

Gaining insight into teaching profession by using film: a preservice teachers' experience

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Abstract. Films can be used as instructional tools in higher education in different disciplines. In the context of teacher education, films with and about teachers and pupils are valuable resources for learning about the teaching profession. The purpose of this study is to examine the pre-service teachers' reflections on a film with an educational content and message - The Triumph (The Ron Clark Story, 2006). One research question guided the investigation: What are the students' cognitive and emotional gains for the teaching profession as a result of watching this film? The participants consisted of eighty-two second year students, enrolled in an initial teacher education program at a Romanian university. At the end of a one-semester course, named Pedagogy (Instruction and Students' Assessment) pre-service teachers were invited to watch a film and then to reflect about it, by completing an open-ended questionnaire. The responses were analyzed through the content analysis technique. Examples of comments made by preservice teachers are presented and analyzed. The results show a range of understandings gained by future teachers through the use of the film.

1 Introduction

As part of the initial training program for the teaching profession, students go through multiple learning experiences through courses, seminars, or internships. Over the course of three years (in the case of Romania), they participate in lectures and seminars, live learning experiences through cooperation or individual learning, discuss educational problems, observe how others teach (mentors) and then teach themselves, develops portfolios, projects, case studies, etc. All these learning experiences initiate them in what the teaching profession means, with its beauty and challenges. Direct interaction with teacher educators at university and with school mentors (during internships) helps them get closer to what the teaching profession is. Some of them become models and sources of professional inspiration for prospective teachers.

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A complementary source of inspiration for students are also the characters in the movies with and about teachers, or so-called "school films", which have something about schools, students, teachers in them [1]. The film makers' interest in the teaching profession is not a minor one, as evidenced by the films with and about teachers and pupils. In 2000, Trier made a one hundred school films list, which was made available for his student teachers, who were expected to select one film and to write a paper or give a seminar presentation of their response to the film [1]. Here are some of these: To Sir, With Love (1967), Teachers (1983), Stand and Deliver (1988), Lean On Me (1989), Dead Poets Society (1989), Dangerous Minds (1995), etc. Meanwhile, this list can be populated with other movies that have been released, such as Freedom Writers (2007), The Class (2008), The Triumph (The Ron Clark Story, 2006), etc.

Within the context of teacher education, school films (with teachers and pupils) can be valuable resources for learning about teaching the profession and for reflection on it. For instance, in a study conducted in Turkey, 102 second year pre-service teachers were invited to watch six relevant movies, during six weeks. The study reveals that educational movies meaningfully affected the students' attitudes towards the teacher profession and their perceived self-efficacy in a positive way [2]. In another study, conducted in Singapore by Tan, four popular movies (*The Lord of the Rings*, *Dead Poets Society*, *The Matrix* and *The Simpsons*) were used to promote philosophical reflections for 25 pre-service teachers [3].

In their study, Kalelioglu and Tekmen (2012) examined the perceptions of thirty five senior class pre-service teachers about eight week video based classroom discussions. The experience helped the students to developed their self-evaluation ability, to criticize, to easily realize the wrong behavior, to have a multiple faceted perspective, to bridge theory and practice, etc. [4]. Popular movies such as Dangerous Minds, Stand and Deliver, and 187 have been seen as valuable resources to promote reflection of preservice teachers about learning and teaching, diversity, and working in educational communities in another study, conducted by Grant [5].

Movies are used in teaching different disciplines. For example, in a project called "Cinemedication" five movies with professionalism issues were screened for second year medical students. Participants then were asked to reflect on what they had learned in terms of professionalism. The authors conclude that the students developed their critical thinking and moral reasoning skills [6]. Films were also used in language classes for students being trained as teachers of English [7].

