

Teacher TV



Seventy Years of Teachers on Television

SECOND EDITION



Mary M. Dalton
Laura R. Linder



Teacher TV: Seventy Years of Teachers on Television, Second Edition examines some of the most influential teacher characters presented on television from the earliest sitcoms to contemporary dramas and comedies. Both topical and chronological, the book follows a general course across decades and focuses on dominant themes and representations. Although each chapter presents an overview of the all the teachers on television for each decade, the focus will link some of the most popular shows of the era to larger cultural themes. “1950s Gender Wars: *Our Miss Brooks* and *Mr. Peepers*” looks at acceptable behavior for men teachers and women teachers on television and offers a context for making links to how gender is socially constructed in popular culture and in society. The racial tensions of the 1960s take a more implicit form on two series and are examined in “1960s Race and Social Relevancy: *The Bill Cosby Show* and *Room 222*.” In “1970s Ideology and Social Class: *Welcome Back Kotter* and *The Paper Chase*,” both lower and upper ends of the class spectrum are blunted in favor of storylines that are personal and predictable instead of overtly political. Two popular television sitcoms validate educational privileges for elite students in “1980s Normalizing Meritocracy: *The Facts of Life* and *Head of the Class*.” The 1980s reflect a return to conservatism, and two popular television sitcoms mark the transition by validating educational privileges for elite students. The 1990s mark a time of significant change for teachers on television. In “Gaining Ground From Margin to Center: *Hangin’ With Mr. Cooper* and *My So Called Life*,” the two featured shows, illustrate the mundane and the provocative in teacher depictions on television. In “Embracing Multiculturalism: *Boston Public* and *The Wire*” we use these dramas as exemplars of the 2000s to examine themes such as race, gender, and sexuality, but view them through a new lens. Chapter Eight is new to this edition and looks at the downward spiral in the depiction of educators in popular culture during 2010s and pays specific attention to *Madam Secretary* and *Teachers*. The Afterword, which is also new, explores these television texts in the larger socio-political context and makes important links between television narratives and issues of identity, the culture of testing, poverty, and dropping out. We must reestablish the importance of public education and consider its essential role in creating an informed citizenry, which is necessary for the future of democracy. Recent trends represent a dangerously skewed view of educators, and it is essential that we begin to “flip the script”—literally and figurative—to combat the cynicism of today’s television narratives and stop the way those stories influence public perceptions of education in America.

Mary M. Dalton is Professor of Communication at Wake Forest University, author of *The Hollywood Curriculum: Teachers in the Movies* (Third Revised Edition 2017), and a documentary filmmaker.

Laura R. Linder is a retired media arts professor, author of *Public Access Television: America’s Electronic Soapbox* (1999), and co-editor (with Dalton) of *The Sitcom Reader: America Re-viewed, Still Skewed* (Second Edition 2016).

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR **Teacher TV**

“This book about media images of teachers offers a rare chance to reflect on a profession that touches all of us. These chapters give readers a critical look into the way educators and education have been portrayed on what is effectively one of our first teachers—television.”

—Naeemah Clark, co-author of *Diversity in U.S. Mass Media*

“Addressing issues of race, class, and sexuality, this smart, accessible study of teachers on situation comedies and dramatic series is required reading for classroom teachers, their students, and television fans. In this expanded edition, Dalton and Linder shed new light on the significant role television has played over the past seven decades in the cultural construction of the image of the American teacher.”

—Stephen Tropiano, author of *The Prime Time Closet:
A History of Gays and Lesbians on TV*

“In *Teacher TV*, Dalton and Linder help us to see the shifting representations of teachers on television from the early days of the medium to the present—and how those representations both reflect and influence societal views on teaching. This book is essential for anyone interested in issues of race, class, and gender as frameworks for understanding the portrayal of teachers in popular culture.”

—Jeremy Stoddard, co-editor of *Teaching Difficult History through Film*

Teacher TV



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Shirley R. Steinberg
General Editor

Vol. 320

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Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder

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For my son, Dalton Smoot, and my niece and her husband,
Melanie and Michael Gerou
—MMD

For Jake Linder and Ashley Davenport, extraordinary educators
—LRL



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Overview

Why TV? Why Teachers?

