HOLLYWOOD PORTRAYALS OF TEACHERS: THE ROLE OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE IN CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an insight into the ways that teachers are portrayed in films, impacting the way audiences view progressive education, versus current traditional education. The individual qualities and characteristics associated with teachers have been constructed through social practices, traditional hegemonic beliefs and maintained and reinforced through the media. The study examined the cultural significance of the representation of teachers in three film artifacts, Dead Poets Society (1989), Mr. Holland’s Opus (1995) and Freedom Writers (2007). Using Stuart Hall’s (1970) cultural studies, they were analyzed to determine how the meanings of dialogue are culturally constructed. The results of the dialogical analysis of all three films determined the portrayal of teachers in contemporary media to be that of a sacrificial martyr and villain. Secondly the study analyzed the role of cognitive dissonance within a classroom and how it is portrayed in films today. Despite technological progression, our educational system is functioning within limited parameters and outdated ideologies, reinforced by the media.
We the undersigned, certify that we read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree Master of Arts.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

During a time when globally we are going through rapid changes, education is at the forefront of the battle. New solutions are needed and we are looking to our future generations for responsible citizenship. A transformation within the education system according to many critical scholars has been long overdue, in order for students to value what they learn in the classroom and begin to unite theory and praxis. Dewey expressed this need for all of us to evolve best, “Continuity of life means continual readaptation of the environment to the needs of living organisms” (Dewey, 2007, para.1). Our quality of life depends on our ability to readapt and solve our current problems. If we remain the same, things remain the same.

Critical thinking is seen as an extension of a new philosophy in education exercised by progressive teachers (hooks, 2010). The role of cognitive dissonance within education is still in question, due to emotions typically not addressed in classrooms. Dewey (1997) acknowledges this tension when stating the conflict in accepting new ideas within education, “Rather, they set new problems which have to be worked out on the basis of new philosophy of experience (Dewey, 1997, para.1). Although traditional education is a more familiar method of developing the minds of future generations, conformity, obedience, consuming and regurgitation of information within the classroom has for many years taken the place of thinking, self expression and self actualization. The power struggle within the educational system amongst progressive teachers and traditional education is only one of the threats critical thinking is faced with. Finn’s (2012) research demonstrates how the communication between the student and teacher, can make a significant difference in the academic performance of a student.
Outside of the classroom more subtle and normalized practices of maintaining ideologies are found. Dominant culture media ranging from the news, magazines, radio, television and popular culture films are all part of a communication web. Hollywood and its popular culture productions have been for many years’ instruments that have educated people of all ages politically, culturally and economically. From all angles mis-education is extremely pervasive, diffusing the possibilities of people regaining an accurate account to what really matters. At any given moment the media is in a position to perpetuate racist, classist and imperialist narratives, which according to Stuart Hall must be analyzed and deconstructed. “Stuart Hall (1979) for example argued that media products are messages in code about the nature of society, the nature of productive relations within the media themselves and institutional domains and social processes” (Altheide, 2001 p. 3) Within popular culture films concerning education, a reoccurring message of “leave things the way they are” is continuously enforced. The good guy /bad guy role within these films is assigned to the teacher, who in turn is faced with many penalties and personal sacrifices if they chose to not “follow the curriculum”. In essence the films serve as conditioning to all audiences and agreement is gained. Critical media literacy is thus essential for and helps produce more engaged, aware and active audiences.

Definitions of Key Terms

In order to proceed, it is essential to define some key terms that will be used throughout this study.

1.) Critical Pedagogy/Thinking- generally focuses on revealing issues of power, and dialogically exploring alternatives for addressing and surmounting oppression in education and society (Brooks, 2011, pg. 44).
2.) Education: scientific method by means of which man studies the world, acquires cumulatively knowledge of meanings and values, these outcomes, however, being data for critical study and intelligent living (Dewey, 1997, para.1).

3.) Cognitive Dissonance- Distressing mental state caused by inconsistency between a person’s two beliefs or a belief and an action (Griffin, 2009, p.205).

4.) Media Theory: Is the idea that there is ideological content within the framework of productions. (Griffin, 2009, p. 335).

5.) Cultural Studies- A neo-Marxist critique that sets forth the position that the mass media manufacture consent for dominant ideologies (Griffin, 2009, p.334)

6.) Ideology: Framework through which we interpret, understand and make sense of social existence (Griffin, 2009, p.335).

7.) Hegemony: The subtle sway of society’s haves over its have nots (Griffin, 2009, p. 336).

Organization of Remaining Chapters

To create a foundation for the duration of the study paper and avoid any ambiguity that may arise, following is a description of the order of chapters. Chapter 2 develops the theoretical framework of literature that addresses aspects of two differing ideals, traditional education vs. progressive education, psychological implications of cognitive dissonance, cultural studies and ideologies examined within critical media literacy. The chapter first discusses an ongoing public debate in education concerning its transformation and need to keep up with the social needs. Next chapter 2 identifies the range of arguments, within traditional and progressive education, and its implications on all actors involved. In addition critical media literacy is
defined as a tool, aiding cultural studies in exploring ideologies reinforced through the media.

The chapter goes on to discuss the emotional and psychological implications (cognitive dissonance) that arise from engaging in critical pedagogy and current question of its place within a classroom. Lastly the role of dialogue is defined, as an essential within classrooms in regards to discussing confronting topics within critical literacy and as a tool in cultural studies. Chapter 3 provides an explanation of the scope of the study as well as the methodology of the study, which describes the research design details. Following this, Chapter 4 how the study was conducted as well as the results as they relate to the research questions posed. Finally after linking all of the concepts together, Chapter 5 discloses the limitations of the study and suggests areas beneficial to future studies.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter explains the opposing views of traditional education and progressive education, which is also focusing on developing critical pedagogy. Also reviewed is the theoretical basis behind the role of cognitive dissonance in critical pedagogy, for all participants within the educational system. The first part of the chapter focuses on defining what critical pedagogy is and its importance in the classroom. The second part of the chapter defines Leon Festinger’s cognitive dissonance theory, as it relates to critical pedagogy both from a positive and negative perspective. The third part of the chapter reviews the theories of Stuart Hall within Cultural Studies are also reviewed as it provides a need for critical media literacy and a foundation for analysis of artifacts.

Critical Thinking

During the last decade, one of the main aims in the Education agenda has been to develop critical thinking amongst the youth, so that they can play active roles in a democratic society. Progressive educators hope is that the existing gap between school and post-schooling reality can be bridged, especially because of the needs we are faced with today. Many of the articles reviewed, focused on our need to move away from a focus of “individual competency” and towards a focus that entailed considerations and connections with contemporary issues, global relations, historical context and social political urgencies (Halualani, 2009). As a nation who seeks to learn from our past mistakes, scholars within the field of communications find value in doing things differently during our “junctures” which are considered according to Hall (1996) critical times and opportunities for learning and growth.
In order to cultivate critical thinkers’ educators are seeking new teaching strategies and establishing new methods to practice in classrooms, this is referred to as critical literacy/progressive education. The goal of critical literacy is to move individuals beyond argumentative, logical or empirical thinking. In this new space students would begin to look at assumptions taken for granted, in areas which could include religious, social, ethical, political and cultural aspects. Reflecting on various justifications including their own students take the first steps in engaging in a more objective framework. “In support of this outlook Dewey (1910) believed reflective thought to be an active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief of form of knowledge in light of knowledge of the position from which it permeates” (Feuerstein, 1999, p. 45).

According to Griffin, an educator conducting this type of work is considered a critical theorist, an interpretive scholar who uses theory to reveal unjust communication practices that create and perpetuate an imbalance of power (Griffin, 2009, p. 23). They tend to reject the notion of any permanent truth, through continual examination and seek to stimulate the same type of thinking in others. Critical thinking is seen as, a foundation, providing reasoning and explanations concerning our daily lives. “For all aspiring intellectuals, thoughts are the laboratory where one goes to pose questions and find answers and the place where visions of theory and praxis come together. The heartbeat of critical thinking is the ongoing longing to know, to understand how life works” (hooks, 2009, para.1). The development of critical thinking skills within progressive education has the potential of producing and promoting knowledge that in return would grant society a better quality of life. “Under this rubric, strengthening the pupils meta-cognition should be the focal point in the curriculum in order to enable these individuals to form valued, autonomous outlooks on life”(Feuerstein, 1999, p. 44).
Critical theorists also believe that schools should be less concerned with drilling information requiring memorization of empirical data/standardized testing, which stands to be one of the biggest educational power battles taking place today (Kellner & Share, 2005). Embracing new ideas for many is a challenge within itself, since most people initially are uncomfortable with change.

Traditional education exists within a realm of learning through the text books, teachers, drills, techniques and competitiveness. Dewey describes in his book *Experience and Education*, the traditional educational system, “Learning here means acquisition of what already is incorporated in books and in heads of the elders. Moreover that which is taught is thought of as essentially static. It is taught as a finished product, with little regard either to the ways in which it was originally built up or to changes that will surely occur in the future” (Dewey, 1997, para. 2.). It becomes more evident that we have two ideals in conflict and a world of possibilities ahead. Unfortunately there is time wasted in traditional educators and progressive educators making each other wrong.

