Three Characters and Me(me): Positioning Popular Culture to Unpack Emerging Teacher Identity

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ABSTRACT

In this article we narrate an instructional practice we implemented in two different teacher education courses that facilitated conversations about teacher identity through the use of fictional characters who were educators. This practice served two purposes in our course work: firstly, this activity presents students with an opportunity to demonstrate their media interests and career goals; secondly, this activity provides a quick, baseline assessment of how aspiring teachers view their profession and future practice. We detail student responses to this activity and consider how their choices of fictional educators fit into broader patterns we see in popular culture, specifically depictions of teachers within film and television. While our paper specifically centers teachers, there is significant possibility for this activity to be used in any professional-identity training program (e.g., nursing and medicine, social work and counseling, and law). We close the paper with additional questions for future lines of scholarly inquiry into teacher identity and media representation.

Keywords: teacher identity, memes, television shows, practice-based identity, identity models

A slew of television shows in recent years have turned their attention to the lives of educators: Mr. Ajayi in Netflix's *Heartstoppers*, Mr. Wilson in Disney+'s *Ms. Marvel* series, and Ms. MacElroy in CBS' *Young Sheldon*, among others. Yet, Quinta Brunson's *Abbott Elementary* stands out by being the one show whose entire main cast comprises public school educators. Indeed, *Abbott Elementary* has been lauded and has garnered an expansive viewership; one critic argued that the show represents a "new model for network-sitcom success" (Adalian, 2022), while one political activist praised the fictional school for fulfilling the "promise of schools without cops" (Ettah, 2022). As former English teachers and current teacher educators, we're thrilled to see an emerging pop culture behemoth illustrate the challenges and beauties of public education in a nuanced, thoughtful manner. Equally exciting is the show's cast, which balances new teachers learning the sweet spot between idealism and pragmatism alongside veteran teachers who are equally poised and self-reflective. Each week millions of viewers in the United States see these teachers on screen enact pedagogies of care, provide compassionate collegiality, and offer critical critiques of policies that create the inequalities plaguing too many public schools. The popularity of the show combined with our roles preparing future teachers made us wonder: What other fictional educators in popular culture are aspiring teachers looking to as models? And what might those fictional educators reveal about how future teachers plan to teach their own students?

In this paper we detail how we created an assignment that prompted students to reflect on those very questions, and on their own emergent identities as future educators. In doing so, we offer other professional educators a classroom activity that services two purposes: first, this activity presents students with an opportunity to demonstrate their media interests and career goals; second, the activity also provides a quick baseline assessment of how aspiring teachers view their profession and future practice. This work is informed by the conceptualization of identities-in-practice (e.g., Wenger-Traynor, 2015), or how identities are enacted within the context of a professional activity. It is an activity that illuminates the preconceived perspectives of a professional identity that students bring to their pre-professional training. While this activity specifically centers on teachers, there is significant possibility for it to be used in any professional-identity training program (e.g., nursing and medicine, social work and counseling, and law).

The curricular decisions we outline in this article have been influenced by scholars of teacher representation on screens, both big and small. Indeed, significant research has attended to teacher representations on television and film, including pedagogical implications of such representations in the past three decades (Alsup, 2019; Beyerbach, 2005; Burbach & Figgins, 1993; Dahlgren, 2017; Dalton, 2013, 2017; Dalton & Linder, 2008; Dalton & Linder, 2017; Marcus & Stoddard, 2007; McLaren & Leonardo, 1998; Raimo et al., 2002; Trier, 2001; Weber & Mitchell, 1995). For instance, Shoffner (2016) found three archetypes for teachers spanning several eras in popular media: The savior who acts like a messiah for students and their families; the scapegoat who is underpaid and blamed for society's ills by external forces; and the schoolmarm who shows no interest in students' lives, opinions, and interests. We wondered how this triumvirate of fictional pedagogues would be reflected in our students' analysis of self-selected fictional teachers. Additionally, we wondered how we could prompt semester-long discussions about teaching and teacher identities with our students using an analysis of fictional teachers as our starting point. We detail that journey in the following sections after establishing who we are and how popular culture has informed our own teaching practices.

