

Beyond a Good/Bad Binary: The Representation of Teachers in Contemporary YAL

Preservice teachers in my university classes on children's and young adult literature draw attention to the interactions among teachers, students, and principals in the fiction we read. Perhaps because these situations parallel what they might face in the field, these future teachers are eager to analyze why the characters behaved as they did and how they might have acted differently. Students wonder whether the teacher appearing briefly in Angela Johnson's *The First Part Last* (2003) could have helped the teen father more (p. 44). Reading journals and class discussion consider the long-term influence of characters such as Coach Clarke in Viola Canales's *The Tequila Worm* (2005) and geometry teacher Mr. P. in Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007). Preservice teachers learn from the depictions of professionals in roles they hope to fill (Carter, 2009).

While films and television programs are recognized for creating popular visual representations of teachers, young adult fiction also contributes enduring images (see Fig. 1). The portrayals of teachers in fiction reflect contemporary perspectives on the teaching profession and influence teen perceptions of the roles and responsibilities of teachers. Contemporary YAL reveals the diversity among 21st-century teachers. The more favorably depicted teachers help students develop their identities and resist dominant and oppressive educational paradigms; the less favorably perceived teachers often represent the authority against which the adolescents and good teachers rebel. Based on my reading, approximately as many teachers are depicted negatively as positively in the last decade of

YAL, but authors undermine the simplicity of a good/bad binary by complex portrayals, kinetic characters, and changes in the young adults' perspectives on the teachers.

This study emphasizes realistic YA novels set in the present and featuring a "good" teacher and a "bad" teacher: Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* (1999), Chris Crutcher's *The Sledding Hill* (2005), Anne Schraff's *The Petition* (2001), and Carl Hiaasen's *Scat* (2009), as well as Gordon Korman's *No More Dead Dogs* (2000), in which a teacher changes to become more effective. The realistic novel is a classification "that emphasizes truthful representation of the actual," a novel in which fiction corresponds closely with the real world (Harmon & Holman, 2005, p. 433). I argue that the more effective teachers are characterized by use of critical pedagogy; that Anderson, Crutcher, Schraff, and Hiaasen use the contrasts of a good/bad binary to animate conflict; and that Schraff and Hiaasen also challenge the idea of such a dichotomy. The more effective teachers correspond with education theorist McLaren's (1988) formulation of the teacher role-ideal of the "liminal servant," while less effective teachers fit the mold of the "hegemonic overlord" or "entertainer" (pp. 164–165).

Relevant Scholarly Literature

Scholars have analyzed the possible impact of the representations of teachers in popular culture products, particularly in film. Dalton (2008) acknowledges that "we are shaped by popular culture just as we shape popular texts," because the texts "inform our identi-

Standing Up to Mr. O. (1998) by Claudia Mills
Speak (1999) by Laurie Halse Anderson
No More Dead Dogs (2000) by Gordon Korman
The Misfits (2001) by James Howe
The Jumping Tree (2001) by René Saldaña, Jr.
The Petition (2001) by Anne Schraff
Happenings (2002) by Katie Cobb
Does My Head Look Big in This? (2005) by Randa Abdel-Fattah
Prom (2005) by Laurie Halse Anderson
The Sledding Hill (2005) by Chris Crutcher
Sexy (2005) by Joyce Carol Oates
Teach Me (2005) by R. A. Nelson
The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian (2007) by Sherman Alexie
Schooled (2007) by Gordon Korman
Scat (2009) by Carl Hiaasen
Gentlemen (2009) by Michael Northrop
The Secret Life of Ms. Finkelman (2010) by Ben Winters
A Good Long Way (2010) by René Saldaña, Jr

Figure 1. Chronological list of recent, realistic YA novels with noteworthy teacher characters

ties and our collective and personal sense of the possibilities and limitations our life stories hold” (p. 9). Trier’s (2005) preservice teachers found that the project of analyzing “inner-city school movies” and box covers was “instrumental in setting the stage” for their perceptive “transformations” after student teaching (p. 185). Trier argues for teacher educators’ use of “a variety of different texts” in popular culture to contest negative images of students and schools (p. 187). In analysis of films that depict classroom instruction of works by William Shakespeare, Bach (2009) finds that teaching strategies differed on the basis of whether the school was urban, suburban, or elite, and that “these representations risk reinforcing the class stereotypes found in this genre” of teacher films (p. 324).