The growing pains within the educational system are present within everyday classroom activities and conflict with teachers, students and administration. Teachers play the roles of heroes, freeing the minds of their students to in turn be vilified by their peers and administration. Often teachers who refuse to comply with the requests to “follow the curriculum” are marginalized and often even pushed to resign. Bell hooks an author, and teacher heavily involved in the educational system, recalls moments within her teaching career where she sought to teach in ways that “differed from the norm” but felt intimidated especially during her untenured years. “Always there was a fear of punishment. And the worst fear the failure to reach a student, to be attacked and assailed on all sides by students” (hooks, 2009, para.1). Progressive teachers like
hooks oftentimes felt alone in their quest to make a difference, when realizing that her peers did not share her interest. “I was unprepared for the reality that many teachers would view with hostility the idea that education as the practice of freedom” (hooks, 2009, para 1). Progressive teachers, who follow their calling, acknowledge they rather make a difference than to witness the potential of their students wither away. Sadly, teachers are faced with a possible loss due to their commitment to help others achieve or simply get a glimpse of their greatness. Various scholars have highlighted the problems at hand, and although no one may have all the answers on how to transform education, it proves to be a cause worth fighting for. A powerful statement was referenced in Nam’s article, referring to McLaren (1994) thoughts on the nature of pedagogy: “Any worthwhile theory of schooling must be partisan. That is, it must be fundamentally tied to a struggle for a qualitatively better life for all through a construction of a society based on non-exploitive relations and social justice” (Nam, 2010, p. 11). Many of the articles within the literature review describe the challenges many of the individuals within a school system are faced with, examples of these conflicts can also be observed through media products coded with messages pertaining to the nature of our society.

**Critical Media Literacy**

The research for this topic began with a focus on Media Literacy, one of the subject areas dealing specifically with reflective thinking. It was found that critical literacy according to (McPecks 1981) is best taught using the *infusion* approach which involves teaching about, “thinking within a content of knowledge of curriculum subjects”. The subject area of media literacy lends itself to the infusion approach, thus making it a useful and popular choice in critical literacy. Many scholars support the idea of developing critical skills in regards to the media because of the populations increased exposure to mass communication. Siho Nam describes this need as a
public policy priority, quoting The Federal Communication Commissioner Michael Copps, “in a culture where media is pervasive and invasive, kids need to think critically about what they see, hear and read. No child’s education can be complete without this” (Nam, 2010, p. 7). The media has the power to provide us with snapshots and examples of our current ideals, which is essential in educating us.

During the research process of this particular subject area, a certain level of resistance began to surface in many other subject areas of communication that also seek promote critical thinking. State officials, school administration, faculty and the students were experiencing conflict with these liberating initiatives changing the game in pedagogy. An exploration of other subject areas such as social justice, humanities, cultural, and feminist pedagogy revealed that these subject areas were also grappling with critical thinking and its space within the classroom. According to Kellner & Share “multiple literacies” share the common goal of reconstruction of education (2005, p.369) thus all subject areas are important in this research.

An example of how critical literacy was introduced to students through a critical media literacy class was the Media and Public Interest Program at the University of Western Ontario undergraduate curriculum, which focused on cultural studies, political economy of communication, social movements and political justice (Smeltzer & Grzyb, 2009). Research highlighting most aspects of the program were positive, some tensions and conflict that surfaced within their progress were fairly acknowledged. Many success stories concerning their student body were documented as proof of the programs’ effectiveness, but right behind a success always lays a struggle. One of the practical complexities arising from the program was within the staff itself. Although the school system allowed the staff to participate in activism within the program and locally, they understood it to be a delicate matter for professionals and students
within the educational system. It was noted that relatively little of the public service work faculty members engaged in, counted toward any service requirement from their jobs. Instead most of the faculty members’ productivity was geared towards publishing for tenureship. “As Bell hooks laments, without such reward for service in the interest of building community, it becomes even harder for individual teachers to make a commitment to serve” (Smetlzer & Gryzyb, 2009, pp. 83-84). Unfortunately many academic professionals in the field cannot help to feel the tensions inherent in their role as educators.

The teachers at MPI expressed how part of their role was to bridge the university with the broader public, yet this article clearly expressed certain ideologies in the way. “In addition to increasing corporatization of the university means the administrators are more likely to focus on what contributes to the bottom line than how the university is contributing to the wider public interest, especially in the current economic crisis” (Smeltzer & Grzyb, 2009, p. 16). Although critical literacy is necessary, this article serves as an example of issues that can play out on the grounds of building and maintaining a curriculum dedicated to incorporating and blending theory and praxis.

**Cognitive Dissonance**

During critical pedagogical dialogue students are introduced to new concepts and frames of reference that may not be common to them. On one end of the spectrum, new ideas are introduced and accepted; while on the other side of the continuum is rejection of the idea. Leon Festinger’s theory of *cognitive dissonance* defines this occurrence as a distressing mental state caused by inconsistency between a person’s two beliefs or a belief and an action (Griffin,
2009, p. 205). An example of this would be a student deflecting or trivializing new information in order to protect the safety of existing assumptions.

An example of the challenges students faced while incorporating and blending of theory and praxis was in LaDuke’s (2009) ethnographic research, where students engaged in multicultural educational content. A common debate within this area during critical reflection would be acknowledging racism and sexism. “Most students argued that racism and sexism were everywhere. They insisted however that they were neither responsible for nor in racist or sexist practices” (LaDuke, 2009, p 42). Most teachers with experience, nonetheless the pre-service teachers are challenged during critical dialogue and have a hard time moving from conflict into the realm of renegotiation. The misunderstood aspect concerning critical thinking is that it is difficult to blend theory and real life; this due to all parties involved fearing the natural dialogical process of renegotiation.

**Dialogue for Renegotiation**

Confronted by dissonance an individual may be motivated to change their behavior or beliefs in order to avoid or relieve the feelings of distress. While the issues discussed in critical literacy merit confronting due to society’s pervasive injustices committed along the lines of race, language, ethnicity, class, disabilities, religion, gender, sexuality and education, dissonance is magnified because of the discrepancies between our behavior and the beliefs of others. It was observed that before we begin to address prejudices in a constructive manner in order to transform our economic and political systems we must first transform our belief systems, this can only be done through dialogue (North, 2009, p.558). According to Martin Buber *dialogic communication* takes place when in the space of tension, holding on to ones perspective while
being open to the other (Griffin, 2009, p. 80). Preparing for dialogue is necessary since it requires vulnerability, disclosure and confirmation while engaged. Avoiding dialogue or simply presenting information lies at the root of us not evolving as individuals according to hooks, “The future of learning lies with the cultivation of conversations, of dialogue” (hooks, 2009, para. 1).

The most exciting moments in education occur during conversation; this can be experienced personally or seen in films depicting dialogue within a classroom.

**Examining Dialogue in Film**

As discussed previously in the section reviewing critical media literacy, the media is a dominant educator and definer of our social, economic and political life. Examining dialogue within a film is a method that can be used to observe such a phenomenon, since language embodies a thought system. In an attempt to understand the study of discourse, Philo quotes Fairclough, “I see discourses as ways of representing aspects of the world processes, relations and structures of the material world, the “mental world” of thoughts, feelings, beliefs and so forth and the social world…different discourses are different perspectives on the world, and they are associated with the different relations people have to the world” (Philo, 2003, p.124). The dramatization of a social issue and its limitations within the film can serve as a tool to reinforce a taken for granted assumption and reinforce ideologies that may not serve towards a positive transformation. “A particular discourse includes assumptions about what there is, what is the case, what is possible, what is necessary, what will be the case, and so forth. In some instances, one might argue that such assumptions, and indeed the discourses they are associated with are ideological. (Philo,2003, p.58). Examining film dialogue critically, within a classroom in many cases served as a tool within critical media literacy.
Students Experience with Dissonance

Julia G. Brooks, the instructor of a dialogic and justice oriented class best described the students experience, “As critical pedagogy generally focuses on revealing issues of power, and dialogically exploring alternatives for addressing and surmounting oppression in education and society, it seems like taking on such a project for those who have never considered that the world might indeed be different from their own insular experiences and socialized conceptions can be daunting” (Brooks, 2011, p.44). This power shift also seems unnatural to students, since they have had a sense of the teacher leading the class for as long as they can remember. Pizzolato’s study on student's schematic dissonance demonstrated that high levels of dissonance were associated with constructing knowledge about themselves as learners. It was noted that students had a hard time shifting perspectives from teacher as the main source of learning to believing they too are authorities. A student named Anne was interviewed during the study, due to the high level of dissonance she experienced in class, “I was unsure about everything and whether I would be able to do the assignment the way I was supposed to, let alone benefit from it in any way” (Pizzolato, 2009, p.134). Most students fail to make the epistemological shift and thus aid the space of cognitive dissonance unknowingly.