This book offers an examination of some of the most influential educator characters presented on primetime television over seventy years from the earliest sitcoms to contemporary dramas and web series. Both topical and chronological, this book focuses on dominant themes and representations within each decade from the 1950s through the 2010s. Although the chapters present an overview of the compendium of teachers on television for each decade, the focus of each chapter is a thesis that links some of the most popular shows of the era to larger cultural themes. *Teacher TV* is an extension of our earlier work and melds explorations of the cultural and curricular implications of how teachers are represented. Starting with *The Hollywood Curriculum: Teachers in the Movies* and continued in the anthology *The Sitcom Reader: America Re-viewed, Still Skewed* as well as articles and book chapters, we have thought deeply about the intersection of media, politics, identity, and education. Since the publication of the first edition of *Teacher TV*, we have also edited two volumes featuring essays about depictions of educators, *Screen Lessons: What We Have Learned from Teachers on Television and in the Movies* and *Teachers, Teaching,¹ and Media: Original Essays About Educators in Popular Culture.*² Even so, we have only scratched the surface in terms of examining important texts and making critical cultural connections. New to this edition are companion videos for each chapter. A link will be provided at the end of each chapter for that chapter video. This link will take you to the entire set of videos: <https://vimeo.com/showcase/6916789>

Why TV?

Robert C. Allen poses the question in the introduction to *Channels of Discourse Reassembled*: “Why study television? For starters, because it’s undeniably, unavoidably ‘there.’ And, it seems, everywhere” (1). In *Media Unlimited*, Todd Gitlin talks about more than television when he argues that the “main truth” about media is that it “slips through our fingers” (4). It would be difficult to refute the importance of analyzing television texts and their larger contexts when considering something else Gitlin goes on to say: “The obvious but hard-to-grasp truth is that living with the media is today one of the main things Americans and many other human beings do” (5). The very obviousness of this condition is precisely what causes people to take television and other media for granted. For our purposes, television is a much more expansive term than it was a decade ago when the first edition of this book was published. The term television is shorthand for visual narratives that arrive in our homes or on smaller screens we take with us anywhere and everywhere. With the introduction of different platforms for engaging with visual narratives, viewers have more choices and more ways to access series than ever before, but the reasons we give them our attention may not be so different after all. Gitlin maintains that we spend so much time engaging media not for information but for “satisfaction, the feeling of feelings” (5–6). Stories tell us who we are and how we fit into the rest of the world, a world partially constructed by those same stories. We believe the result is not mere stimulation but—intended or not—inculcation from the repetition of specific patterns of representation across time and, in some cases, across media.

Our purpose here is to look critically at patterns of representation of teachers. These are patterns that many people “know” and tacitly accept without considering carefully and often without making connections among these television shows, relevant historical topics, and ideologies. Visual texts with moving images have become the dominant textual forms of contemporary global culture, a condition that was true ten years ago and that has been compounded by the explosion of social media. Liberal education today must include developing in students the ability to decode and interrogate visual texts and, optimally, learning to produce them as a means of empowerment. Critical viewing is necessary for consumers of popular culture, but the power to produce goes further and is democratizing. We continue in this second edition of our book with what is necessary—viewing critically—and introduce a few concepts here in the first chapter that will serve as useful tools for explicating the television shows that feature important educator characters: intertextuality; competing messages; and, genre and the popular.

Intertextuality

We know that media—and our particular focus on television in the expansive meaning of the term—is ubiquitous but so, very nearly, is schooling. One might point to the growing number of students who are home-schooled and not exposed to professional teachers, but even these students likely have occasion to encounter teachers on television and know about group classrooms if only through stories shared by others and field trips with other homeschoolers. Most of us, in fact, will encounter more teacher characters over time in mediated classrooms than actual teachers in our own classrooms, and there are certain lessons we learn from these many fictional educators. This is also the case for teacher education students (and for actual classroom teachers). In the article “Culture and Pedagogy in Teacher Education,” Ronald Soetaert, Andre Mottart, and Ive Verdoodt discuss exercises they use in a teacher education program to help reveal “literacy myths” in popular texts:

One of the possible ways to make students aware of the politics of representation is to confront them with the ways—for example—in which “teachers” are represented in literature, movies, advertising, television, and so on. In our teacher training course we invite students to collect material from different media in which teachers and literacy practices and events are represented. (163)