Describing how popular culture creates unrealistic expectations of “teaching as a divine vocation” and contributes to poor working conditions, Carter (2009)

argues that educational communities and methods classes need “to expose and critique the saint-teacher metaphor” that alternately idealizes and scorns teachers (pp. 84, 83). Muzzillo (2010) likewise expresses concern that the portrayal of teachers in films such as *Freedom Writers* (LaGravenese, 2007) could establish “impossible teacher-personhood paradoxes, especially when viewed by our novice colleagues” (p. 180). The self-sacrificing, inspirational teacher who almost martyrs herself for the sake of the students is heroic, but not a model for sustaining a long-term career in the profession. Bach and Jolly (2011) point out that even the postmodern mock-documentary film *Chalk* (Akel, 2006) critiquing the “teacher hero” paradigm still reinforces “modernist mechanisms” in the classroom (pp. 89, 90). Forms of popular culture merit interrogation for the messages conveyed to viewers.

While much less attention has been devoted to the teacher’s role in contemporary YAL, scholars have examined YAL from the past to uncover how teaching and learning are represented. Attempting to classify teacher roles, Smedman (1989) reviews teacher portrayals in 15 novels published before 1980 and finds favorable treatments outnumbering unfavorable treatments (p. 148). Burnaford (1994) analyzes fiction published in the 1970s and 1980s for readers aged 10 to 14, finding myriad images that are “often not orderly, neatly categorizable, or easily typed” (p. 227). Burnaford observes that most of the fictional teachers who breach expectations of acceptable conduct or belief get dismissed from their jobs (p. 225), akin to Dalton’s (2008) finding that iconic teachers in films often leave their schools at the end of the movie, sometimes unwillingly (p. 12). In contrast, today’s YA novels have more successful nonconformists, and rebellion against norms often characterizes favorably depicted teachers.

In an essay in *Children’s Literature and Education*, Gates (1989) argues that in her study of initiation in the *Little House* and *Anne of Green Gables* book series, the heroines who become teachers “learn to humanize their childhood images” of the teacher’s role, thus complicating the dichotomy in which “The Good Teacher has no faults; the Bad Teacher, no redeeming qualities” (pp. 171, 166). Because these protagonists grow to adulthood in the course of a book series, a longer span of development is shown than in single books, in which a protagonist may not get to revise

opinions held in adolescence. Gates established the appeal and limitation of the good/bad binary.

The ALAN Review has addressed the representation of teachers in YAL. Albritton (1994) applies the description of archetypes from Carol Pearson's *The Hero Within: Six Archetypes We Live By* (1989) to interpretation of teachers in Cynthia Voigt's 1982 novel *Dacey's Song* (p. 56). Emphasizing the teacher's process of becoming and changing, Albritton sees teaching as a heroic journey and a process of growth (p. 59). He does not assert that the best example, music teacher Mr. Lingerle, is a model all must follow, but rather argues that growth into better teaching can occur continually if teachers have "willingness to experience levels of honesty and vulnerability" (p. 59). In a 2006 essay, Town assesses the depiction of coaches in nine novels by Chris Crutcher, finding that the basic principle of Crutcherian good coaching is that the coaches "let kids figure out what they need for themselves, and provide them with all the backup they need to make these discoveries" (p. 68). This is similar to the constructivist approach, considered among best practices for any subject, in which teachers create an environment where students "construct their own understandings" and actively participate in making meaning (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005, p. 18). These studies interpret YAL insightfully but do not examine how individual examples are part of a larger pattern.

To help with categorization of the teachers in the novels, the present essay applies an interpretive framework of education theorist Peter McLaren in "The Liminal Servant and the Ritual Roots of Critical Pedagogy" (1988). McLaren bases his theories on the application of anthropology to education and on direct observations in middle and high schools, both public and private. McLaren argues that teachers can be categorized as three distinct types or ideals of performers of ritual: the liminal servant, the entertainer, and the hegemonic overlord (1988, pp. 164–165). The actions and responses of students determine the classification of teachers into these performative roles.