Teachers’ Experiences with Dissonance

Similarly tension was identified amongst teachers who practice their roles as critical theorist. They stand on the opposite side of the spectrum, facing the daunting task of creating community amongst students who initially saw themselves as equals only to discover that reality that “group based oppression and domination remain pervasive”(McKinnon,2002). In the article Critical Media Pedagogy in the Public Interest, Smelter & Grzyb highlighted the
concerns of teachers of European decent delivering subjectivities from their point of view and raise questions on how these teachers should speak for and on behalf of others. They acknowledge the reproduction of divides through discourse in their efforts to promote critical thinking. Recognizing their blind spots they express the fear of lack of control, “We are not however always aware of exactly how these subjectivities operate and manifest themselves within and beyond the classroom” (Smelter & Grzyb, 2010, p. 5). Students were also found to be resistant of ideas that challenge assumptions about themselves as found in the Sun & Sharrer study, Staying True to Disney: College Students’ Resistance to Criticism of the Little Mermaid. Regardless of the ideologies presented during this study, students were motivated to hold on to their beliefs and opinions simply because they grew up watching Disney movies and desired to stay consistent with classmates. “A handful of respondents pointed out the negative elements in Disney’s version, such as the sexist stereotypes and sexual overtone, but their criticism was balanced with their approval, often for the movies entertaining values, and particularly Ariel’s portrayal as a strong and independent woman”(Sun & Scharrer, 2004, p. 44). Attending to those issues perceived by those in dialogue, while keeping in mind the competencies needed for academic achievement and ensuring effective and positive social change is a task that critical instructors battle with on their own.

**Administrative Experience with Dissonance**

Another theoretical term that stems from the cognitive dissonance theory and helps to further understand the dissonance experienced by state officials and schools administration is *selective exposure*. Defined as, the tendency for people to avoid information that would create cognitive dissonance because it is incompatible with their current beliefs (Griffin, 2009, p.207). In several articles reviewed, like-minded state officials and school administration help buffer
their districts, school teachers and students from the ideas that could cause discomfort. For example, the subject area of critical media pedagogy in the USA is in its infancy and struggling for respect within educational environments due to its opposite nature of print-oriented pedagogy. It lacks firmly established principles and solid teaching procedures, as well as involves teachers sharing power within the classroom. “Moreover, the material of media culture is so polymorphous, multivalent and polysemic that it necessitates sensitivity to different readings, interpretations, and perceptions of the complex images, scenes, narratives, meanings and messages of the media culture which in its own ways is as complex and challenging to critically decipher as book culture” (Kellner & Share, 2005, p. 373). Critics such as Fish & Kingwell reject the relevance of real life or student experience in a university classroom, stating that “any foray into politics in the classroom- is an abdication of the instructors’ primary scholarly responsibility” (Smeltzer & Grzyb, 2009, p. 7). Other efforts such as the trivialization and growing irrelevance of the communication studies are also seen as direct resistance of critical thinking (Nam, 2010, p. 6). It was also noted that the two studies that serve as opposing forces to the dominant paradigms (behavioral and functionalistic) have been the critical and cultural studies. Another issue amongst state officials and administration in regards to critical thinking in class is that it seems too radical or ideological in nature. This stems from the belief that educational institutions must strive to be neutral, not question the status quo or add to the power struggle within the system.

Stuart Hall’s Perspective

The work of Stuart Hall a critical sociology scholar, is highlighted in this chapter due to his focus on the ongoing dialogue “cause and effect in relationships”, reproduced within the media. As other critical scholars from the Frankfurt School, his work was suspicious of any
analysis that ignored power relations. In his perspective, all actors play a role in maintaining the dominance of those already in positions of power. The power struggle within the educational system, as it relates to critical literacy, serves as a microscopic example of such a natural occurrence within our culture. Conversely Hall believes the media, who is already in a position of power, serves to exploit the poor and the powerless through a replication of its framed ideals. “Orthodox Marxist theory sees ideology as “false knowledge” directly determined by a mirror reflection of – relative class position” (Grossberg & Slack, 1985, p.89). The culturalist orientation sees actors as participants with their own experiences within a terrain of struggle between different classes. Hall emphasized that the media hegemony, which is a subtle sway of society’s have’s over its have not’s is perhaps not done intentionally, but they tend to promote the already accepted interpretations or reality (Griffin, 2009, p.336). An example of this would be how the media portrays the relationship of students and teachers or school administrators and teachers.

Actors within the educational system enter this pre-existing conversation and unconsciously relate to each other in a manner that reinforces resignation and recreates barriers. As noted other scholars share Hall’s beliefs, “Relatedly, Hall, Whyte, Keesing and Bennett (1996) challenge the construction of communicative participants as unencumbered rational subjects when he proposes that in any communicative event participants “are not free agents in the interaction process: they enter the engagement with culturally conditioned conceptions and expectations which influence communication and learning” (Halualani, Mendoza & Drzewiecka, 2009, p. 25). The work of Grossberg and Slack reiterate the same idea because they believe by positioning the individual within a predefined space, the reproduction of the dominant ideology takes place (p. 89). According to Hall democratic pluralism is a myth, and that society is not
held together by common norms such as equal opportunity, respect for diversity, individual rights and rule of law (Griffin, 2009, p.335). Thus cultural studies plays a role in helping society see the urgency to articulate oppression and linking this subjugation to media representations.

Together critical literacy and cultural studies are fields that help identify issues, Hall would call this a juncture or detour, which serves to interrupt our paradigms and help provide a space for new reflection, growth and transformation. It is imperative for us to see that culture cannot be abstracted from historical and political contextualization and separated from sociopolitical conditions. Martin and Nakayama (1999) help tie in all of the ideas referenced above by proposing a dialectical approach to intercultural communication to explain culture, “is not just a variable, nor a benignly socially constructed but a site of struggle where various communication meanings are constructed (Hulualani & Mendoza, p.26) This conception of culture serves to challenge the notion of an ideologically uncontaminated space within communication and irradiates the idea of neutral dialogue that in the long run, in the words of Spivak denies history, denies structure and denies positioning of subjects (Hulualani & Mendoza, p.26). In conclusion there are many artifacts within media that can be critically examined and would aid in identifying patterns of ideology that stand in the way of the transformation of the educational system. Several questions have been identified below to serve as a reference in creating such a case.

Questions:

RQ1: How does popular culture portray critical thinking? Who does this serve?
RQ1a: How does popular culture portray teachers who think critically and teach in a progressive nature? Are teachers who care for the minds of their students seen as heroes or martyrs?

RQ1b: What consequences do teachers pay for in regards for crossing invisible “professional line” and not following the curriculum?

RQ2: Is cognitive dissonance portrayed as an important element in education within popular culture or as something to avoid?
CHAPTER 3: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Scope of the Study

To further explore the concepts of ideologies we are exposed to via popular movies, with a focus on how progressive teachers are portrayed. A qualitative study was conducted examining 3 artifacts with similar actors involved such as teachers, students, and school administration. Another concept to observe is how cognitive dissonance is portrayed within all of the actor’s interactions. Using a Stuart Hall’s cultural studies concepts and repetitive internal dialectics, the focus is on the ongoing tensions and messages that educate its viewers.

The study of how teachers are portrayed is an appropriate component due to the position they have in society. As leaders within a classroom, they are expected to preserve society and not try to take from or add to the knowledge base required they deliver. Because of cultural consciousness arising teachers are adhering to a new calling to progressive forms of education. In making a choice to educate their students differently, they move from being heroes to villains “Might this mean that contemporary superheroes, prompted by changing cultural consciousness, have revised their missions, morphing into agents of progressive change? Indeed proactiveness does inflect our superheroes today, and marginality serves as a premise for it, but to the end of reestablishing as opposed to “merely” defending conventional privilege” (Shugart, 2009, pg. 99). The power struggle among progressive and traditional educators is present in the artifacts as in real life. Interestingly enough in both cases, ideologies of “leave things the way they are” status quo are reinforced.

Methodology

Cultural Studies and repetitive internal dialectics were used as a framework to analyze teacher films in regards to their expected traditional roles and their revised missions as
progressive educators. Specifically, to determine if popular culture movies progressively and repetitively move teachers from being heroes to villains. Secondly, the same methods are used in observing the ambiguous message told concerning the risks critical thinking in regards to cognitive dissonance.

In an overview of Cultural Studies and Dialectics, this study will look at film as a set of text that conveys ideologies and cultural meaning through repetition in dialogue. Fairclough highlights the work of Halliday, Hasan and Foucault in explaining text and dialogue, “Text refers to any particular instance of language and or image in use (adapted from Halliday and Hasan 1985) that has coherence and coded meaning, while “discourse” refers to recurring statements and meanings (which are not restricted to language) across multiple texts (Foucault 1972) which are linked to knowledge, beliefs and categories about the world and manifested as a form of “social practice” (Fairclough, 1989). Within this study of critical media literacy, cultural theories as well as dialectic theories will be applied to analyze the cultural significance and embedded meanings the selected films play. This method was selected because language embodies thought systems, which are the current ideologies that are repeated on various occasions and in 3 different artifacts.

Sampling

To keep the study relevant, the study examined those films that are considered to be the most widely known and successful films featuring teachers and their roles within society. All comedies were excluded from the research since the current topic carries serious and real life consequences. It is important to note that all the teachers portrayed in the films were engaging in their first year teaching. The dialogue within these specific scenes is especially rich because they are being spoken to as “this is the way things are, get used to it”. The senior staff’s resigned
nature served to highlight the two different ideologies within battle at school. This sample is highly purposive and is representative of the topic and genre of interest.