Others, have written about their choices to use popular teacher films in teacher education programs for similar reasons, including: Dierdre Glenn Paul; Raúl Alberto Mora; Jill Ewing Flynn; and Jacqueline Bach and Susan D. Weinstein. Scholars Christian Z. Goering and Shelbie Witte show media texts (such as the 2002 film *Blue Car*) to teacher candidates to introduce issues of educator misconduct and give students practical examples of “grooming” behaviors to help them keep a protective eye on future colleagues. While Henry Giroux is framing an argument about the value of studying films when he notes that their “popularity and widespread appeal” are precisely what “warrants an extended analysis” (147), we believe that premise applies equally to television for the same reasons and that these texts may merit even more consideration because of the accessibility of television. We see media and culture as indistinct constructs swirling together and sometimes merging as we, individually and collectively, draw on the narratives we encounter as “scripts” that are filled with both limitations and possibilities for our lives, scripts that provide patterns we draw upon in creating our identities and worldviews.

Viewing media is an active process, a reading of the visual text. Media texts never exist separate from contexts, including a reader’s own lived experience, and that lived experience is similarly informed by many other media texts and personal

narratives. The texts under consideration here, television series featuring educators, are incorporated into the reader's everyday life at the same time the reader's everyday life becomes part of the construction of the text. John Fiske writes in *Understanding Popular Culture*:

Because of their incompleteness, all popular texts have leaky boundaries; they flow into each other, they flow into everyday life. Distinctions among texts are as invalid as the distinctions between text and life. Popular culture can be studied only intertextually, for it exists only in this intertextual circulation. The interrelationships between primary and secondary texts cross all boundaries between them; equally, those between tertiary and other texts cross the boundaries between text and life. (126)

To begin to understand ourselves, we must look at the stories that make us who we are and consider the implications of those leaky boundaries.

Competing Messages

The critical tools we will use to contextualize television programs featuring teacher characters are not new to this process. We owe intellectual debts to the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, researchers at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham in the 1960s and 1970s, feminist media scholars, historiographers, and practitioners of cultural studies, especially Stuart Hall, John Fiske, and Douglas Kellner. Their work encourages a multi-layered questioning of media texts³ within a larger cultural context. This is what we want to do, all the while realizing that our critique may lead to more questions than it answers because meaning in media is dynamic and not particular across time or among readers. The most important point here is to generate an understanding that media texts do not have singular and consistent meanings but can be read critically to encourage a fuller understanding of the competing messages readers can uncover. An example of this type of textual analysis can be found in the examination of the sitcom *Our Miss Brooks* in Chapter One. While critics and scholars can argue over preferred readings and interpretations of mass media texts such as television shows and films—and there is an important place for discourses that promote persuasive readings—the fact is that interpretations and meanings of texts will never be monolithic; there can never be a consensus reading because the lived experiences of viewers (including the training and practice of the readers) will never be completely uniform. Far from making this a discouraging condition, the dynamic and ubiquitous status of media makes its consideration crucial to understanding connections media share with the larger culture. The more time viewers spend with mass media texts, the more important it is for them to begin to

question the patterns of representation they see in moving images, to think about the systems that create those images, and to look for links among those images and other sites in their lived experience, including pockets of resistance to dominant depictions.

Genre and the Popular

Although there is no clear consensus among scholars about whether or not genres actually exist let alone what constitutes them, we believe the Good Teacher texts exhibit distinct and identifiable characteristics, or conventions, and that these patterns constitute agency and are significant because they are replicated over time and seen by viewers repeatedly.⁴ We are looking for connections between this group of television shows and larger cultural and political concerns. Scholars such as Jane Feuer have noted some usefulness but also some limits of genres in television studies because the medium has a “greater tendency to recombine across genre lines” than film or literature (158). Yet, television genres are more than a recognition of categories of style and content, even when those categories become fluid. Jeremy G. Butler notes that some scholars argue television programs “operate as modern-day rituals that reinforce certain values and social beliefs” (375). The formal and structural concerns of earlier scholars are of interest to us here only in the sense that they may help deepen our textual readings as we look beyond this genre of media texts to a larger social context. Our thinking on this question of genre is much closer to Jason Mittell’s in “A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory.” He writes, “The goal of most cultural media scholarship is not to understand the media in and of themselves, but rather to look at the workings of media as a component of social contexts and power relations” (178). If our interest in genre studies is qualified, our enthusiasm for taking popular forms seriously is unbridled.