Based on the analysis of the theory and research on the brain and videos and the extensive literature on how videos have been used in specific disciplines, Berk (2009) highlights the value and uses of video materials in the college classroom, by identifying 20 learning outcomes, among which we mention: grab students' attention; generate interest in class; energize or relax students for a learning exercise; increase understanding and foster deeper learning; provide an opportunity for freedom of expression, inspire and motivate students, create memorable visual images, etc. [8]. These advantages are a solid foundation for their use in teaching various disciplines. Viewing a good film in an appropriate context can be an experience with cognitive and emotional impact for the audience.

The purpose of this study is to examine a group of pre-service teachers' reflections on a film with an educational content and message - *The Triumph* (The Ron Clark Story, 2006). The participants were enrolled in an undergraduate secondary school teacher education program, at the "Lucian Blaga" University in Sibiu.

2 Method

The learning activity, based on viewing and reflection on *The Triumph* film, was designed and developed at the end of the one semester course of Pedagogy II (Instruction and

Students' Assessment), which is an important part of the teacher education program. The participants were eighty-two second year students from the Faculty of Letters and Faculty of Science (79% female, 21% male, ages between 20 and 27 years old). The students' participation in the study was voluntary.

Through this learning experience offered to undergraduates, two of the objectives of this course have been supported, namely: (1) the use of the concepts and principles specific to the theory and methodology of training / evaluation; (2) the analysis of pedagogical situations (experienced or observed) by the participants. One research questions guided the investigation: What are the students' cognitive and emotional gains regarding the teaching profession as a result of watching this film?

At the end of the Pedagogy II course, the pre-service teachers were invited to watch the film and then to reflect about it, by completing an open-ended questionnaire. The steps we followed were:

- Film selection - Two criteria were considered in the selection of the film: the students' characteristics (their enrollment in the pedagogical training program and their interest for a possible teaching career) and the relevance of the film for the nature of the course.
- Providing the necessary context - Students were invited to see the film after the last lecture and after the revision of the subject was done; two intervals for watching the movie were agreed upon with the students.
- Introducing the film was about providing clues about what they were about to see;
- Distribution of the open-ended questionnaire and explanation of the completion procedure; The students' impressions of the film (qualitative data) were collected via an open-ended questionnaire. The open-ended questionnaire contained five questions: (1) What concepts or ideas from the Pedagogy course are illustrated in the film? Name them ; (2) How are these illustrated in the film? Provide examples for each identified concept. (3) What practices, educational ideas have you learned by watching this movie ?; (4) Were there any aspects of the movie that impressed you? (5) If so, what were they?
- Projection of the film on a large screen. The movie is inspired by a real case and tells the story of a passionate and creative teacher - Ron Clark, who leaves his home in North Carolina to try his chances in New York. He gets to teach one of the worst public schools in the Harlem neighborhood. Received reluctantly by the principal and rejected by the students, Clark fights to gain their trust and give the students a chance for a better life through education. Through his innovative methods, using clear and simple rules, with passion and dedication, Ron Clark manages to rebuild their trust and give hope to these young people, already condemned by society and their families. He uses ingenious methods to make his subject accessible and enjoyable. He altruistically engages in the students' family problems, helping them to mobilize for the final exam. His effort is fully rewarded, his class gets the best results, and the success of the students marks his triumph in educational work.
- Offering time for individual written reflection (20-30 minutes). The teacher candidates completed the open-ended questionnaire designed to provide insights into their experience with the movie they just viewed. We preferred the option of individual reflection (instead of a possible debate after watching the film) to give each student the context and time to draw their own insights into the teaching profession and the things they learned.

3 Results and discussion

First of all, we were interested in seeing how undergraduates can relate the concepts, ideas, theories within the Pedagogy course to this film. The first question of the questionnaire addressed this issue. The students were asked to identify pedagogical concepts without imposing a limit on the minimum or maximum number of concepts. Multiple concepts and themes emerged from the analysis of open-ended questionnaire data. Thus, it has been discovered that students have identified over 25 concepts. These were: "classroom management", "class rules", "student motivation", "teacher's expectations", "praise", "family types", "family-school relationship", "the teacher-pupil relationship", "verbal communication", "non-verbal communication", "teaching", "learning", "learning styles", "teaching methods", "teaching instruments", "accessibility principle", "student types", "school violence", "teacher behavior", "student behavior", "student assessment", "evaluation errors", "education", "school success", "failure", "learning environment", "lessons", "feedback".

