” (p. 341). Similarly, [Kelchtermans \(2009\)](#) emphasizes that approaching teaching as an “enacted scholarship” (p. 267) does not only imply a focus on the effectiveness of teaching, but also implies approaching teaching as a complex relationship with others that is characterized by “moral responsibilities, political interests and emotional experiences” (p. 269). Therefore, he argues, teacher education needs to provide spaces to engage in “discomforting dialogues” (p. 270).

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Common reflective practices for the development of teacher identity have relied on inquiry-oriented methods through the use of (non-fictional) narratives. Indeed, there is a large body of literature that shows the impact of the narrative turn on research about teacher education in general and teacher identity construction in particular (Beattie, 1995; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Bullough, 2015; Carter, 1995; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clough, 2002; Coles, 1989; Taylor, 2017; Vásquez, 2011). Within Loughran's pedagogy of teacher education (2006), for instance, the development of teacher identity requires a process of questioning and exploring the ways in which teaching has been constructed and is being portrayed. Similarly, Beattie (1995) argues that professional meaning should begin from an examination of practice and experience, of the stories that are enacted in teachers' personal lives, in schools and in society. Specifically from the perspective of narrative inquiry, Connelly and Clandinin (1999, p. 4) defined professional identity as "stories to live by", which are constituted through plots that grasp teachers' experiences together. Teacher identity can be seen as constructed through narrative processes (Søreide, 2006) and informed by a diverse array of narratives (Weber & Mitchell, 1995). Therefore, the process of learning and questioning stories can become part of the process of reflecting on and molding one's identity, for example acquiring teacher identity, and thereby informing practice. Also, Kelchtermans (2009) stresses the importance of narratives to understand the complex processes of sense-making that constitute teaching. For Kelchtermans (2009), the most important contribution of the narrative and biographical perspective to teacher education is that it indeed provides a different language that enables a focus on the non-technical aspects of being a teacher, such as the confrontation with moral dilemmas, emotional experiences and political struggles. However, these dilemmas and struggles can sometimes be very delicate and difficult to address in a straightforward manner.

Although the importance of narrative is recognized as a lens through which to problematize the development of teacher identity (Bullough, 2015; Carter, 1995; Doyle & Carter, 2003; Hooley, 2007; Taylor, 2017), the majority of reflective methods focus on the use of non-fictional narratives, such as experiential anecdotes, case studies, writing personal narratives and (online) group discussions (Farr & Riordan, 2015; Honkasilta, Vehkakoski, & Vehmas, 2016; Loughran, 2006; Pulvermacher & Lefstein, 2016; Taylor, 2017). However, one of the most important proponents of the idea of "narrative identity", Paul Ricoeur, has stressed that we know ourselves "only indirectly by the detour of the cultural signs of all sorts" (1991a, p. 198). Narrative identity for him denoted "a self instructed by cultural symbols, the first among which are the narratives handed down in our literary tradition" (1991b, p. 33). The role of fiction in the process of acquiring identity was essential to Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity. The introduction of fictional narratives, from literature to popular culture, can thus be a complement to existing practices. From this perspective, there is a growing body of work on the use of fictional narratives for the development of teacher identity (Davis & Johnson, 2017; Long & Pope, 2016; Tillman & Trier, 2007; Trier, 2005; Wright & Sandlin, 2009).

In this article, we argue that reflecting on stories of lived experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1995), as is often proposed in narrative inquiry, can be supplemented with reflecting on fictional narratives to understand how teacher identity is also embedded in broader cultural discourses. We report on a study in which we examine how student-teachers engage in "discomforting dialogues" about teaching and teacher identity in response to school movies that deal with specific educational taboos, i.e. the failed teacher and teacher-pupil relationships. As such, we aim to add to the body of research on narrative approaches to teacher identity by

exploring how fictional narratives that focus on such educational taboos can be used in teacher education to reflect on teaching as a continuous confrontation of choices, dilemmas and tensions and to grapple with disturbing practices and problematic experiences.

2. Education at the movies

During the past few decades there has been a growing interest in introducing popular (visual) culture in both education and educational research. An increasing cross-over between cultural studies and education has led scholars to focus on the educational and research implications of culture, fiction, narrative and art (Barone & Eisner, 1997; Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2018; Knowles & Cole, 2008; McNiff, 2013; Piirto, 2002; Rutten et al., 2013; Soetaert, Mottart, & Verdoodt, 2004; Soetaert & Rutten, 2013; Springgay, Irwin, & Kind, 2004; Vandermeersche, Soetaert & Rutten, 2013). Indeed, popular and visual culture is increasingly considered and studied as a legitimate source of knowledge and understanding. From this perspective, Giroux (1994, 1999, 2002) argued that popular culture has a powerful pedagogical influence on how people reflect about themselves, society and their relationship with others. He therefore described popular movies as a form of "public pedagogy – a visual technology that functions as a powerful teaching machine" (Giroux, 2002, p. 6) and he considers culture as the site where identities are constructed: "where young people and others imagine their relationship to the world; it produces the narratives, metaphors, and images for constructing and exercising a powerful pedagogical force over how people think of themselves and their relationship to Others" (Giroux qtd. in Kellner, 2001, p. 233, see also e.g. Soetaert et al., 2004; Rutten et al., 2013). As such, the public debate and understanding of what schools, education and teachers "mean" in society is not solely based on real-life experiences of schools, but is also influenced by the novels, movies, and TV-series that represent education. *Dead Poets Society*, for example, has had a strong influence, for better or worse, on the shared image of education. Its narrative centers on a charismatic, non-conformist and inspiring teacher (Dalton, 2004). Movies such as *Blackboard Jungle*, *To Sir, with Love*, *Dead Poets Society*, *Stand and Deliver*, *Freedom Writers*, *Entre Les Murs* and, more recently, *Bad Teacher* and *Detachment* are influential tools to think and argue about education, about how our culture represents the profession of teachers and the institute to which they belong (Dalton, 2004; Shoffner, 2016; Terzian & Ryan, 2015; Vandermeersche et al., 2013; Williams & Zenger, 2007).

From a historical perspective, we can clearly see that movies from different decades represent different "public pedagogies" about education (Giroux, 2002; Tillman & Trier, 2007) referring to specific problems: *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) focused on the rise of youth culture and adults' fears of violence in inner-city schools; *Dead Poets Society* (1989) glorified liberal education against the institutional pressures of vocational education; *The History Boys* (2006), the Palme d'Or winner *Entre Les Murs/The Class* (2008) and the television series *The Wire* (2002–2008) show the uncertainties of education and the difficulties with multiculturalism, standard-based education ruled by statistics and quantification, and issues such as a "teach-to-the-test"-mentality. They all reflect on the uncertainties surrounding education from a broader societal perspective (Vandermeersche et al., 2013).

These kinds of cultural narratives are thus an important source of societal "knowledge" about the current state of education. Unsurprisingly, teacher educators have increasingly been using (popular) school movies as educational tools in their courses. Trier (2001, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2010), for example, has implemented this genre in his courses in teacher education "to engage student teachers in a critically reflective practice" (Trier, 2000, p. 3). These

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