In the introduction to the 2003 edition of *Reading Television*, John Fiske and John Hartley make a case for the importance of television studies: “It seeks to make the tacit, implicit knowledge that everyone has as part of the audience, and their general curiosity about contemporary media, into explicit, formal knowledge” (xiv). Allen cites the anthropological tradition of taking something familiar and making it “strange” so that a situation or condition can be considered from a new perspective and suggests the importance of making television strange to encourage new insights into the medium and its cultural influence (3). This is what we propose to do with *Teacher TV*: elicit a wider understanding of links among history, culture, education, media, and how these sites influence the construction of various identities.

Why Teachers?

How we characterize teachers directly reflects the collective opinion about the larger enterprise of formal education. In the last 25 years, academic conferences, papers, and books analyzing the depiction of teachers in popular culture have appeared in a steady stream. The work reflects different traditions and approaches from the sociological (e.g. Robert C. Bulman's *Hollywood Goes to High School: Cinema, Schools, and American Culture*) to the predominantly psychological (e.g. Jo Keroes's *Tales Out of School: Gender, Longing, and the Teacher in Fiction and Film*) to the autoethnographic (e.g. Dierdre Glenn Paul's "The Blackboard Jungle: Critically Interrogating Hollywood's Vision of the Urban Classroom") to critical pedagogy and cultural studies (e.g. Henry A. Giroux's *Breaking in to the Movies: Film and the Culture of Politics*). Most of these studies have focused on teachers in the movies, but the relevance of studying teacher characters certainly transcends any one medium. Furthermore, the overarching themes expressed by these scholars provide a useful background for some of the themes and contexts addressed in this book.

In this section, we'll take a brief look at the most general category of representation for teacher characters then provide a quick overview of the literature. Several scholars have noted the tendency of Hollywood films to depict classroom teachers in a heroic light. Adam Farhi focuses on the "superteacher myth" (157); Rob Edelman dichotomizes idealized teachers into two camps, the "single-mindedly devoted teachers" and the cynics who "persist despite frustration and heartbreak" (28); and William Ayers, who bases his essay on five films, reduces teachers in the movies to "slugs" and "saints" (201). *American Education in Popular Media: From the Blackboard to the Silver Screen*, edited by Sevan G. Terzian and Patrick A. Ryan, goes further than most other works in terms of looking beyond the teacher (and occasional administrator) to devote about half of the book to representations of students in chapters that address gender, juvenile delinquency, and adult education.

Lisa Weems links popular culture narratives with lived experiences of teachers and educational policy and identifies three dominant images of substitute teachers in films and television programs. Yet, Weems identifies only four examples—one film and three TV shows—of media texts to inform her analysis. She argues that "unpacking these representations with regards to the images and assumptions about teaching that they present might shed insight into the contemporary disjunction in models of teaching that abound in popular culture, classroom practice, and institutional reform" (264), but she does not do enough herself to unpack those very representations. Similarly, Charles A. Duncan, Joe Nolan, and Ralph Wood start an investigation of the negative portrayals of physical education

teachers and identify some general thematic patterns that emerge with these characters meriting further study, but most of them are reductive in their construction of categorization schemes and do not allow for competing messages in the media texts they consider. Films, like television series, have layers of meaning that include contradictions, even in the stories that seem the most simplistic.

Giroux has written extensively about the links between education and popular culture. His book *Breaking in to the Movies: Film and the Culture of Politics* is autobiographical in relating his experience of films from multiple perspectives over time—as a child who loves the movies, as a young high school teacher showing documentaries in class, and as an academic who writes about them as a “public pedagogy” (1–6). He writes, “Films do more than entertain, they offer up subject positions, mobilize desires, influence us unconsciously, and help to construct the landscape of American culture” (2). While his passion for movies has not wavered, the context in which he sees them has expanded over time.