A teacher is in McLaren's (1988) identified role of the entertainer when students are "viewers of the action," with the classroom as a theatre and the teacher "as a propagandist—or even worse, an evangelist—for dominant cultural, economic, or ethical interests" (p. 165). The entertainer model suppresses individual-

ity and conditions students "for sameness" (p. 173). When the teacher is a hegemonic overlord, information gets transmitted "perfunctorily—as though it were a bite of food pushed under a cell door" (p. 165). The hegemonic overlord follows lessons "strictly and mor-
dantly by the book" and is unconcerned with student empowerment (p. 174). In these two roles, students become spectators who do not participate, and the knowledge they gain is outside of lived experience and not applied to their realities (p. 167). As Broz (2011) explains, McLaren "reveals a common circumstance in many smoothly operating classrooms: teachers pretending to teach and students pretending to learn" (p. 16). Students remain passive and orderly, going through the motions.

The most effective ideal, the liminal servant, exemplifies critical pedagogy by empowering students to question domination and their own assigned places. The liminal servant is found when the teacher's students respond with "immediacy or purpose," becoming "the primary actors within the ritual of instruction" (p. 165). The learning process is "characterized by intense involvement and participation" (p. 165). This teacher removes obstacles to "allow students to 'embody' or incarnate knowledge through an active interrogation of its ideological precepts and assumptions" (p. 173). Classes with this type of teacher have conditions conducive to *flow* ("the holistic sensation present when individuals act with total involvement") and *communitas* ("temporary camaraderie which occurs when roles or status are suspended between fellow liminals") (p. 173, notes 5 and 6).

Fundamentally, the activity of a liminal servant "takes the form of a critical pedagogy"; the teacher "must excavate the 'subjugated knowledges' of those who have been marginalized, vanquished, and disaffected, whose histories of suffering and hope have rarely been made public" (p. 171). René Saldaña creates a character embodying this value in *The Jumping Tree*, in which Mrs. Saucedo empowers Rey by instilling Chicano pride, correcting errors in the

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Texas history book, and providing tools for opposing the dominant culture. A liminal servant “is as much a social activist and spiritual director as a school pedagogue” who helps students examine the codes around

them and develop “a critical class consciousness” (pp. 172, 175). These ideals involve creating an exploratory educational environment in which the teacher is less of an authority than a co-participant or co-creator. When we examine the teachers in contemporary YAL through McLaren’s interpretative framework, the favorably depicted and effective teachers are closest to the liminal servant

ideal, while some less effective teachers fit the roles of the entertainer or the hegemonic overlord.

Novels with a “Good/Bad” Teacher Pairing

The pairing of good and bad teachers appears regularly in realistic YAL. In Richard Peck’s historical novel *The Teacher’s Funeral* (2004), set in a one-room schoolhouse in 1904, the weaker teacher, Myrt Arbuckle, dies and is succeeded by the effective Tansy Culver. In Kimberly Fusco’s *Tending to Grace* (2004), a passive high school English teacher, Mrs. Paul, is indifferent to her pupils, while Mr. Browne recognizes a good reader and brings Cornelia into his class. As Town (2006) notes, Chris Crutcher uses a good coach/bad coach combination in novels such as *Running Loose* (1983), *Chinese Handcuffs* (1989), and *Whale Talk* (2001) (pp. 66–69). The good/bad contrast serves to bring attributes of the better teacher into greater relief.

Readers may well find that the binary creates a false dichotomy; they may prefer, instead, to show that real teachers could be positioned on a continuum of effectiveness. Some authors create complex portrayals through assigning both positive and negative attributes to the same teacher. The biology teacher in Claudia Mills’s *Standing Up to Mr. O.* (1998) embodies all three of McLaren’s models at different moments. Mr. O’Neill manifests his “angry edge” when a

student, Maggie, questions the ethics of his dissection labs and grows “as disappointed in him as he was in her” (pp. 96, 156). Maggie’s perception does not prove Mr. O’Neill a bad teacher, only a complicated and realistic one.