WHO WE ARE

We are both white, cisgender queer educators from the south who are currently located in the northeast. Prior to our roles in academia, we both taught public secondary English language arts in the American south. Our time teaching English, like our current work in teacher education, was heavily influenced by scholars who sought to bridge a critical analysis of popular culture with a secondary English language arts curriculum

(Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005; Morrell, 2002, 2014). As scholars and teachers, we are interested in how teacher identity is developed, revised, and nurtured throughout educators' trajectories.

TEACHER IDENTITY

Teacher identity is a complex and nebulous construct. As teachers are specifically situated within the socially-constructed practice of teaching, their identities are highly contextualized within the act of teaching and are subject to evolution, narrativization, and change. Multiple definitions of teacher identity contain the same core components: recognition of identity's dynamic nature, the impact of socio-cultural and political context on teacher identity, and a focus on identity development through narrative (Alsup, 2006; Alsup, 2019; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Understanding teacher identity involves considering identity as situated within a practice— in this case, teaching— with the understanding that culture, the profession, and the individual all evolve, with teacher identity often evolving in turn.

However, for those not contextualized within the current world of teaching, popular narratives about teachers shape the public's perception of teacher identity. For students training to be teachers— preservice teachers— the depiction of teacher identity in popular media bears significant implications for how these students conceptualize their future profession. Preservice teachers come to the teaching profession having experienced school from the perspective of a student, complete with identity models, narratives, and ideologies around school. During her exploration of the identity discourses of millennial teachers, Alsup (2019) identified several cultural narratives around teaching replicated in media:

> Media images of teachers have likewise vacillated between the binary poles symbolized either by the male schoolmaster and the female mother or the previously mentioned slacker versus the sacrificial martyr. Movies like *Stand and Deliver* and American History X depict the teacher as disciplinarian and purveyor of tough love against incredible odds; films like Dead Poets Society and Freedom Writers envision the teacher as heroic nurturer, often at odds with the more discipline-minded administration. When teachers are characters… they are often played as dimwitted, old-fashioned, unreasonable, ridiculous, and, at the very least, irrelevant… Images of teachers are ubiquitous in our society, and for the most part these images exist at binary poles, and often appear as distinct choices for the preservice teacher. (p. 38)

We, the authors, are acutely aware of the narratives about teaching that our preservice teachers— like us before them— bring to the classroom. These narratives are often racialized, gendered, and classed; Alsup (2019) describes the common classroom model of a school teacher as "overwhelmingly white, young, female, middle-class, poorly-paid, mother figures" (p. 37). As teacher educators, we are committed to challenging these hegemonic narratives about the teaching profession. However, challenging these perspectives necessitates understanding what emergent conceptions these students have about teacher identity.

TEACHER IDENTITY AND MEDIA ASSIGNMENT

The Assignment

We began brainstorming this assignment the summer before the fall semester. As avid lovers of pop culture, we wanted to bridge the gap between the screen and the classroom. We were also seeking an engaging way to invite students to reflect on their own understanding of how they viewed teachers in popular media. Our hope was that fictional teachers could serve as a guide to the types of pedagogies we hope our students will enact as classroom teachers. In fact, Boche (2016) contends that fictional teachers can support preservice teachers in developing quality teaching practices such as "relationships, care engagement, democracy and

teaching the whole child" (p. 87). Inspired by the popular "Describe yourself in three fictional characters" meme (Brad, 2019) that populated social media feeds almost a decade ago, we began to tweak the structure of the meme to align with our course goals. We introduced and assigned the assignment in the first week of the fall semester. Image 1 features the example we provided for our students as well as its origin story.

Image 1:

Teacher Identity and Media Assignment Handout

"My Teacher Identity" in 3 Characters from Film/TV Media

Some time ago, a meme challenge circulated that asked participants to describe themselves using three characters from media. A couple of examples are provided below!

As a way for us to get to know each other, let's remix this assignment into something related to teaching.

I'd love for you to describe <u>the teacher you are or hope to become</u> using 2-3 fictional characters from media. These characters might be classroom teachers themselves, or they might be educators in a non-traditional fashion!