In his book *Hollywood Films About Schools: Where Race, Politics, and Education Intersect*, Ronald E. Chennault looks primarily at films that focus on teachers and principals that were released between 1980 and 2000. Like others writing about race and representation in teacher movies, Chennault is particularly interested in *Dangerous Minds* (1995), which he cites for its “regressive and demeaning” racial representations (118) and its attempts to “reestablish white supremacy” as part of the natural order of things (121). Robert Lowe also identifies *Dangerous Minds* as a “blatantly racist film” (212), and Giroux writes that the film “attempts to represent ‘whiteness’ as the archetype of rationality, authority, and cultural standards” (46). In her book *Tales Out of School: Gender, Longing, and the Teacher in Fiction and Film*, Jo Keroes writes primarily about sexuality, but she also notes that “teacher narratives have trouble with race” (71). Keroes does an excellent job detailing two of the common problems:

When the teacher belongs to a minority group, he must, despite his “difference,” uphold conventional mainstream values; when the students are members of minorities, they appear to represent the liberal vision of an oppressed group waiting to be rescued, usually by a white teacher-knight, while they remind us of the fears such groups engender. They must be tamed. (71)

Television depictions of race in the classroom were initially nonexistent, then careful, and now sometimes surprisingly complex. It is, perhaps, intuitive to believe that films would offer a more progressive set of depictions than television, but the lower production costs of some series compared to major motion pictures and, more importantly, the episodic nature of the television narrative without the constraint of a self-contained narrative arc limited to roughly two hours of running



Figure 1.1. Michelle Pfeiffer as Louanne Johnson in *Dangerous Minds* (1995). Smith, John N., dir. *Dangerous Minds*. [Burbank, CA]: Hollywood Pictures, 1995. DVD.

time creates a set of possibilities for television and cable series that is not shared by commercial Hollywood films.

In “Indecent Proposals: Teachers in the Movies,” Dale M. Bauer argues that teaching—as depicted once in the movies as a “profound calling”—has become a “sexual proposition” (302), but the intriguing critique given to some films in the essay does not develop overarching themes needed for a convincing meta-analysis of the genre. Keroes provides a more expansive and compelling view. With an overarching argument that “teacher texts are fundamentally about love” (66), she argues that as a microcosm of the larger culture, the classroom—with the teacher as an authority figure—presents gender and power relations and expresses “a connection between teaching and sexual politics” (9). Later Keroes’s argument, based on typical narrative patterns in teacher films, is developed further:

When the teacher is male, he brings the force of public masculine power and all that it entails into the relatively confined psychic and social space of the classroom, where it may be subject to potential challenges but is almost always reconfirmed. When the teacher is a woman, she generates conflict between unleashed maternal (female) power and the alluring solace of domestic space. (15)

Of course, as Keroes notes, men regularly “succumb to the erotic temptations teaching affords” (15) while the “erotic impulses of women teachers are usually suppressed, disguised, or demonized” (16). As with representations of race and

teaching, television continues to offer a wider range of acceptable expressions of sexuality for women teachers than cinematic depictions. During the last two decades, teacher characters on TV who misbehave sexually include women as well as men. Unfortunately, sexual misbehavior for these characters has become a pervasive trope in recent years that constitutes a downward spiral for TV teachers. These representations reinforce negative perceptions about public schools and teaching that influence policy and place public education in jeopardy.

While the bulk of scholarly writing about representations of teacher characters in popular culture has focused on film, some interesting and surprising developments have been taking place on television.⁵ The answer to the question “Why Teachers?” posed at the beginning of this section relates to the recent rush of interest in academics writing about teachers in popular culture. It is at least partly due to the fact that the writers themselves are often teachers. The ruptures between what happens in our own classrooms and those depicted in films and television programs are sometimes glaring but also revealing. Understanding the patterns perpetuated in popular culture is an important enterprise for teachers and students alike because of the roles film and television play in establishing our expectations and shaping our identities. Before turning our attention to television for the remainder of the book, however, it is useful to look at one more analysis of teacher characters in films and to make connections between how Hollywood has constructed the celebrated Good Teacher character in the movies and how that character has emerged on television.

The Hollywood Model

In Mary M. Dalton’s *The Hollywood Curriculum: Teachers in the Movies*, a study of over 230 popular films released in the United States over a period of 85 years (fourth edition), distinct patterns of representation for teachers and principals emerge. Because virtually all of the teacher characters in starring roles on television fell into the Good Teacher category of representation until recently, it is useful to take a look at the “The Hollywood Model” of the good teacher outlined in *The Hollywood Curriculum* to draw parallels, and identify divergences, in portrayals of educators. Movie depictions of dedicated (and even heroic) teachers have been remarkably consistent over time to the degree that the patterns and conventions suggest a genre of Good Teacher movies. Although there are earlier films, *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* (1939) is a good example of the primitive cycle of the Good Teacher movie when the conventions of the genre are first taking shape. *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) codifies the conventions of the form and launches the classical cycle of these films. As the genre matures, it spawns the parody *High School High*

(1996) that reinforces the readily identifiable conventions of the genre by spoofing them (parodic cycle). The final generic cycle to emerge is revisionism. Although there have been revisionist elements in some Good Teacher movies over time, the boldest revisionist films have emerged more recently: *Election* (1999), *Half Nelson* (2006), *Detachment* (2011), *Whiplash* (2014), and *Kindergarten Teacher* (2018).