The number of pedagogical concepts identified by each student varied between 3 (minimum) and 11 (maximum). Based on the number of concepts identified by the students, we could identify three data classes: answers with minimum 3 and maximum 5 concepts (3-5); responses with minimum 6 and maximum 8 concepts (6-8); answers with minimum 9 and maximum 11 concepts (9-11). 26% of students identified between 3-5 concepts. Most students (58%) have inventoried between 6 and 8 concepts and 16% of them wrote between 9-11 concepts (Figure 1). The richness of concepts illustrates their recognition in the context of the movie.

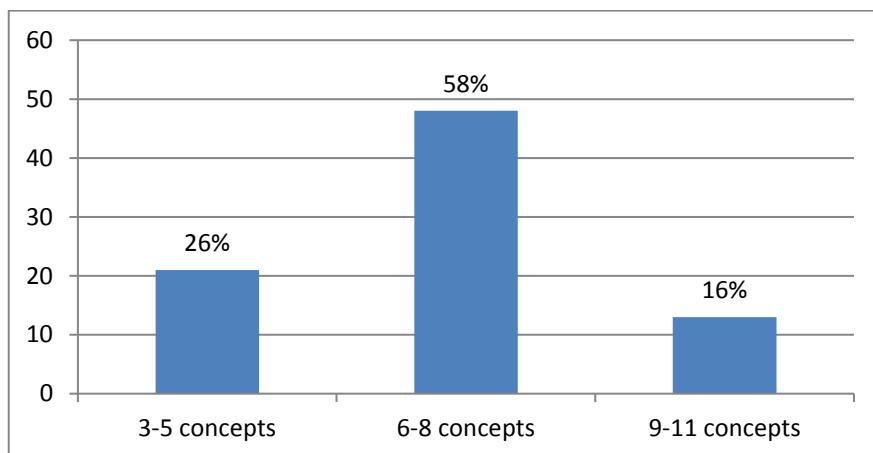


Fig. 1. The amount of pedagogical concepts identified by students

To ensure that they not only call out concepts, but really manage to explain them in the context of the film, the students were asked to provide an example of a situation for each written concept as it appeared in the movie. The content analysis technique was used for the undergraduates' responses. Eight major themes were derived from the data collected, by the process of coding. We present them below and exemplify them with quotes from the open-ended questionnaires.

Students' behavior

- "I was surprised and sometimes shocked by the students' behavior at the beginning of the film. Non-cooperators, defying, disrespectful, with no confidence in their own

strength, they get to be transformed, guided by professor Clark into cooperative students who learn, succeed and even exceed expectations."

- "We have witnessed a gradual, difficult, complicated change in student behavior. Their transformation was impressive in the end."
- "I noticed different student typologies: the leader (Shameika), the isolated pupil (Badriyah), the indifferent student (Schawn)."

Classroom management (maintain discipline, handle difficult behavior or situations, create positive learning environment)

- Starting with the first meetings with his students, Clark tried to organize the class based on simple rules, such as: We respect each other; We help each other; Never cut in line. He established consequences to encourage the students to respect them. The road to compliance was a complicated one for students who weren't used to such things."
- "The teacher replaced the confusion and the chaos of the class with order by rules, even if they were painstakingly accepted by the students."
- "The teacher wasn't overpowered by the countless difficult situations created by students and has not had a negative attitude towards them. Instead, he struggled to unite the students, make them feel like a family, accept each other, help one another."