We modeled the assignment and its purpose to our students in class. Modeling the assignment using examples from our own lives served dual purposes. First, it provided students with a guide on how they could write and analyze their own choices. This point was especially important since some students were unfamiliar with writing about popular culture in the academic setting of a college classroom. Additionally, we used our model to share our own beliefs in pedagogy, our own journeys as educators, and our relationship to power and identity and how these shape the contours of K-12 schooling. For instance, Cody in the example provided below used the character of Marco from the popular and long-running Canadian television show *Degrassi: The Next Generation to share his experiences as an out queer high school teacher. We provide pictures of our examples we shared with students in Images 2 and 3 below.*

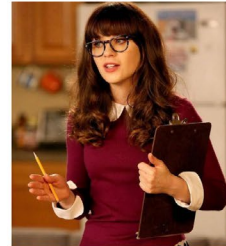**Image 2:**

Gillian's Teacher Identity and Media Example

Author 1

Ms. Frizzle (now Dr. Frizzle!)
The Magic School Bus

"Take chances! Make mistakes!
Get messy!"

Mary Poppins
Mary Poppins

"In every job that must be
done, there is an element of
fun. You find the fun, and snap,
the job's a game!"

Jessica Day
New Girl

"I have touched glitter in the
last 24 hours! And that doesn't
mean I'm not smart and tough
and strong."

Gillian contextualized her exemplar assignment with the following text:

> As a teacher, I believe in authenticity, hands-on learning, and a version of organized chaos. All three of my teachers have a version of organized chaos in the way they teach, from outlandish field trips to magical encounters to interpersonal shenanigans. But all three teachers are unabashedly passionate—and flexible!—about their teaching. There are aspects of learning that are important but mundane, and one of my passions is helping students see their own lives in a new way. Maybe that's a deep dive into an idea, like Ms. Frizzle would do, or maybe it's gamifying learning and developing systems for organization like Mary Poppins. But both Ms. Frizzle and Mary Poppins are almost mythological figures! They're not exactly human to the kids they work with. Jessica Day, on the other hand, is dedicated to her students *and* deeply human at the same time. Her passion and foibles remind me that, like me, teachers are just people trying to figure it all out.

Image 3:

Cody's Teacher Identity and Media Example

Marco from *Degrassi: The
Next Generation*

Janine and Jacob from
Abbott Elementary

Peter Parker from the
Spider-Man series

Cody explained his decisions to students with the following writeup:

> As a teacher, I believe in building relationships, working to meet students where they are while expanding their abilities, and trying to make positive change in the world through my classroom. All three teacher examples embody these beliefs in one way or another. We only see Marco's time as a student teacher in *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, and it's an experience I related to as a young teacher. Marco wants to be liked by his students and is diligent in forming relationships as a core part of his classroom management. While admirable and good practice, he does not yet pair relationship-building with clear boundaries and guidelines. Watching him learn to implement his beliefs into practice reflected my own experiences (and still does). Lately, I've come to believe that every teacher is a combination of two *Abbott Elementary* characters and mine are Janine and Jacob. The former for her dedication and optimism in the face of mass inequities and the latter for his well-meaning, always growing but sometimes clueless white guy approach to social justice in schools. The pragmatism Janine develops throughout her early teaching career is never soiled by cynicism as she remains steadfast in her belief for a better world for her students. I aspire to balance the realism and hope about K-12 education that Janine embodies in the show. Finally, Peter Park is a caring and kind teacher, who often finds a hard time balancing work and life. Like the other teachers mentioned, he works hard to know his students as people beyond their test scores and abilities in his class. Across all three examples, I see teachers who are working to balance what they believe is right with the structures of the world they live in.

Students were then tasked with completing their own three fictional teachers the following week. We provided an elastic definition of teacher to include professors and other educators who teach outside of traditional educational institutions. This wide definition was important as it allowed students to mine their popular culture habits for inspiration and insight into their own views of teachers and teaching. We also stressed the importance of expanding genres to move beyond realistic fiction. While examples from a popular show like *Boy Meets World* could provide insight, so too could more fantastical series like *X-Men* and *The Magic School Bus*. Students were encouraged to think about teachers based on their pedagogies, relationships with students, and identity markers that they found relevant to their own lives. Students shared their teachers with peers the following week in class, which we detail in more depth in the succeeding section.