Television representations of teachers, beginning in the early 1950s, follow The Hollywood Model closely for several decades before developing, perhaps surprisingly, a more progressive and expansive portrayal of Good Teachers, especially with regard to women teachers and gay teachers beginning in the 1990s, which is before cinema's revisionist teachers emerge onscreen. Although genres are more problematic constructions for television than for film, a topic to be addressed later, most of the conventional traits given to Good Teachers in the movies are transferred, at least in some degree, to teachers on television. The defining characteristics of cinema's Good Teachers are as follows: they are outsiders of one type or another; they become involved with their students on a personal level; they learn important lessons from their students; they often have problems with administrators; they personalize the curriculum; and, many of them have a ready sense of humor, especially the males.

Outsider

Invariably, good teachers in the movies are positioned as outsiders of one sort or another in their schools, either by virtue of their social class, race or ethnicity, nationality, political ideology, sexual orientation, the fact that they have trained for a profession other than teaching, or some combination of these traits. There are compelling reasons for screenwriters to construct their characters this way (even in the popular teacher biopics, which are based on or inspired by events in real teachers' lives or memoirs⁶). Hollywood films are rife with iconic individualist characters who stand up to authority and fight the good fight—from rugged cowboys to hard-boiled reporters to mysterious detectives to heroic teachers. Casting these stock types as outsiders up against the oppressive system raises the stakes by ratcheting up the narrative conflicts and also engages viewers in the drama.

Because of the episodic nature of television series, teachers on TV are differentiated from their peers in one way or another, and certainly elevated by their starring status when they are eponymous characters or part of a featured cohort, but their outsider status is tempered if it is left intact. Network television has a tendency to smooth out some of the rough edges in character and story to appeal to the broadest possible audience, and there were guidelines⁷ in place that limited just how far television could go, even in primetime, to explore controversial topics and present complex characters if that complexity suggested a deviation from the perceived “norm.” For most of its short history, television has made safe programming

choices, and broadcast stations have shown little resistance to FCC programming rules.⁸ It is fair to say that Good Teachers on television have been positioned as outsiders in subtle ways that are discernible either by deep readings of television series that encourage alternate interpretations—readings “against the grain”—or distinguished by making these featured teachers “more” and “better” than their colleagues. For example, Miss Brooks’s (Eve Arden) acerbic wit is indelible on *Our Miss Brooks* (CBS 1952–56), Gabe Kotter (Gabe Kaplan) is cooler and funnier than anyone else on *Welcome Back, Kotter* (ABC 1975–79), and Mr. Cooper (Mark Curry) was a professional basketball player before becoming a teacher on *Hangin’ With Mr. Cooper* (ABC 1992–97). They do not have the outsider status that is conferred on teachers in the movies because that dramatic tension could not be sustained easily or credibly on episodic television over a long period of time.

Involved with Students

The second characteristic of the Good Teacher in The Hollywood Model is also evident in many of the television series we studied, especially the sitcoms. These good teachers are frequently more closely aligned with their students than with anyone else in the school, which links them to young people rather than their peers. Because of the dramatic possibilities presented by films, this alliance between teacher and student often involves some incarnation of “breaking the rules” in the service of justice or student empowerment, and the types of activities range from relatively benign to quite serious. A typical manifestation of this story element is the teacher’s repeated attempts to connect with the most difficult or distant student in the class, a connection that is finally forged either in the climax or resolution of the film. While not all Good Teachers fit this paradigm—after all, Professor Kingsfield (John Houseman) in *The Paper Chase* (CBS 1978, Showtime 1983–86) is a distant taskmaster who emerges as a gruff mentor rather than a friend—it is easy to recall other teachers and counselors who do from laidback, aging hippie Charlie Moore (Howard Hesseman) on *Head of the Class* (ABC 1986–91) to gay English teacher Richard Katimski (Jeff Perry) on *My So-Called Life* (ABC 1994–95) to conscientious counselor Tami Taylor (Connie Britton) on *Friday Night Lights* (NBC 2006–11).