Procedures

The first step in researching teacher movies consisted of logging on to YouTube and finding out what were the Top 10 popular culture teacher movies. The idea was to get an idea of what others felt was worthy of praise and recognition in this subject area. Apart from my initial search, my focus consisted of reviewing movies that were all based on teachers who wanted to make a difference in the lives of their students, by using unconventional methods to stimulate critical thinking. The main goal was to capture similar discourse and conflicts within three artifacts that included teachers and students, teachers with participating faculty and administration. I also wanted the movies I selected to be at least 5 years apart from each other’s original releases, in order to equip this research with a 15 year snapshot of existing ideologies within this pedagogical conversation. The artifacts selected were Dead Poets Society, Freedom Writers and Mr. Holland’s Opus.

Careful selection was took place, in order to diverse as possible and one of the first stipulations was achieved through the selection of both male and female teachers within the popular culture movies. Another conscious effort extended in achieving diversity was the teacher’s varying specialization of subjects, in which they invoked critical thinking. Mr. Keaton in Dead Poets Society (1989) specialized in English & poetry, Mr. Holland in Mr. Holland’s Opus (1995) specialized in music and Ms. Gruwell’s in Freedom Writers (2007), specialized in history. Finally another form of diversity chosen for the study was the different backgrounds of the students. The students in Dead Poets Society belonged to upper class families, the students
from Mr. Holland’s Opus belonged to middle class families and the students in Freedom Writers belonged to struggling lower class families.

Analysis

The articles highlighted above are worthy of analysis due to the power of repetitive messages the media reinforces, which in turn become taken for granted ideologies we use to interpret the world. Scholars such as McLuhan, Roland Barthes and Stuart Hall viewed the media as a symbolic environment or framework where our social construction is given meaning and in turn shapes and reinforces our experiences attitudes and behaviors. This idea was eventually coined by Hall as ideology, “Ideology is for Hall, the web of meanings and discourses, the strings of connotation and their means of representation, within which social practices, consciousness, identities and subjectivities are placed” (Grossberg & Slack, 1985, pg. 89).

In an attempt to study these artifacts repetitive internal dialectics will be observed, within several viewing stages, producing a dialogic transcript for all three artifacts. The process began with getting familiar with the characters and beginning to identify common messages in all artifacts. The second viewing consisted of developing and using an informal set of criteria of how teachers’ portrayals in films and the role of cognitive dissonance in class (Table 1). This second viewing focused on the power issues within education that were discussed in the literature review. The set of criteria developed was used as an organizational tool, to record important findings and determine the organizational themes in the study. Visually there were clues as to the nature of the school, strict, conservative, humble or highly academically driven. The verbal context was richer overall and provided sufficient material to complete the study. Below is a chart of how each repetitive dialogue was coded.
Table 1.

Messages Reoccurring in Nature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme #1</th>
<th>Theme #2</th>
<th>Theme #3</th>
<th>Description/Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**RESISTANCE TO CRITICAL THINKING/VILLAINIZED**
- Administrative Resistance
- Peer/Staff Resistance
- Student Resistance

**FEAR OF LOSS OF CONTROL & POSITIVE RESULTS OF (COGNITIVE DISSONANCE)**
- Administrative Feedback
- Peer Staff Feedback
- Student Feedback

**HEAVY INVOLVEMENT ASSOCIATED WITH LOSS**
- Administrative Feedback
- Peer Staff Feedback
- Student Feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Additional viewings of films were conducted as needed.

Reliability

In order to get reliable results each film was watched within a neutral perspective, without any criteria or guideline in mind. This viewing accounted for any personal judgments or opinions initially going into the research or watching the movie artifacts for the first time. In order to have an identical set of criteria or guidelines to analyze the firm, a generic table was created to record data (Table 1). This structural guideline was responsible for providing consistency within the analysis.
Validity

Validity within a qualitative study is gained through gaining credibility and trust, therefore it is critical for the researcher to demonstrate an extensive knowledge of the literature and how it pertains to the artifacts. Through a thorough deconstruction of all the concepts involved the literature serves as confirmation. This study’s validity can be credited to the extensive amount of research that has been conducted. A vast array of literature within several subjects was examined in order to be equipped with the knowledge required to cover the specified topic within examination. The combined literature and artifacts used for this study provide it with uniqueness in framework designed for this study. A combination of several different aspects of theories was used in order to create an original framework, as opposed to using one established theory. This study is best conducted using a combination of theories, which aids in providing new insight and validity to the area of study.
CHAPTER 4: THE STUDY

Introduction

This study focused on the analysis of 3 widely popular and culturally significant teacher films, *Dead Poets Society* (1989), *Freedom Writers* (2007) and *Mr. Holland’s Opus* (1995). These films not only reflect the current problems within the educational system but also demonstrate the hardships the teacher endures when committed to teaching progressively. The significance in this analysis lies within the repetitive messages each film has in common and how these movies that are used for entertainment purposes create and recreate culture ideologies. Such ideologies reinforced throughout the films are that critical thinking is dangerous and no place in the classroom and teachers who become overly passionate about their students suffer great losses.

*Dead Poets Society*

The first film of the sample is *Dead Poets Society*, Directed by Peter Weir in 1989. This film depicts issues currently taking place within the educational system over time that have not yet been resolved. The students within this private school were drastically oppressed by a strict and traditional catholic system. Their parents deliberately chose this school due to the high expectations they had of their children and the excellent reputation, the school had with 75 percent of their students accepted into Ivy League Schools. This film demonstrates the priority achievement has had in traditional education, both strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, beyond the surface level of the film there are many examples of how progressive teachers are heroes for their students yet seen as villains by their peers and administration.
The film is based around a new year at Welton, an all boys school. Due to the retirement of a staff member Mr. Keating (played by Robin Williams) was the new English teacher. Within the first 12 minutes of the movie it became obvious that Mr. Keating was not going to blend in so smoothly with the rest of staff at Welton. Most of his classes had a certain level of spontaneity that at first even threw off his students. They were used to being drilled and disciplined by teachers and Mr. Keaton was the total opposite. As a progressive educator his goals included helping his students learn the importance of seizing the day, savoring and appreciating language, thinking for themselves and honoring their ideas that would one day help change the world. He showed his students he could relate to their boredom and that he had the desire to spice up education when he asked them to rip the boring pages out of their poetry books. It wasn’t long before Mr. Galister, another staff member began to watch his every move. The school continued to not interfere with his lectures; nonetheless they had no interest in learning from what he was contributing to his students. The staff within this school believed the curriculum in place was proven and should not be questioned by anyone. For them the role of a teacher was simply to prepare them for college and not for life.

Mr. Nolan, the principal at Welton had his first serious conversation with Mr. Keating after an outburst among his students took place. Behind Mr. Keating’s authority, his students formed a secret club called the Dead Poets Society. They were excited about all their new ways of thinking and in a humorous and rebellious manner one of the members published an article in the school paper requesting girls be admitted into Welton. Mr. Nolan warned Mr. Keating of what he felt was unorthodox teaching and reminded him of how impressionable young boys can be, indirectly accusing him of having fault in the misbehavior of his students. Within the film
there are many other suggestions that convey the consensus of critical thinking being dangerous causing more harm than good in young minds.

Progressively within this film students begin to seize the day, as they learned from Mr. Keating and take action within not only their academics but personal lives as well. One by one all of the boys deal with the demons they have been battling with their whole lives. They seem to be overcoming fears, shyness, resignation and unworthiness. Neil, one of his students, has always wanted to be an actor and acts on his new found confidence. Unfortunately he never dealt with how to properly go about expressing that he wanted to be in the school play to his parents and got in deep trouble for deliberately disobeying them. Eventually his parents decided to remove him from Welton and put him in military school. Neil’s father wanted him to be doctor and forget about acting. Neil was devastated and when his parents went to be he went to the den where his father kept a gun and killed himself. As the film progressed and leading to this tragedy, Mr. Keating became a target for the parents, staff and administration of Welton. They blamed Mr. Keating for the death of Neil and disturbance of their young boy’s minds. Mr. Keating’s leadership and heroic nature is in question and call for a deeper examination of his character. Each encounter with his students holds a unique narration and through their stories it is evident that he did more good than damage. In the end their voices were silenced and Mr. Keating was terminated and suffered a loss for something that he did not do.

\textit{Freedom Writers}

The second movie in this study is \textit{Freedom Writers}, directed by Richard LaGravenese in (2007). The film is a recreated documentary of a high school class in Los Angeles California around 1992 during a time of riots and heavy gang affiliation. This was a time where there was
not much hope for the youth in this area, since most of them were already third generation gang members themselves. This film is unique to the study simply because it contributes to the other extreme of the spectrum with teachers serving students from a lower income community. A progressive teacher will manage to touch the lives of many students and in this case the environment serves as another challenge within providing their students the skills of critical thinking. Old ideologies the students confront and disown are those that no one cares or understands them, that they have to fight for respect, and that they do not deserve more. This film demonstrates how resignation plays a big role in the staff reinforcing the status quo.