Teacher's professional behavior and relationship with students

- "This teacher has not given up on his plan for his students, no matter how hard things got. He believed in them and in their chance when no one believed, not even themselves."
- "The teacher understood and demonstrated that he can also learn from the students. That was a decisive moment for his acceptance by the children."
- "With patience, empathy, perseverance, Mr. Clark succeeded in his work."
- "It seemed important to me that Mr. Clark was not only concerned with helping students with the exams, but also with modelling strong characters and positive relationships."
- "I would say that the teacher-student relationship has evolved spectacularly in this film. From rejection, tension and open conflict to acceptance and cooperation, to emotional attachment and mutual appreciation."
- "Mr. Clark was keen to know his students, to know their problems, skills, and to develop them. Visits to students' homes and discussions with their parents helped him to understand the problems of the pupils: caring for younger brothers (Shameika), ill-treatment by stepfather (Schawn), theft (Julio), integration difficulties (Badriyah)."
- "Even when he suffered from pneumonia and had to stay home, he found a way to help his students by teaching and recording lessons."

Teaching and learning (instructional methods and tools, learning styles, didactic principles)

- "The teacher used various methods to teach students: through discussions, demonstrations, explanations, posters, play, music and movement. Different learning styles have been encouraged (visual, auditory, kinesthetic)."
- "I have noted the attractive, surprising, even ingenious methods used by Mr. Clark, such as learning by playing (grammar, mathematics), learning by songs."
- "Various didactic materials were used (sheet, posters, tape/ video recordings, etc.)."
- "The teacher gave the students some of his free time, giving them tutoring and helping them learn."
- "The teacher has endeavored to make the material accessible and even pleasant to the pupils. When the methods he used failed, he did not give up and he came up with something else: learning history through music."

Student Motivation

- "We have seen how students not interested in learning can be stimulated to learn."
- "Professor Clark encouraged the students to have the highest aspirations possible (Dream big) and fight for their dreams. He always gave feedback, praised them for any little progress."
- "When the students got their first better results, Mr. Clark wrote their grades with large characters on the page and rewarded them with sweets."
- "For their effort throughout the year, the teacher rewarded them with taking part in a show."
- "Even when his students have achieved poor results, shortly before the final evaluation, Mr. Clark did not cease to encourage them and believe in them and in their ability."
- "Students were rewarded by Mr. Clark for their abilities, effort and results in front of their families."
- "Mr. Clark has inspired students to believe that they decide on their future, not the social environment they come from."

Students' assessment

- "Students were evaluated with tests, along the way and at the end of the year."
- "I noticed the halo effect, in the way the principal perceived the students in the class that Clark took over. They came from disadvantaged social-economic backgrounds, many had behavioral problems, and the principal considered them incapable of succeeding in school. Fortunately, Mr. Clark was not influenced by the director's opinion."

Teacher's behavior and relationship with parents

- "I found it interesting and useful that the teacher wanted to know the children's families before starting school and to develop a relationship with their parents. So he was able to better understand the backgrounds of these children, the problems they were facing (single-parent families, migrant families, etc.)."
- "He had the courage to confront the parents (when it was the case) and to convince them about the potential of their children."

School context

- "In a school on the outskirts of a huge city with children from difficult environments, success was still possible."
- "I saw how complicated it is to be a teacher in a school with a lot of verbal, physical and psychological violence among students."

Most of the students' comments were focused on the behavior of the teacher (the main character) and on the relationship with students. It is gratifying that students also surprised the other elements that contribute to school success, such as student behavior, methods and means used in teaching and learning, family involvement, school climate. Their comments demonstrate a pedagogical discernment, made obvious through identifying pedagogical concepts in the film and the way they are illustrated. Many responses have gone a step further towards analyzing and interpreting situations. It was encouraging that students were able to capture the pedagogical potential of most scenes in the film. The richness of the comments (of which only a part were included here) proves this.

Question 3 asked students to report what they had learned, by watching this movie. Because all the students answered the question, we appreciate that everyone had something to learn. The following comments support this:

- "I have learned that when some teaching methods do not help you achieve what you have proposed, you need to look for others. Learning maths through card play, history through song has seemed brilliant ideas that we can also use."