NOTES FROM OUR CLASSROOMS

In this section we share insights from our implementation of the assignment as well as patterns we noticed from across both classes. Importantly, we are not positioning this section as an empirical study. Rather, we are providing insights and vignettes into the implementation of this assignment. Our goal is to illustrate how this assignment worked in our classrooms and what types of conversations were prompted due to the work. Ultimately, we believe the excerpts from our classrooms demonstrate the value of using pop culture to unpack aspiring teachers' attitudes and beliefs about pedagogy and their future classrooms.

We are both teacher education faculty within the State University of New York system at two different institutions, and we both are tasked primarily with working with aspiring teachers. All the students in our classes are preservice teachers, which means they are completing a program that will lead to teacher certification in our state. Gillian's students (23) are completing certification to teach elementary students while Cody's students (18) are completing certification to teach secondary English language arts. This split in teacher trajectory means that the focus of our two classes differ. That said, our courses are among the first teacher education courses that students enroll in during their programs, thus explicitly naming and unpacking

ideas of teacher identity is valuable as these students still have malleable and transitional depictions of what their future teacher identity may or may not look like. Our teacher education student body mirrors that of the United States teaching force: overwhelmingly white and cisgender women (Will, 2020). Both classes we implemented this assignment in did have Black and Asian American cisgender students and non-cisgender white students. However, the majority of the class composition echoed what we see in national trends.

Gillian's Classroom Vignette

I (Gillian) introduced this assignment during the first session of "Teaching Elementary School Reading and Language Arts": a literacy course preparing elementary education majors to teach literacy in the elementary classroom. All students are in their senior year of college, and are preparing to move into their student teaching experience. After opening the class with a discussion about experiences with reading both inside and outside of school, I presented students with my model and the directions. Verbally, I explained my slide to students, and contextualized the activity by expressing the personal belief that "you can learn a lot about your own views on teaching and education by thinking about depictions of teachers in the media." I encouraged students to think flexibly about teaching by indicating that they could also consider non-traditional instructors, such as coaches or mentors. I shared my example with particular attention to how Miss Frizzle and Mary Poppins worked in tandem— an approach I jokingly characterized as "structured, purposeful chaos." I used the Jessica Day example to highlight teachers' identity both in and out of school— as well as to introduce larger social narratives around gender performance, race performance, and perceptions of strength in the classroom. The larger conversation was framed around the notion of practice-based identities: what teachers know, what they do, and who they are (Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

Before the second day of class, students submitted their slides, and during this second class meeting, they shared their teacher identity models in small groups. Upon sharing, they were challenged to identify patterns they noticed within their small groups. During the first round of sharing, I circulated the room and listened to how students conceptualized their choices and how their group mates responded to each selection. Then, as a whole group, we discussed the patterns we noted across student responses. Our discussion focused on teachers as role models for young children, often during their first schooling experiences. The intention of this discussion was that students would begin to recognize stereotypes and assumptions about the teaching profession that impact their positionality as early-career teachers. Many students referenced a culture of care and warmth in their selections; for example, Miss Honey from *Matilda* was referenced repeatedly. Students often mentioned that they selected models based on the emotional impact these teachers had on their students: for example, Will Schuster from *Glee* was referenced as a dedicated leader, and teachers like Mr. Feeny from *Boy Meets World* and Ms. Howard from *Abbott Elementary* were referenced as wise, patient role models. During the discussion, I jotted down some notes on large patterns to share with Cody.