Hillary Swank plays the role of Ms. Erin Gruwell, an enthusiastic first time teacher Woodrow Wilson high school. Within the first 12 min of the film it is evident that she is going to have a tough time dealing the administration, her peers and students. Viewers are positioned to see that she is already odd lady to her supervisor Margret who appears concerned for Ms. Gruwell due to her wholesome look and eager nature. She even advises her to not wear the pearls her father gave her to school. Hinting that the environment to undeserving and too tough for her dainty jewelry. During her first class she experienced lack of enthusiasm from all of her students, noticed animosity amongst her students and even had to break up a fight. Margret along with Brian Gifford (who teaches the honors juniors) assured her that eventually she need not worry about dealing with these kinds of students once she achieved seniority and taught the juniors. According to them most of the bad kids eventually stop coming. Like in many traditional school systems they believe that the best thing she could do for them is teach them discipline and obedience. To their dismay she did not respond favorably to their consolation. She wants to help her students, she feels like she can make a difference.
Her father is yet another character in the story who feels like his daughter is wasting her time with children who don’t give a damn about their education. His daughter being a teacher in general, seems as though, is not good enough for him. As the film progresses Ms. Gruwell finds herself using unconventional teaching methods in order to gain her students’ attention and respect, eventually the ability to transform their thoughts. Many of her students experience cognitive dissonance within the process of discussing serious matters. Brooks (2011) gave an example of this in her research, documenting her students’ reactions during dialogue causing cognitive dissonance. In her experience, critical thinking reveals what she calls “issues of power” revealing oppression within society and stirring up feelings of resentment, frustration and disappointment. Ms. Gruwell handled the tension in her classroom gracefully, considering how she was attacked by her students. Eva and Andre are two examples of students that struggled with dissonance due to the ideas within the materials reviewed and what was real life in their experience. Ms. Gruwell is confronted by the gaps of experience between her students and her, but soon she realized that she better get to know who they are and what they have been through in order to help them.

Woodrow Wilson High was an integrated school and because of this they were using a system called sight based instruction. Unfortunately this consisted of only the honors students within the school receiving the good books. He students received beat up, condensed versions of the real books like Romeo and Juliet. By Ms.Gruwell insisting her students get better books, she began to be a ridiculed target by her fellow teachers and most of the administration. Within its progression, the movie also portrays that due to her involvement with her students she suffers the personal loss of her husband. He feels as though she has neglected the marriage and gives her an
ultimatum of choosing between her husband or her students. This film also reinforces the storyline of the hero teacher suffering great losses due to their commitment.

Overall, the film demonstrates how progressive teachers within a traditional education system stand to lose the respect of most of their loved ones and peers because they choose to teach in a manner that honors themselves as teachers and provides in the long run, major contributions to their communities. *Freedom Writers*, demonstrates a clear division of preexisting ideals and controversies we are still faced with today within our educational systems.

*Mr. Holland’s Opus*

The third movie in this study is *Mr. Holland’s Opus*, directed by Stephen Herek in (1995). The movie was filmed to reflect the time during when the Vietnam War took place. Richard Dreyfuss played the role of Mr. Holland, a musician that took on teaching as a temporary gig. His ideal of being a teacher, until something better came along is a unique and common theme in most teacher movies. As he becomes more involved within the lives of his students, he sets his dreams aside of being a famous composer. The giving up of one’s personal life and dreams is also a reoccurring ideology popular culture movies express within their story lines.

The film begins with Mr. Holland becoming a new school teacher and facing the challenges of motivating his students to appreciate music. Between his students needing private tutoring assistance to help improve their performance and the request from his principal Mrs. Helen Jacobs to lead the band, Mr. Holland soon realized this teaching job would consume more of his life than he initially intended it to. Shortly after receives the news that his wife is
expecting their first child, and with this new responsibility, he settles down as teacher and begins to look for more innovative ways to stimulate his students in learning and participating.

Mr. Holland begins to ask his student, what genre of music do they like listening to and to no surprise, due to the time period this movie reflected, the popular choice was Rock n Roll. Because of his keen sense of hearing, he was able to help his students connect the work of Sebastian Bach with current Rock n Roll beats. By this point he not only gained the attention of his students, but also Mr. Walters the vice principal. Word quickly circulates and Mrs. Helen Jacobs demanded some explanations. The following week she had a school board meeting and she knew that Mr. Holland’s unconventional way of teaching would surface.

Among all of his work demands, Mr. Holland’s family is also in need of his attention, his son apparently lost most of his hearing abilities and needed to be enrolled in a special school for children with hear disabilities. During a period of 3 months the Holland’s attended an intensive sign course which was necessary for them to communicate with their son. School and work became too much for Mr. Holland to juggle, and soon his family felt neglected. The progression of his family’s resentment towards his teaching position became one of the main tensions in the movie. It seemed like no matter how hard he tried as a father or teacher, he could never win.

Overall, the film demonstrates how a teacher’s sacrifice for his students is never appreciated nor understood by many. Rather than illustrating how teaching can be a fulfilling career, the film demonstrates how Mr. Holland is left with the feeling of an unfulfilled life when the funds for the music department are cut and he is forced to retire early. A teacher moves from hero to villain and none of the problems within the educational system get resolved. An example
of this kind of situation can be seen during his last fight with the Unified Public School District concerning school funds being cut.

Analysis and Results

During the analysis of *Dead Poets Society* (1989), *Freedom Writers* (2007) and *Mr. Holland’s Opus* (1995), data was recorded with Table 1, which is illustrated on p. 20 in Chapter 3. This table was used as a guideline to develop the overall analysis which is presented in a thematic organization.

The organizational structure of this study was developed as an extension of the work of several previous theories and studies within the field of critical thinking, cultural studies, and media studies. This study used aspects of Stuart Hall’s theories to examine how progressive teachers implementing critical thinking are portrayed in popular culture film.

There are four themes that categorize this study. 1. Resistance to critical thinking coming from actors and how teachers are villainized in the process. 2. Fear of loss of control (cognitive dissonance) in all actors. 3. Positive results of cognitive dissonance in classroom. 4. Heavy involvement with students is associated with loss and considered dangerous. Many of the categories described above are issues within the educational system today and this study focuses on how the film artifacts are a progression of these ideologies and representations. This study found that each movie portrayed these four themes concerning the portrayal of teachers. These portrayals were consistent with the characters development and villainization. All four of these themes are identified in different parts of all three films.

Theme 1: Resistance to critical thinking coming from actors and how teachers are villainized in the process
The first theme depicts a teacher who desires to perform his or her duties with excellence. The goal is for every student in their class to achieve their highest potential, and their methods involve critical thinking. Critical thinking is part of a new progressive method within the educational system that has surfaced due to observing that it is an essential element in learning. The most powerful lessons within the classroom were found to be those in which all parties involved experienced a paradigm shift. This shift is resisted many times due to the ideologies and experiences of each individual.

In *Dead Poets Society* (1989), Mr. Keating was confronted by his peer Mr. Galister, after hearing Mr. Keating’s unorthodox lecture. “You take a big risk by encouraging them to be artist John”. Mr. Keating responds by saying that he is showing them how to be free thinkers, something that is lacking within the staff and students at Welton. The second time Mr. Keating was confronted was due to an exercise he had his students’ complete concerning conformity. He told his students, “Now we all have a great need for acceptance, but you must trust that your beliefs are unique, your own. Even though others may think them odd or unpopular, even though the herd may go that’s baaad”. In the principal view, this type of assignment was unacceptable; the curriculum was set and proven. Questioning and teaching the students how to question things was not regular practice at Welton. The principal did not share agreement with Mr. Keating in teaching the students how to think for themselves and he was advised to stick to his job, to prepare them for college and nothing more.

This theme was also identified in *Freedom Writers* (2007), several times. After Ms. Gruwell broke up the first fight amongst the students in her classroom, her peer Brian Gilford and the vice principal Margret felt that she was going to see things their way. To their dismay they became disturbed when they realized that she seemed hopeful in positively impacting them
and changing their lives. On another occasion Margret chastised Ms. Gruwell for wanting her student to have better books to help motivate them to learn. “You can make someone want an education, the best you can do is try to get them to obey. To learn discipline, that would be a tremendous accomplishment for them”. When she turned to her coworker Mr. Gilford for support, hoping he might know a better way to persuade Margret to give better books to her class, she was also met with noncooperation. He laughed at her when she spoke of using The Diary of Anne Frank as a text they can relate to and learn from. He even became indignant and said to her, “How dare you compare them to Anne Frank? They don’t hide; they drive around in the open with automatic weapons. I’m the one living in fear; I can’t walk out of my door at night”. She gave their experiences more value than anyone else had ever done at Woodrow Wilson and because of this the students wanted her to remain their teacher for the following two years. This was against how things worked within that school system and the staff was at an uproar. Margret in a meeting with the board of education concerning this issue began bashing Ms. Gruwell in attempts to make Ms. Gruwell out to be unqualified to teach, “Her methods are impractical and impossible to implement with regularity. What if everyone else performed this way”? Ms. Gruwell had created a family like environment within her classroom, she had managed to transform her students’ perspectives, along with many of them even changing their lifestyles and the staffs at Woodrow were jealous.