As mentioned in the introduction, four novels from the last decade (or so) offer a pairing in which a favorably depicted teacher who is a major character in the book contrasts to a negatively depicted teacher: Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak* (1999), Chris Crutcher’s *The Sledding Hill* (2005), Anne Schraff’s *The Petition* (2001), and Carl Hiaasen’s *Scat* (2009). In each work, the better teacher corresponds with McLaren’s ideal of the liminal servant, while the poorer teacher is the hegemonic overlord or entertainer. These authors, whether intuitively or calculatedly, support constructivist learning theory and the teacher in the role of facilitator, both in classroom activities and beyond course content. Through the pairing of textual teachers, the authors are in effect supporting the best in contemporary teaching practice and critiquing less desirable methods. A fifth novel, Gordon Korman’s *No More Dead Dogs* (2000), shows how a teacher can change to let the students create their own learning experience.

Mr. Freeman (from Anderson’s *Speak*) is a gifted artist who models what he expects of students and exposes the reality of the institutional power structure. For example, at one point he paints artwork likening a school to a prison to criticize underfunding of the arts (p. 62). Mr. Freeman’s importance for ninth-grader Melinda Sordino’s recovery from a rape the previous summer is seen by his presence throughout the book. As Ward (2008) argues, Mr. Freeman is “one of Melinda’s only allies” and is “essential in the healing process” (pp. 69, 75). His encouragement to Melinda includes both praise and criticism of her painting (p. 152). She finally reaches a state of flow and completes her art project, but only after she has spoken out about being raped in an attempt to protect other women. Mr. Freeman’s shamanistic role is enacted because he invites students to enact the ritual of painting and paints with them. His classroom is psychologically, educationally, and socially removed from the ordinary routines of school and characterized by heightened, individual meaning making on the part of the students and a great sense of community both among the students and between the students and the teacher.

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In the mold of the hegemonic overlord, a social studies teacher (known only by the nickname Mr. Neck) behaves in a bigoted, unprofessional way—a contrast to the positive effects of Mr. Freeman. Mr. Neck’s techniques in social studies class not only endorse the status quo, but also assail anyone questioning it. After complaining that affirmative action policies kept his son from getting a job, he announces a class debate on the claim that “America should have closed her borders in 1900” (p. 54). In this one-sided “debate,” Mr. Neck limits expression by students who disagree with him, an exclusion of opinion that cannot be excused by time constraints. Class member David Petrakis stands up against Mr. Neck and eventually wins the struggle after many chapters. Mr. Neck intimidates Melinda in class and during an assembly, even punishing her for friendship with the rebellious David by changing an assignment. When Melinda resists his authority, Mr. Neck sends her to the principal’s office for insubordination and assigns her work a D grade (p. 157). Mr. Neck embodies the forces that suppress students who oppose him at their peril.

As Bartolomé (2004) explains in *Teacher Education Quarterly*, teachers who do not “identify and interrogate their negative, racist, and classist ideological orientations often work to reproduce the existing social order” (p. 100). Never self-assessing, Mr. Neck openly supports a racially and socially exclusivist America. He represents the opposite of critical pedagogy, which encourages teachers to develop “counter-hegemonic positions” and to understand discrimination better through having “personally experienced or witnessed someone else’s subordination” (Bartolomé, p. 116). Another hegemonic overlord, Alexie’s (2007) Mr. P., perpetuates oppression in a reservation school and participates in deculturalization, offering no corrective other than a verbal apology. Mr. P. is the counterbalance to Junior’s outstanding basketball coach at his new school (pp. 43, 148).

The antagonist of Chris Crutcher’s *The Sledding Hill* (2005), English teacher Mr. Sanford Tarter, also represents the hegemonic overlord type. Mr. Tarter is physically and intellectually restrictive of students. Reveling in his own power, Mr. Tarter responds to all disciplinary infractions with physical “techniques of torment,” such as making students stand for long intervals in “stress positions” (pp. 22–23). Trying to ban a novel from his public school, he organizes protests

of the book, manipulating the members of a student organization and the congregation for which he is pastor. Although he means well, Mr. Tarter intrudes excessively in the life of Eddie, a ninth-grader whose father and best friend have recently died, and tries to force Eddie to come to a quick decision about religious salvation. For other novelists, a teacher who is also a minister could be a favorable role model, but not for Crutcher, who has faced much censorship.