Cody's Classroom Vignette

I (Cody) presented this assignment during the first week of my English language arts methods course entitled, "Teaching Middle School English Inclusively." All students were enrolled in a program that prepared them to teach English language arts Grades 6-12. The course was a mix of undergraduate (13) and graduate (5) students seeking initial certification in New York state. Some of the 18 students knew each other from prior classes, but many did not. I introduced the assignment by discussing the importance of seeing popular culture and multimedia as important textures in a well-rounded, engaging and relevant English curriculum for secondary students. I also briefly shared how I incorporated popular culture into my high school classroom before explaining that a major theme throughout the semester would be broadening our definition of "text" to include material beyond print texts, which echoes a cultural studies approach to secondary English language arts (Webb, 2014). In that sense, I modeled what I was advocating for: teaching popular culture in the contexts

of English language arts. Then, I shared my examples, specifically focusing on the character Marco from the popular Canadian television show *Degrassi: The Next Generation*. Marco was the focus of my piece because I wanted to stress the importance of having openly queer educators for LGBTQ students. Again, the goal was to plant another seed that would be watered throughout the semester: creating affirming spaces for students who have historically been maligned and marginalized within schools and in their classrooms.

The students submitted their own versions of the assignment before the following class, in which we shared our writings in small groups within the class. I posed the following guiding questions for discussions after the students had shared their characters: What trends do you notice across your educators? What identities seem most prominent? What characteristics are shared across different students' selections? These questions prompted a whole class discussion in which students noted the frequent appearance of zeitgeist-dominating popular cultural artifacts like the Harry Potter series and *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. The mention of the Harry Potter series subsequently prompted a brief conversation about the author's recorded transphobia, and this allowed us to consider how we engage with texts whose authors we find abhorrent. Many students also pointed out how their peers expanded the definition of "educator" across institutions and beyond traditional K-12 schools. For instance, students noted a few instances of Mrs. Puff from *SpongeBob SquarePants* as an example of a patient, caring educator who never gave up on the titular character. I took notes of students' points in order to share them the following week with Gillian.

Common Identity Models Across Both Classes

Finding commonalities across our two classes is generative for considering what topics and questions we should engage our students in to further their thinking around teaching and becoming teachers. Importantly, as previously noted, this paper is not an empirical study. Yet, our observations do inform our practice. Several common characters that appeared on our students' submissions are fictional teachers who have been the subject of scholarship, including that of critical interrogation. We fold in critical readings of these popular teachers in our commentary in this section to suggest preconceptions we can unpack with our students throughout the semester. For instance, critical interrogations of whiteness, femininity, and niceness must guide our conversations with future teachers about teaching, considering the demographics of our students (Bissonnette, 2016; Daniels, 2021; Pascoe, 2023). In a sense, this assignment acted as a type of pre-assessment to provide valuable information into the construction of future conversations and our courses' curricula.

Some common responses were expected. For instance, John Keating from *Dead Poets Society* was a popular response in our classes, which isn't too surprising given that scholars have identified Robin Williams' character as the first time a fictional teacher on screen has "engendered such strong feelings of professional pride and admiration" (Burbach & Figgins, 1993, p. 65). There is a level of romanticizing English teaching that is embodied in Williams' character: from standing on desks and destroying textbooks to challenging ideas of tradition. Yet, more critical scholars have drawn into contrast the limits of Mr. Keatings' allegedly radical pedagogy, noting that the poetry-loving pedagogue "falls short of politicizing a collective project toward cultural emancipation" (McLaren & Leonardo, 1998, p. 132). Mr. Keating offers an interesting line of questioning for our students regarding the image of the sagacious teacher whose unplanned lessons inspire but never fully embody a clear political critique of power and institutions of immense privilege. Mr. Keatings' bursts of inspirational monologues seem spontaneous, but quality teaching requires planning, reflection, and thoughtfulness (Darling-Hammond, 2012). Mr. Keating is a sage and the classroom is his stage, but the "sage on the stage" model of teaching has fallen out of favor in many schools. Furthermore, Mr. Keating doesn't link the students' predicaments to a broader critique of wealth and whiteness that unequivocally shape the experiences at Welton Academy.