This theme was also identified in Mr. Holland’s Opus (1995), on several occasions. Mr. Holland saw he was not getting any positive results or feedback from his students, so he decided to think outside of the box and use Rock n Roll genre as an aid to help students appreciate music. It was bought to the principal’s attention that Mr. Holland was using unconventional methods of teaching and he was pulled into her office, to have a meeting. Mr. Walters was the third party at
the meeting and he was adamant about proving his point, “My point is rock n roll by its nature, leads to a breakdown in discipline”. Mrs. Jacobs was going to have a meeting with the school board the following week and she asks Mr. Holland to give her the explanation she would be using when she was confronted about this matter. Mr. Holland bravely said, “Mrs. Jacobs, you tell them that I am teaching music, and that I will use anything from Beethoven to Billie Holiday, to rock n roll if I think it will help me teach my students to love music.

Theme 2: Fear of loss of control (cognitive dissonance) in all actors & Positive results of cognitive dissonance in classroom.

The second theme depicts the behaviors of all actors involved within the school system after being exposed to critical thinking and new ideologies. As mentioned within the literature review cognitive dissonance arises out of our ideals being different than those presented to us. In all three films we see the back and forth tug within dialogue that is most times avoided by many but necessary.

In Dead Poets Society (1989), this theme was identified several times. On one occasion Mr. Keating gave his students the assignment of writing an original poem of their own. He gave them free reign to choose whatever topic they’d like because he wanted to make sure they remained interested. He knew that Todd his most reserved student would have a hard time completing the assignment. One by one students read their poems, and when Mr. Keating called on Todd it was no surprise that he had not completed the assignment. It is not common for a teacher to say much to his students about their lack of performance in front of others, but Mr. Keating seized the opportunity to help Todd out, “Mr. Anderson, thinks that everything inside of
him is worthless and embarrassing. Isn’t that right Todd, isn’t that your worst fear? I think you are wrong, I think you have something inside of you that is worth a great deal”. Against Todd’s will Mr. Keating has him stand up and has him spontaneously create a poem. During this scene Todd looked like a heart attack going against what he believed in, but in the end with great effort he was able to see what Mr. Keating saw also. Todd’s confidence grew stronger as the film progressed.

Toward the end of the film, when Mr. Keating was unjustly made to resign, he stopped by his classroom to pack up his belongings and before he made his way out for good. Todd was the first individual willing to stand alone in defense of Mr. Keating. He confessed that all the boys were forced to sign a petition for his dismissal. One by one, more than half of the class stood up on their chairs to salute Mr. Keating farewell, while Mr. Gallister commands them to sit down. It was at this point that the idea of him being in command as the replacement teacher was not going to be possible amongst the new free minds at Welton.

This theme was also identified in *Freedom Writers* (2007), several times. On one occasion after Ms. Gruwell realized how segregated her students were amongst each other due to their gang relations, so she had them all get up and sit next to the class mate they dreaded sitting next to. On another occasion, Ms. Gruwell confronted her class, due to a racially discriminating picture being circulated during her lecture. She began to give them examples of how a bigger gang “the Nazis” ridiculed, demoralized and killed the Jews during the Holocaust. “Yeah they wiped out everyone they didn’t like and everybody they blamed for their life being hard. And one of the ways they did it was by doing this. They would print pictures like this in the newspaper, Jewish people with big noses, and blacks with big fat lips”. Like the Nazis they too, disliked each other to the point of wishing the other race did not exist. The students knew
she was right but began to give her dirty looks. They resisted her saying things like, “You don’t know nothing home girl, you don’t even know how we live”! Although Ms. Gruwell powerfully proved a relevant point, her students felt that she had to do her due diligence in getting to know them. She did not know much of what it took for them to survive in the streets and come back to school for what they believed were worthless lessons. Everybody in the room had something to learn from each other, and after this conversation their attitudes began to transform rapidly. This is an example of the kind of work most of the students and teachers within the literature review were trying to avoid or had difficulty with.

Ms. Gruwell managed to keep her students attending class daily, their grades had all gone up; they were excited about their education due to most of them being perhaps the first to graduate high school in their families. Unfortunately, to the students’ dismay Ms. Gruwell was not allowed by the schools regulations to teach juniors, so they were all going to have a new teacher, coming next September. They convinced Ms. Gruwell to dispute this regulation with the board and this created uproar among the senior staff. No one cared of the results she had accomplished with her students, only the fact that if they granted her this wish, the way things operated at Woodrow Wilson would change. The meeting with the board was verbally volatile and hostile; they attacked her from every angle possible stating things like, “she is in the middle of a divorce” as if that had anything to do with her qualifications as a teacher. The fact of the matter was, they knew she was a progressive teacher who cared about teaching her students how to think critically about themselves and the world around them. She was making a difference in their lives and the staff did not feel these students deserved this type of education. Margret desperately utters, “Her methods are impractical and impossible to implement with regularity, what if every teacher performed this way”? Could the same results be created continuously with
the other students was the final argument. Jealousy was present within this conversation, but most evident was the fear of loss of control. The positive impact Ms. Gruwell had at Woodrow Wilson continued for years to come, as she managed to change policies making them work best for the students.

This theme was also identified in *Mr. Holland’s Opus* (1995), on several occasions. This process begins when Mr. Holland confesses to his class his lack of control which is the fact that he has made no impact on them within the last five months. He had been lecturing with no eye contact, asking few questions and not really getting to know his students. His fear of loss of control in the classroom kept him from being a great teacher till the very moment he took a step forward to ask, “Mr. Sullivan, what kind of music do you like to listen to”? During the following scene in the movie, he was able to take what he had learned, and help his student Ms. Lang trust herself in playing an instrument. She felt as if she was the only one in her family with no talent, and her strongest desire was to be good at something. Mr. Holland began to understand her pain and fear and spontaneously played a Beatles song for her to listen to. He said, “These guys can’t sing, they absolutely have no harmonics and they are playing the same three notes on the page. I love it do you”? They were both in agreement and simply because they felt that playing music was supposed to be fun. He asks Ms. Lang to trust herself, and at that moment full of fear she takes the first steps. If it wasn’t for Mr. Holland taking a stand and helping his students think outside of the box, his students would not have learned how to play an instrument or achieve things they could have dreamed of before.

Cognitive dissonance as described in detail above with examples of each of the artifact selected, has many ways of manifesting. Resistance can come from students as well as teachers learning how to take on a new perspective, finding out how life works and taking on a new
challenge all happens within a classroom, the illusion of danger lies within not knowing what the results will be and the uncovering of our true characters.

Theme 3: Heavy involvement with students is associated with loss and considered dangerous

In *Dead Poets Society* (1989), this third theme surfaced on many occasions. Mr. Keating was stimulating the young minds of these student who before his class believed that their one and only job was to survive their parents and the curriculum at Welton. He taught them how to think critically, “Just when you think you know something, you have to look at it in another way. Even though it may seem silly or wrong, you must try. Now when you read just don’t consider what the author thinks, consider what you think. Boys, you must strive to find your own voice, cause the longer you wait to begin the less likely you are to find it at all.” It all seemed like harmless instruction that one could apply to any aspect of life, but the principal of the school did not think so. “But I don’t think I have to warn you that boys this age are very impressionable”. This dialogue sets the viewers up for the upcoming disastrous scenes that would follow.

Neil one on Mr. Keating’s students, due to his newfound inspiration in English class decided to join the school play without his father’s permission. No one but Todd knew that he never received permission to participate, nonetheless Neil’s father finds out he went behind his back and signed up for the play and the first person he accuses of influencing his son to be disobedient is Mr. Keating, “Who put you up to it? Was it this new man? This uh…Mr. Keating”? He prohibits his son from taking any part of the play and was not willing to compromise. By this time in the film, Mr. Keating is being heavily accused of doing more damage than good for his students by Neil’s parents and administration. As the scenes progress, Neil disobeys his father, performs in the play and gets caught being disobedient again. This time
around his father tells Neil he is removing him from Welton, putting him into military school where he will become a doctor. Neil was devastated by this news and tried to speak to his father about his dreams and aspirations of someday being an actor. He never got a chance to express himself and stood in pain as his father walks away. Neil waits for his parents to go to be, sneaks into his father’s home office and kills himself. The movie continues to have negative message concerning the dangers of teachers becoming too involved with their students. Mr. Keating is blamed for Neil’s suicide and the school calls the parents in help aid in the signing of a petition that help remove Mr. Keating from Welton.

This theme was also identified in Freedom Writers (2007) as well. Once Ms. Gruwell understood how important it was for her to not back down on being a progressive teacher, she did not care about how others viewed her. Because of her commitment she was willing to forsake the admiration and respect of her father, her coworkers and even her husband. This movie explicitly reviews current ideologies with its viewers, reminding them just how sacrificial being a teacher can be. In the beginning of the film, her father expresses his discontent with Erin becoming a teacher, due to the intelligence he believed his daughter possessed. “With your brains you could run a major corporation, instead I worry all night because you are a teacher at Attica. You are going to waste your talent on people that don’t give a damn about education, it breaks my heart”. As his only daughter she was not used disappointing her father, but she hoped somehow that her choice would in time be justified and she could make him proud.