In contrast to the book-banning Mr. Tarter, the other English teacher in *The Sledding Hill* gives students choice and power. Ms. Ruth Lloyd teaches a freshman elective class in “Really Modern Literature” in which students choose their own readings; the only required book is *Warren Peerce*, a text that causes a censorship battle but that comforts a grieving student (p. 85). Ms. Lloyd believes the book has merit because it “challenges” students “to stretch”; she believes that it will “get some of you who tend to get your book reports from the backs of cereal boxes to actually read a book cover to cover” (pp. 89, 87). When opposed by a parent who asserts she should cover only noncontroversial material, Ms. Lloyd insists, “You are offering me a solution that makes kids hate to read, and that is simply not acceptable” (p. 207). Ms. Lloyd wants students to have the power of choice, freedom to read, and ability to question the status quo. However, the last chapter indicates that Ms. Lloyd makes the choice to leave her job because so many works are being “cleansed” from the high school library (p. 226). She takes a job at the city library instead, where she presumably hopes to practice her counter-hegemonic ideology with fewer reprisals. Not really subverting the good/bad binary, Crutcher’s text implies that any teacher who isn’t a Ms. Lloyd in advocating for relevant, contemporary literature in English class is a Mr. Tarter who tortures students, covers boring material, and demands fealty.

Challenges to the Good/Bad Dichotomy in Representing Teachers

Mr. Pedroza, the best teacher in Anne Schraff’s short novel *The Petition* (2001), initially seems like a hegemonic overlord but comes to be recognized as a liminal servant, a “transformative intellectual” (McLaren, 1988, p. 174) who pushes and assists students, while Ms. Corey fits McLaren’s descriptions of both the

entertainer and the hegemonic overlord. Although protagonist Izzy senses the correct classifications of these teachers throughout the whole novel, other students, parents, and a coach are skeptical about Mr. Pedroza until convinced otherwise. The demanding Mr. Pedroza is proven to be more effective and more respectful of his Mexican American students than the easygoing teacher who gives “freebie grades” because she does not believe the students are capable of doing better work (Schraff, 2001, p. 35).

Ms. Corey, who is Anglo American, reinforces the status quo and does not empower students to improve their lives. Students voice a personal liking for Ms.

Corey because she is “a young, new teacher” who relates to them, is funny, makes it “easier to pass,” and is generous about grades and assignment completion (pp. 6, 35). However, Izzy overhears Ms. Corey revealing her ignorance and biases to another teacher. Ms. Corey knows students cheat but will not “make a fuss”; she pities the students because “it can’t be much fun living in the *barrio*”; and worse, “we just can’t expect as much from them

as we expect from our Anglo students” (p. 7). Ms. Corey’s superficial niceness barely covers her bigotry. Unfortunately, some students have already internalized racist attitudes. Ramona, for example, holds a low opinion of her own abilities and seeks only “easy” classes (pp. 34, 52).

Mr. Pedroza, who is Mexican American like protagonist Izzie, does not surrender to an unjust system that establishes low expectations and fewer resources to Latino students (p. 19). He appears to be the only teacher who grades honestly and rigorously (p. 93). Yet one student says Mr. Pedroza is “the meanest teacher he’d ever had” (p. 73), and the baseball players fear being ineligible to play because their grades are too low. Izzy resists peer pressure to sign a petition to the school board to fire Mr. Pedroza, instead writing in a letter to the city paper that “Some of the

other teachers don’t expect much from their students. But Mr. Pedroza expects us to be the best we can be” (p. 83). Students representing three decades of Mr. Pedroza’s teaching career speak up in the school board forum and describe “an esteemed teacher who made a difference. A teacher who had seen the latent abilities in kids when no one else had” (p. 97). The final testament to Mr. Pedroza’s position as a teacher who works for the “clearing away of obstacles to the embodiment of knowledge” (McLaren, 1988, p. 172) is when his top student offers to tutor the members of the baseball team who want help despite their previous insults to her (Schraff, 2001, p. 99).