Another frequently-mentioned figure was Miss Honey, particularly as depicted in the 1996 film *Matilda.* Ryan and Grieshaber (2005) describe this depiction as "Caucasian, slim, single, and attractive female

with blonde hair and a sweet voice" (p. 40)-- an interesting corollary to a description of "the average teacher" in Pauline Annin Galvarro's (1945) doctoral dissertation as "single and serious" (p. 1). Miss Honey is sweet yet unassertive, dedicated to learning yet policed by the tyrannical Miss Trunchbull. Miss Honey was the most commonly referenced teacher model among Gillian's preservice elementary teachers, and aligns with archetypes Alsup (2019) characterizes as the "sacrificial martyr" and the "female mother" (p. 38); indeed, Miss Honey is shown as gratefully living in poverty, and adopts one of her students by the end of the film. Students reported being inspired by Miss Honey's care for her students, and the warmth and welcome she brought to her classroom. Miss Honey's position in popular culture has recently undergone a more radical reading with some queer viewers dubbing her the "original lesbian cottagecore queen" (Jewett, 2021) and a "woman who sparked a [queer] generation's sexual awakening" (Rennex, 2020). The sapphic reading of Miss Honey marks an interesting departure from compulsory heterosexuality that entraps many young female teacher characters in other media. Miss Honey as lesbian icon suggests a new queer (at least by some fans) educator that can serve as a model for LGBTQ preservice teachers.

Additionally, several students referenced "hero teachers," often highlighting teachers from narratives of "white saviors". The white savior media narrative centers the "hero teacher": a dedicated passionate white teacher who intends to "save" their (often-Black and Latino) students. Films centering teachers in this role include *Freedom Writers*, *Precious*, *Dangerous Minds*, and *The Blind Side*, and often star inspirational teachers who, by nature of their dedication and sacrifice, motivate and rescue suffering students from their oppressive lives (Hughey, 2010). Most damaging about these narratives is their emphasis that *white* savior teachers are best positioned to "rescue" marginalized or oppressed students, thus continuously centering whiteness. While these narratives may appear uplifting on the surface, Hughey (2010) describes white saviorism in film as…

> validat[ing] a structurally violent and racist educational and legal system, demoniz[ing] youth and lower socioeconomic cultural patterns associated with people of color, and ultimately sanctify[ing] a sole white teacher as a messianic character of biblical proportions. (p. 479)

This depiction of education as comprised of "saviors" severely neglects the structural impacts of schooling as an institution to enact social harm. These sorts of identity models can stimulate critical conversation about educational inequities and structural solutions.

Several students reported an affinity for experienced, calm, expert teachers. It was surprising how many different depictions of teacher expertise arose in this category, ranging from *Harry Potter's* Minerva McGonagall to *Boy Meets World's* Mr. Feeney. A more recent addition to this category includes *Abbott Elementary's* Barbara Howard, who has been teaching for at least 30 years. These teacher veterans are seasoned, but never cynical or bitter; rather, their wisdom is always generously imparted to the students and early-career teachers they encounter. Mrs. Howard does mark a new phase of representation for veteran teachers as she (unlike Professor McGonagall or Mr. Feeney) is shown facing challenges as a more seasoned educator. For instance, in one episode she has trouble accessing a digital repository of teacher training videos. In another episode, Mrs. Howard must interrogate her own beliefs regarding respectability politics to best support a student. Mrs. Howard thus demonstrates to our students (and ourselves) the importance of constant learning and reflection.

Mrs. Howard is also a Black woman educator. She and two newer teachers — Janine and Gregory—have been praised as illustrating the important work Black teachers do for Black students (Moss, 2022). It's notable that most, though certainly not all, of our white students did not discuss race in their selection rationale, even when they selected a fictional educator of color. Addressing race and racism in our courses was already a major component of our work, and the writings on these assignments reinforced our goal to challenge color-evasive approaches to education with our students (Goldin & Khasnabis, 2021). This point offers an opportunity to have students discuss how the characters they selected reflect (or not) their own racialized

experiences in schools as students. Explicitly discussing how race and racism shape educational and teacher experiences could be one way to disrupt the white savior thinking that we noted earlier in this section. What students did not write can be as valuable information about their thinking as what they chose to vocalize on this assignment.

OPENING CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS ABOUT TEACHER IDENTITY

Both authors used this activity, firstly, as an icebreaker: a way to get to know students at the beginning of a new semester and an opportunity to spark conversations. While this activity gave students the chance to think through their responses, it also afforded them the opportunity to consider their developing professional identities through influential media depictions of teaching. Foregrounding identity can provide insight into students' emergent perspectives of the field they're working towards entering, and instructors can build upon these preconceived perspectives during future discussions.