Ms. Gruwell came home many times exited to share the breakthroughs she had in classroom with her students and her husband could not care less. She did not feel guilty in her commitment to the students, since in her mind, they married young and were still trying to establish themselves as individuals professionally. Mr. Gruwell’s husband refrained from
joining her during any events involving the students, so he never had a chance to learn exactly why his wife was so involved. He believed that his role as a husband was not to be or act like a supportive wife and that he did not agree to live this life that he was dragged into. In one of the last scenes involving her husband he says to her, “I think what you are doing is noble and good and I am proud of you, I am. But I just want to live my life and not feel bad about it”. He asks her to choose between the relationship with him and her commitment to her students. She was clear that if he was asking her for these ultimatums, he did not love her and was willing to let him go.

This theme was also identified in Mr. Holland’s Opus (1995) on several occasions. Mr. Holland initially did not set out to make teaching a permanent career. He was teaching, hoping to still have free time to compose an opus which would make him famous. Shortly after the film began in a conversation he had with the football coach Joel Myster, he began to realize a loss of his initial goals and dreams. Mr. Holland asks Mr. Myster, what’s so funny and Mr. Myster replies, “Oh the free time. Glenn I can’t remember the last time I had free time”.

Mr. Holland was also faced with the possibility or threat of losing his family due to him not prioritizing his time correctly. Due to his heavy involvement in school he would forget promises he had made to his family and in turn made them feel unloved. “It’s always something isn’t it? If it’s not a school play, its band practice, or grading papers or some student committee needs an advisor”. He manages to balance his work and home life, but not without getting into a few more arguments with his wife and son Cole.

Becoming too involved with students posed to be a threat once more, when he worked closely with Rowena Morgan the lead singer of a play he was organizing. In general she had a
beautiful voice but whatever she was missing to make her performance spectacular, Mr. Holland managed to further develop. His students were always in awe of how he always managed to get the best out of them, but Rowena not only appreciated him as a teacher but was also falling in love. Perhaps these strong feelings came about because of how he spoke to her about singing with a passion for her performance and to follow her dreams of being a singer after graduation. On Mr. Holland’s advice, she decides to leave to New York after the play to follow her dreams. She invites him to go with her, asking him to leave behind all that he knows for a chance to make their dreams come true, “Don’t you see, you could be writing great music”. This offer was most enticing due to the fact he had unfulfilled dreams, but nonetheless he declines the offer. This scene reinforces the message of danger in heavy involvement with students.

In the end after all the difficult and sacrificial choices Mr. Holland had made, fulfilling his role as a husband, father and teacher, he was faced with the loss of his job through an unfortunate budget cut of the entire music department. He put aside his dreams and aspirations because he fell in love with being a teacher only to get it taken away from him. After thirty years of dedication he was in his experience left with finding a new purpose in life.

What is most admirable about his experience was that although he was suffering this loss, he understood that the greatest loss was the loss of the music department for his students.

Discussion

Research question 1 is concerned with popular culture’s portrayal of critical thinking, whom this portrayal serve? Within all artifacts examined, popular culture portrayed critical thinking as dangerous. This perspective or as Hall would say ideology, is reinforced and legitimized in film within dialogue repeatedly and achieves dominance within our culture. Mr.
Keating was asked, why was he teaching his students to question the system at Welton? He was warned and advised to simply prepare his students for college and not to be free thinkers. This way of thinking serves no one; it keeps everyone from thinking outside of the box, and taking risks that are worth taking for themselves and their communities. The passive learner within all three films is simply looking to survive their classmates, teachers and administrators.

Critical thinking within the artifacts is portrayed as forbidden, due to the numerous times the teachers received negative feedback from peers and administration, yet the students demonstrated objective thinking, fulfillment in learning, a new energy in dealing with scholastic and personal matters within their lives.

Critical thinking is seen as a double-edged sword due to its unpredictable results mentioned within the literature review (cognitive dissonance) and reinforced within all three artifacts under observation.

In addition to students’ discomfort, I imagine that probing to uncover and give voice to the anxiety that seemingly stifles students’ participation in these dialogues can be equally daunting to the instructor who has no experience, or even interest in revealing the emotional dynamics at play. My personal experiences as both student and instructor that many in the academy believe that emotion does not belong in the classroom, and when emotion appears it is shrugged off as being “the students’ problem” or evidence of “student’s resistance”. It seem to me however that when discomfort is dismissed and emotional upheavals go unaddressed the potential for respect care and meaning-making and radical change is clearly stifled (Brooks, 2011, p. 45).
Ms. Gruwell had some of the toughest times a teacher could possibly have. Her life experiences differed from that of her students and they were aware of that. If it weren’t for her willingness to work with her students emotions, she would not have witnessed the transformation in thinking these individuals needed.

Research question 1a, is concerned with how popular culture movies portray teachers who think critically and teach in a progressive nature? Are teachers who care for the minds of their students seen as heroes or martyrs? In all three artifacts the teachers were portrayed as a little on the radical and crazy side. They were also treated as if they were too idealistic in their ideas. In all selected artifacts the teachers become heroes to their students, yet martyrs to the system they work for. They were all punished with a loss somewhere within the plots of each of the films. Ms. Gruwell’s husband found what his wife was doing professionally was noble but he did not appreciate it enough to stick by her and help her in any way he could. He had an attitude of “you go out there and save the world”, wanting no part of it. Neil also asked Mr. Keating, when he goes to visit him where he lives, “why do you do this, when you can be doing whatever you want in life”? Another example of this type of attitude was observed with Mr. Holland’s wife, when she told him to just go back to grading his papers. The go and save your students dialogue constitutes for reinforcement of the martyr image teachers have within popular culture media.

Moreover, marginalization is fundamental to the superhero’s character: a key generic feature of superheroes is that they are orphaned, literally or virtually, thus “marked out of society,” Superheroes are misunderstood, and this is both the basis and outcome of their “secret identity” feature: beneath their ordinary, mortal visages lie powerful, godlike personae. Furthermore, superheroes are marginalized insofar as they are often,
technically, outlaws, to the extent that their “devotion to justice overrides even (their) devotion to the law” a quality to commensurate with the individual-community tension that characterizes US cultural history (Shugart, 2009, p. 98).

The teacher who played the superhero part the best was Ms. Gruwell, because although she asked probing questions to Margret concerning why her students were not allowed to use the better quality books the other students used, she would back down and apologize, stating that she did not mean to disrespect. After finding out how limiting Woodrow Wilson’s policies were, she did everything in her power, without Margret’s approval to give her students the best she could. Margret soon realized Ms. Gruwell was negotiating with administration above her, which granted Ms. Gruwell a stronger identification with what is considered a superhero.

Research Question 1b, is concerned with the consequences teachers pay, in regards for crossing invisible “professional line” and not following the curriculum? In all three artifacts the teachers face consequences of losing the initial respect their peers and administration have towards them. With their students they take the risk of not being liked after intentionally communicating material outside of the ordinary. The teachers within the artifacts also risk losing the respect and admiration of their students, friends and family due to their opposing nature to the system in place. Hooks lived through this experience herself in her quest to make a difference as a progressive educator, “They do not read John Dewey. They do not know his powerful declaration that “democracy has to be born anew in each generation, and education is its midwife” (hooks, 2010, para.1). Repetitively all the teachers were called into private offices to discuss or review the school policies, or simply how things were done within the premises. Within the narratives of the films within the study all teachers suffer great losses. Mr. Keating is
expelled from the school, Ms. Gruwell loses her husband in a divorce due to his claim of negligence, and Mr. Holland is forced to retire early.

Research Question 2, is concerned with if cognitive dissonance is portrayed as an important element in education or as something to be avoided? Elements of avoidance were more prominent within the films *Freedom Writers* and *Dead Poets Society*. The ongoing dialectical message was that either the students were too young to be exposed to critical thinking or that they were undeserving of an education that encompassed anything more than the basics or reading, writing, arithmetic and the sciences. Margret constantly reminded Ms. Gruwell that, the most you can teach your students is to “obey”. As long of the students followed the rules at school and remained out of the way, they had a chance at graduating high school. In *Dead Poets Society* according to the principal at Welton, the most important thing was for the students to get prepared for college. This message reinforced within the film correlates to the issues within education today and that of the literature reviewed.

The preoccupation with skills training within the educational system has left little room for critical thinking or cognitive dissonance, the emotions involved in dealing with real life injustices and issues. Since critical pedagogy lends itself to the examining and questioning existing ideologies and cultural practices, conservative and traditional educators as seen within the literature review demonstrated concern in the form of protectiveness in regards to their student body. Zipp & Fenwick’s research results demonstrate that liberals within the academy were not looking to push their left winged ideas on to their students, instead their work points out how traditional education has been derailed from their initial mission which is the appreciation of ideas.
Quite ironically, in contrast to conservative laments about liberals narrowing political discourse and debate, the real change may instead be the move away from the importance of the critical appraisal of ideas and toward the teaching of job-related skills. Thus, the traditional mission of higher education may be in jeopardy of being compromised, but not in the ways conservative commentators have described (Zipp & Fenwick, 2006, 321).