Much as Schraff illustrates with her character representation in *The Petition*, Hiaasen’s *Scat* (2009) shows that students assume strictness makes a teacher bad and perceive teachers as mean when they have high expectations. (A variation on this assumption appears when Advanced Placement English students in Katie Cobb’s *Happenings* [2002] respect their teacher only when she challenges them, disdaining her when she gives easy work.) Schraff weakens the good/bad binary by showing that the teacher many current students believe to be bad enough to merit immediate firing is actually the school’s best teacher. Hiaasen also undermines the good/bad dichotomy. One teacher seems bad and unquestionably is so; the other teacher initially seems cruel but is in fact good. Both Schraff and Hiaasen show perspectives toward the teacher changing to recognize excellence.

For Hiaasen, even the protagonists must modify their view of the teacher, Mrs. Bunny Starch, who is introduced as “the most feared teacher at the Truman School” in Florida (p. 1). Yet at the conclusion, her eighth-grade biology students give a round of applause when she returns to the classroom after an injury sustained during environmental activism. Mrs. Starch, whose top concerns are teaching eighth-grade biology and saving endangered species, is eventually perceived as a well-rounded person by protagonists Nick and Marta and to a truant, Duane, whom she tutors. The students investigate the mysterious disappearance of Mrs. Starch and are “stunned” to find her caring gently for an abandoned baby panther, because “this was a side of their teacher that they’d never observed, or had even imagined to be part of her buzz-saw personality” (p. 261). They have misinterpreted her strictness as evidence of an uncaring person, but

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Mrs. Starch has always emphasized student learning. She tells her biology class: “A teacher’s job is to identify and cultivate each student’s strengths, and then encourage him or her to utilize those strengths in the pursuit of knowledge” (p. 7). Mrs. Starch fosters student abilities both in and out of the classroom; ultimately, we see her as a liminal servant to whom activism is as essential as her teaching.

Because the students of the liminal servant, like Nick and Marta with Mrs. Starch, are authentically engaged in making personal and individual meaning, they do challenge the status quo and cause problems for administrators. Despite running afoul of their principal, the success of their environmental activism to rescue panthers and their exposure of criminal behavior by an oil-drilling company brings positive publicity and donations to the school and dissolves his anger (p. 350). The rebels are welcomed back by the principal, not despite but *because of* their activism. In this, as in Hiaasen’s prior YAL about environmental activism, middle school students find intergenerational partnerships to advocate for Earth and are ultimately celebrated for challenging norms.

Dr. Wendell Waxmo is Hiaasen’s caricature of an unqualified, eccentric substitute. Students know he is “a legendary wacko” whose bad behavior and methods have banned him from public schools, yet he substitutes in private schools when they get “desperate” (p. 98). Dr. Waxmo takes caprice to the extreme, teaching erroneous material and confusing students, who consider their time wasted. Ultimately, his narrative presence in *Scat* seems intended for comic relief, although he is hardly an entertainer, and this incompetent substitute makes the students more appreciative of their regular, strict teacher.

A final YAL text destabilizing the good/bad teacher trope features an English and drama teacher whose voice is heard in the multiple-perspective novel *No More Dead Dogs* (Korman, 2000), in which Mr. Fogelman’s kinetic characterization changes from mixed to good. Initially, students regard Mr. Fogelman unfavorably, yet both he and their attitudes change for the better. The book is told through multiple perspectives, including the teacher’s view in two chapters that take the form of journal entries with memos to himself. Mr. Fogelman becomes a liminal servant almost in spite of himself. He recognizes that his play script is too faithful to the sentimental original of *Old*

Shep, My Pal and allows football star Wallace Wallace to rewrite it. While anger is one reason Mr. Fogelman gives Wallace detention, the punishment ultimately benefits the student and Mr. Fogelman, who acknowledges that Wallace taught him, “If you mold the *play* to showcase the talents of the *students*, the sky’s the limit” (p. 134, emphasis in original).