Furthermore, we believe this activity can support students' criticality as they explore depictions of teacher identity through media. For example, the activity can spark conversations regarding stereotypes and cultural discourses present across teacher identity models (Dahlgren, 2017; Weber & Mitchell, 1995). For example, any of the following tropes demonstrated as a pattern - white savior, caring and parental pedagogue, rebel with a heart, selfless martyr - may provide fertile soil for future conversation. These stereotypes are highly present within American media, and as Dahlgren (2017) notes, repeated cultural images influence Americans' meaning-making out of their educational experiences. Bringing these held stereotypes to the forefront of professional education is one step towards creating an intentional curricular space for preservice professionals to explore their own identity construction, and indeed to problematize hegemonic expectations of teacher identity.

Additionally, discussions of media representations of teacher identity can prompt a conversation of existing inequities within the profession: for example, the overrepresentation of white, middle-class women within American education (Alsup, 2019). Stereotypes about teacher identities are pernicious and pervasive, and oftentimes are linked to existing assumptions of teaching as a white, female, and middle-class profession. However, many of our students do not fit the single mold of what teachers' look like, and indeed, they shouldn't— it's critical for young learners to have teachers that reflect the same identity diversity that is present across schools.

Finally, this activity can spark inquiry regarding the pedagogical models and philosophical approaches that students identify in their identity models. For example, are students drawn to pedagogical practices highlighted by media models, such as hands-on learning or whole-group lecturing? Can students notice how these teachers cultivate a sense of community in their classrooms, and contextualize those practices within authentic K-12 classrooms? Comparing models with oppositional pedagogical practices may support students' meaning-making about classroom practices. For example, comparing how Ms. Howard (*Abbott Elementary*) questions her own beliefs to Mr. Feeney's (Boy Meets World) less-reflective dispensation of wisdom may help students conceptualize the impact of reflective practices in education.

FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This activity was planned and implemented in two teacher education courses. However, we believe the outline of the work can be implemented in other professional education programs. For instance, nurse educators could ask incoming nursing students to select fictional nurses and conduct a similar analysis. Other fields like social work, law, and medicine could adapt the activity as an opening assignment to the field. Like teaching, popular media abounds with characters who are nurses, social workers, lawyers, and

doctors. Scholars in the aforementioned fields are also grappling with how popular media depictions of these professions impact the broader public (Flores, 2004; Friedman, 2017; Hallam, 2012; Ravulo, 2018). We believe it is worth considering how students new to their professional field see their own aspirational practices reflected in contemporary media.

As previously stated, we do not position this paper as an empirical study but rather a pedagogical reflection. With that said, further research in teacher education could take up the way in which future teachers envision their teaching through fictional teachers. Future empirical studies may attend to such inquiries as: What ideologies and belief systems do teacher candidates inherit from popular cultural depictions of educators? How do new career teachers enact or evolve the pedagogies they learn from educators on screens? What pedagogies are most commonly praised or critiqued in popular culture? Such questions can provide further insight into the relationship between aspiring teachers and the characters they see teach on the screen, both big and small.

We did notice shifts in how our students talked about their emerging teacher identities throughout the semester. A gap between how our students imagined their future selves through pop culture and their actual future selves began to widen after spending time in actual K-12 classrooms. Some of that gap stemmed from the realities of classrooms compared to their representations on screen. For instance, students noted that enacting student-centered, community-oriented practices is more difficult in a room of 26 students with widely diverging academic and socio-emotional needs. A show like *Abbott Elementary* is beginning to reflect these realities, but many beloved shows and movies depict an artificially cohesive public school classroom.

As teacher educators, we've noticed that our students come to teacher preparation with unrealistic expectations of teacher identities, largely delivered through media: teachers as saviors, teachers as parent figures, teachers as hyper-competent heroes. As these early-career teachers develop an awareness of tropes around teacher identity, they simultaneously go into schools and see teacher identities enacted in ways that expand far beyond what's depicted in media. We hope activities like the one we've outlined in this paper offer a starting point to dialogue about construction of teacher identity in media and practice.

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