Due to how the teachers in all three films are portrayed, it is expected for them to continue to push boundaries and fight for what they believe their students deserve. The teachers within these narratives were visionaries within the discipline of education with the same convictions Kellner & Share (2005) research reveals “To the domains of reading, writing, and traditional print literacies one could argue that in the era of technological revolution educators must develop robust forms of media literacy, computer literacy and multimedia literacies, thus cultivating “multiple literacies” in the reconstructing of education (p.369). An example of this concept can be seen when Mr. Holland states how he will use Rock n Roll, if that is what it takes get the students to feel passionate about music. Ironically after every scene within each artifact, demonstrating positive results from critical thinking and cognitive dissonance was a scene of the teacher getting in trouble with administration due to their unconventional ways of teaching.

In general the way the dialogic themes within the artifacts are constructed and repeated within the film and how they were observed within this study are in line with Fairclough’s ideas, “In his work discourse is a social force which has a central role in what is constructed as “real” and therefore what is possible. It determines how the world can be seen and what can be known and done within it. Discourse is thus crucial in explaining how the social subject is positioned and limited. A key question which he highlights is “how are constituted as subjects who exercise
or submit to power relations?” (Philo, 1994, p.318). Fairclough’s words are experience, of an audience following the story line. If the images and ideologies seen on films is what we mindlessly imitate or see as possible, we are then submitting to these power relations that may not necessarily allow us to evolve for the better as a culture. Teachers are vilified in films that in fact were promoted to the audiences as a celebration of teachers. It is clear that the reason why these films move from a teacher celebration dynamic into the vilification of character is due to their differing commitments within the current cultural structure. Although within the end of each film there are triumphs, it does not necessarily lead to the acceptance of critical thinking.

Conclusion

On the surface level many of the films examined are created for entertainment, and empowering the young to be free thinkers, and take bold action with things that matter to them in and outside of the classroom. However, in a deeper analysis, the films provide a clear representation of traditional ideologies within the educational system. Rather than simply inspire its audience these films mix signals of others ways of thinking and being. The films taught it audiences that not everything in life is possible and accepted outside of tradition.

Through inquiry and the analysis of text within the literature review, familiarities with the range of arguments within the subject area of critical pedagogy were achieved. With the literature as my base I was able to see how the power struggle that exist within the educational system in films reflects that of real life. The theories of Hall are supported within this study as many of the codes about the nature of society were present for our viewing.
The characteristics of a progressive teacher were at one point of the movie glorified by their students, who so desperately needed new philosophies to live by. hooks 2010 within her book *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* has the experience to provide us with a numerous amount of students experiences in that she can recall enthusiasm within the classroom, “Whenever genuine learning is happening the conditions for self-actualization are in place, even when that is not a goal of our teaching process” (hooks, 2010, para.2). Within the film dialogue had the power to change old thought patterns for the students as well as the audiences watching. As the films progress in story line, it is the same element of dialogue that in turn has the power to villainize the teachers. They were pulled into the office to review school policies more often than their own students for simply doing their jobs. The teachers were the characters that suffered the most from the conflicts examined, but they were willing to do this for the sake of their students. They move from hero to martyr, because they cared more about their students, than following a curriculum that in the end serves no one.

Mr. Keating in *Dead Poets Society*, was an example of what effective teacher. On the first day of school, he began his class in an unconventional manner, which the students needed due to their experience with boredom. Most of the teachers spoke at them, and to them, they were not treated like the future generation of intellectuals that they were. Welton was a very prestigious school and the parents trusted that their children were going to receive a good education, unfortunately for many students not a good experience. Dewey believed that it was not the number of experiences one has that makes a difference, but the quality of experiences that matter. This in turn then affects the probability of a student being open to new experiences. It is to emphasize the fact first, that young people in traditional schools do have experiences; and secondly, that the trouble is not the absence of experiences, but their defective and wrong
character- wrong and defective from the standpoint of connection with further experience (Dewey, 1939, para. 1).

The media a mere reflection of our classrooms today informs us that our students are not getting what they need out of their education but in turn presents us with reinforcements of resignation and lack of power to transform an institution that has the nation, within its care.

Ms. Gruwell in her quest to be the best teacher to be no matter how difficult the circumstances demonstrated great leadership skills, some of those were compassion, listening, engaging her students with real examples of people who faced similar circumstances outside of the books being read in class, and allowing the students to express their thoughts and feelings. She was open to dialogue even if the conversation involved attacks from her students, many teachers within the literature review expressed their inability to get past this stage in dialogue and avoided confrontation. It is possible that this occurs because critical pedagogy requires a distinct form of dialogue that requires teacher to give up some of the power within the classroom, so that others can express and feel their own.

Mr. Holland in Mr. Holland’s Opus, at first was not passionate about his career as a teacher. He saw teaching as a temporary gig, which would give him the stable income he needed, so that he can write his orchestra opus and become famous. Once he came in contact with his students he realized that he would have to give more of himself than he anticipated. He was called to the office for a serious conversation with the principal due to his lack of enthusiasm, “you run out those doors faster than your students when you hear that bell ring” the school principal said. Eventually he changed and his lack of enthusiasm became passion. The narrative shifts when his wife starts to complain about his lack of attention at home, making Mr.
Holland out to be the bad guy. The repetitive messages thought the artifact is that the teacher can never win. Too much enthusiasm, or not enough enthusiasm the teacher hero, martyr or villain gets beat up over and over. The message the media gives us is one that encourages resignation. “Hall emphasized that the media hegemony, which is a subtle sway of society’s have’s over have not’s is perhaps not done intentionally, but they tend to promote the already accepted interpretations of reality” (Griffin, 2009, p336). Even if the nature of education is meant to transform with the times, the ideologies within films serve as an opposing force to this natural idea.

Although all artifacts are meant for entertainment and encouragement of its audience, the narratives carry mixed messages. Teachers are heroes to their students that are thirsty for knowledge and villains to their peers and administration for being creative with how they provide their students with a quality experience. The overall findings of this study illustrate the cinematic and complicated power these artifacts carry disrupting and, reinforcing mainstream values and beliefs.
CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Limitations

Due to the complex nature of film, there are limitations involved in this study. Popular culture films have an enormous amount of dialogue that can be interpreted in various ways. In fact, movies are so rich that an analysis can be done using a single scene within the film and can constitute for an entire study. Instead, this study is limited to examining a few aspects within the three films. This procedure limits the analysis while simultaneously contributing to the appropriate approach for the goal of this study. Using multiple films in the sample allows for a more reliable analysis. For the sake of keeping the study simple and clear, a limited amount of artifacts were used. The limited amount of films in combination with the concentrated analysis of three themes adds to the reliability and validity of the analysis.

Reliability and Validity

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, which is based on interpretation, the reliability falls short. The limitations occur, as naturally there are different interpretations of meanings even when it relates to interpreting dialectics. Discrepancies due to interpretation are a phenomenon that arise due to each individual’s social and cultural backgrounds. In Loklin’s research (2010) students were placed in disadvantaged countries for a period of three weeks, in attempt to provide their students with an experience that would help them with this gap of experiences. Reliability is also under a certain level of constraint, due to the researcher being the only individual involved in this analysis. This study lacks a certain level of validity due to the fact that it is not replicating a previously established study.
Recommendations for Further Study

This study included popular culture movies that were released during a time period ranging from the late 80’s to as early as 2007. These films are representative of the current struggles taking place within the educational system today. Due to the need to focus on a specific question that was relevant to the material examined within the literature review, earlier teacher movies were not examined. It would be greatly beneficial to further address teacher portrayals before and after the time frames that were examined within this research. A factor to examine within future teacher portrayals would be, if the teachers continue to struggle with the same cultural ideologies portrayed and if they are parallel to the current issues within education.

Conclusion

This thesis intended to address how progressive teachers are represented within popular culture films by deconstructing the concepts that are closely related to critical thinking through an examination of dialectical analysis. Those concepts were then examined in regards to the role they play in reinforcing current ideologies and maintaining social practices that do not serve us in solving future problems. After deconstructing these concepts, they were pulled together and discussed in regards to their presence in American popular culture films. The goal of the study was to incorporate all aspects of the films that were addressed and examine their cultural significance within the portrayals.
This dialectical analysis is important in understanding how reality is constructed, reconstructed or simply kept in place through the means of communication. The way we currently view and our social worlds are through our cultural interpretations within a dialogue. This study achieved its goal in further understanding how our current educational system is mirrored within popular culture films. This thesis has gone beyond simply answering the research questions; it has deconstructed the concepts within existing films and provided a reason for future cultural studies within media literacy. Within this dialogic analysis it is clear that the commitment of the media is not the same commitment of those who seek to transform the educational system through critical thinking. The value of this study lies in what Hall (1996), termed as *junctures or detour*, the spaces in which one acknowledges the gaps within the current system and allows a space for transformation within that knowledge. Power lies within knowing what is going on as Philo explains, “Ideas are linked to interest and these competing interest will seek to explain the world in ways which justify their own positions. So ideology (which we defined as an interest-linked perspective) and the struggle for legitimacy go hand in hand” (Philo, 2007, p.178). Meanings are circulated within the dimensions of production, context and reception and the audiences research within the subjects observed, serves as key to how one receives the meaning of that message. Reviewing the literature for this study served as a foundation of my reception and those who review this work will hopefully benefit from these other points of view.
References