Mr. Fogelman moves toward a constructivist approach that works out well for the students and their performance. As the club advisor, Mr. Fogelman is responsible for the musical drama, yet he understands that he must let the students build their own learning experiences. His memos chart the changes, going from “A director must *never* lose control of his play” to “When things start falling into place, get out of the way; it’s a happy avalanche” (pp. 93, 135).

He relinquishes directing to Wallace and temporarily becomes a Dead Mango by joining the student rock band accompanying the musical. Mr. Fogelman equalizes himself with the students reluctantly but wisely, because, as McLaren writes, “To fully understand the subtext of the student, the liminal servant must ‘become’ the student” (p. 174). They achieve with their play a sense of *communitas*, the “temporary camaraderie which occurs when roles or status are suspended” (McLaren, p. 173, p. 5). Mr. Fogelman merges with the cast and crew for one transcendent night as 700 audience members rise to their feet ecstatically and dance.

Conclusion

YA novelists Anderson, Crutcher, Schraff, and Hiaasen all work with the binary of the “good teacher” and “bad teacher,” while Schraff, Hiaasen, and Korman undermine this false dichotomy. The idea of better teaching is still present, as the teachers might be positioned on a continuum of effectiveness, but the novelists uncover the variance in perception of teacher practice. As Christenbury (2011) describes, “there is no definitive recipe, no immutable formula” for effec-

The student’s role is active rather than passive, more like an exploratory risk taker than a person who works only for right answers to yield a grade on an assignment.

tive teaching, but characteristics may include methods “premised on students’ intellectual curiosity” and should be considered variable, because teachers try diverse strategies as they “change and refine” methods over time (p. 48). Rather than being static, educators may be traveling on what Albritton describes as a “heroic journey” of “growth into better teaching” (1994, p. 59).

Whether deliberately or unintentionally, the novelists appear to endorse types of progressive pedagogy. There is a correlation between favorably depicted teachers and the practice of constructivism as well as critical pedagogy. In constructivism, the teacher is a facilitator who demonstrates skills and respects student responses rather than a dispenser of knowledge; the student’s role is active rather than passive, more like an exploratory risk taker than a person who works only for right answers to yield a grade on an assignment. A critical pedagogue goes even farther in helping students adopt tools to combat oppression and domination. Textual evidence suggests that these approaches are used by the favorable teachers—Mr. Freeman in *Speak*, Ms. Lloyd in *The Sledding Hill*, Mr. Pedroza in *The Petition*, Mrs. Starch in Hiaasen’s *Scat*, and Mr. Fogelman in *No More Dead Dogs*.

Furthermore, the more favorably depicted teachers show correspondence with Peter McLaren’s (1988) “liminal servant” teacher role-ideal in which the teacher “must excavate the ‘subjugated knowledges’ of those who have been marginalized, vanquished, and disaffected (p. 171). The liminal servant is a critical pedagogue who crafts an exploratory educational environment in which the teacher is a co-participant or co-creator, like Mr. Freeman making artwork alongside his students, Ms. Lloyd and students discussing literature by living authors, Mrs. Starch rescuing animals in the forest with her biology students, and Mr. Fogelman performing in the collaboratively written drama with his students. Some of the more negatively portrayed teachers correlate with McLaren’s formulations of the “hegemonic overlord” and “the entertainer.” These latter types reinforce the status quo rather than challenging it.

Students at any grade level reading YAL benefit from analyzing depictions of teaching and learning. Preservice teachers preparing for the profession would benefit from considering not only how school works now, but also how it could be improved through

individual and collective efforts. Fiction does not substitute for lived experience, but it does provide an additional venue for understanding contemporary education. All students, through taking different perspectives on texts, can gain broader views of their own educational situations. As Kornfeld and Prothro (2005) have demonstrated, students should have opportunities to read fiction about schooling and to examine the classroom, the curriculum, and “their own positionality in their formal education,” because in life as in fiction, students can become “agents of change” who motivate teachers and coaches to challenge administration or fellow teachers “in the interest of the students” (pp. 218, 223). Students who consider what they hope to gain from schooling could make their experiences more meaningful and increase motivation to stay in school. Good teachers can help students identify goals and achieve them.

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