Learns from Students

One generic convention of the Good Teacher movie is that the teacher must become the student. At least once over the course of these films, the Good Teacher makes some sort of breakthrough in reaching the most difficult or elusive student or in some other way learns a lesson that keeps her or him going in order to tackle



Figure 1.2. Connie Britton as Tami Taylor in *Friday Night Lights* (NBC 2006–11). Berg, Peter, creator and writer. DVD. Reiner, Jeffrey, dir., Jason Katims, writer. Season 3, episode 1, “I Knew You When.” Aired January 16, 2009. [Universal City, CA]: Universal, 2011. DVD.

another obstacle and teach another day. Usually, the lessons these teachers learn could be reframed as prosaic (but perhaps comforting) platitudes, something like the following: “Quitters never win, and winners never quit.” The narrative structure of television being what it is, there are many more opportunities over the course of a season for TV teachers to learn from students, and often they do. Chet Kincaid (Bill Cosby) has his eyes opened about discrimination in an episode of *The Bill Cosby Show* (NBC 1969–71), Edna Garrett (Charlotte Rae) learns to stand up for what she believes in on *The Facts of Life* (NBC 1979–88), and Gabe Kotter discovers that his students learn because they feel accepted and secure in his classroom in *Welcome Back, Kotter*. The importance of this narrative device is not limited to the actual lessons that the Good Teachers learn from students, but the greater significance is the promotion of a progressive idea of reciprocal education in which the authority figures—the teachers—do not possess all of the knowledge and the power that goes along with deciding what constitutes knowledge and how it will be disseminated.

Problems with Administrators

Their outsider status contributes to the problems teachers in the movies have with administrators, and there is usually a storyline in these films related to their

conflicts. These administrators, who are often department chairs jealous of the new teacher, range from outright villains dripping with malicious intent to uninterested paper pushers who don't want to be bothered to former idealists who are just too beaten down to care much anymore. Their role in these films is to provide one more obstacle for the Good Teacher to overcome to make a positive difference in their students' lives. Notably, Good Teachers usually win a symbolic but hollow victory in teacher movies, and the feel-good effect of that victory masks the fact that the system never really changes in these movies. Viewers have the pleasure of watching progressive teachers go up against the system and the dubious comfort of stability when the status quo is intact at the end of the film. Television shows have a bounty of administrators, mostly principals and vice principals, who are less than enthusiastic and encouraging. In his survey of thirty-five television programs and films from 1950 to 1996, Jeffrey Glanz identifies three patterns of representation of principals: first, an authoritarian principal with an autocratic management style; second, the principal-as-bureaucrat, who puts paper above people; and third, the principal-as-numbskull, whose dimness is exaggerated (4–5). It is easy to see how these three dominant representations would put television principals in conflict with dedicated teachers. How could it be otherwise? In a footnote, Jeffrey Glanz observes that not all administrators are portrayed negatively but argues that even good principals like Mr. Kaufman (Michael Constantine) “when portrayed positively in shows such as *Room 222* (ABC 1969–74), grapple with bureaucratic and autocratic tendencies” (23). His major example of the principal-as-numbskull is Mr. Woodman (John Sylvester White), the often-maligned character on *Welcome Back, Kotter*, who is a memorable object of ridicule in virtually every episode.

Personalizes the Curriculum

Teachers in the movies, when they are the protagonists, are shown in the classroom actually teaching more than their television counterparts because the films are usually plotted around conflicts related to the teaching process while the television programs usually feature a series of storylines focused on various interpersonal situations. When teachers in the movies personalize the curriculum to meet everyday needs in their students' lives, pedagogical strategies are employed to “reach” students or otherwise engage them in learning with the goal of making the experience transformative. In television, the curriculum is usually personalized as a plot device or a punchline. In an episode of *Mister Peepers* (NBC 1952–55), for example, Robinson (Wally Cox) invites his students to bring their pets to science class, and he is forced to try to hide a cow when the superintendent decides to make an unannounced inspection of the school that day. This is a far cry from James Leeds (William Hurt) using the vibrations of rock music to encourage his