- "If a class is seen as the weakest, it does not mean it is true. Perhaps the right teacher for them was just not found yet, maybe they did not try enough."
- "We have learned how important it is to see the class as a family and to help students have the same perception, to respect, to help and even to care for each other."
- "Gaining students' trust and establishing lasting relationships counts enormously in education."
- "I learned not to superficially judge any situation, any student. Behind naughty, inappropriate behavior can hide a lot of things and situations. We need to find them and offer help and support."
- "The road to success is full of hardship. To quit is simple, to continue is the real challenge."
- "As a teacher, you need to be patient and persistent, and the results will appear."
- "I learned about the power a teacher has to change the mentality of students, parents and the principal."
- "I saw how important a teacher can be in the life of students."
- "Mr. Clark taught us that there are no weak pupils, but only students who are not sufficiently supported by family, school or society, or whose potential has not yet been discovered."
- "There are no bad students, only teachers who do not know how to approach various student typologies."
- "I understand how difficult the teaching profession is, but also how rewarding can be."

Through questions 4 and 5, we tried to access the students' emotional palette in relation to the movie they were watching. We felt this is important because emotions are elements that contribute to the perception of what surrounds us (in the case of the didactic profession) and can influence our decisions. To Question 4 (Was there anything in the movie to impress you?), all students answered yes. And the answers to question 5 (If so, what impressed?) allowed us to find out what impressed the students. Here are some of the quotes extracted from their answers:

- "Although I wanted to become a teacher, I now feel more determined because I saw the power a teacher has to make a difference in the lives of children."
- "It is an edifying film in terms of the teaching profession. He convinced me."
- "The best movie I've ever seen!"
- "I was impressed by the scene where the teacher was about to give up, but he came back. And he came back with new ideas, showing us the power of determination."
- "I have found an extra reason to overcome the fear of teaching I used to have."
- "I was impressed by the fact that the teacher, Mr. Clark, although regarded with suspicion, or even being rejected by the students at first, eventually succeeded in gaining the respect and admiration of all: students, parents, principal."
- "It impressed me that the teacher chose to teach the worst class in school, with the most problems, and his patience and perseverance were admirable."
- "It impressed me that the teacher was able to see beyond the appearances, treating problems like a challenge and to see the students' potential despite their failure."
- "The teacher's desire to connect with the pupils' life and his personal involvement with students to save them through education from their home environments impressed me very much."
- "I liked Mr. Clark's involvement in his pupils' lives, even out of class. I was impressed by the scene in which Schawn gave up his gang to go to study with Mr. Clark. I understand how important relationships based on trust are in education."

The richness and depth of the students' comments shows that the emotional impact of the film on the students was very strong. The film did not only inform the students, but also

touched their emotional part. The students were particularly impressed by two aspects, namely the behavior of the teacher and the evolution of students. Some have reinforced their conviction that they are on the right path, choosing the job of a teacher or even gave them reasons for self-improvement. Others have become more aware of the complexities of the teaching profession. There have been no emotional reactions of rejection towards this film and no indifference. All students found at least one aspect with emotional impact on them.

As a result of an individual-based reflection exercise, a general consensus on the pedagogical value of *The Triumph* could be found in the students' feedback. Without being influenced by each other in the way they think or feel, the students have demonstrated maturity and pedagogical discernment in the way they relate to the film. Even though the educational contexts in which they will work will probably be different from the one presented in the film, there are a number of general issues that apply when we relate to the didactic profession, such as teaching, learning, assessment, classroom management, educational relations, challenges of public school, etc.

Thus, the findings show that the pre-service teachers' reflections fall under four main directions: (1) identify pedagogical concepts within the film; (2) demonstrate the pedagogical conceptual understanding; (3) extract pedagogical meanings and aspects learned; (4) examine the emotional aspects of the teaching profession. For this reason, we believe that watching the film and then reflecting on it was a relevant experience, with cognitive and emotional impact for the undergraduates, with the potential to prevent the shock that future teachers often experience when faced with the educational reality in schools.

4 Conclusions

This study examined teacher candidates' perspectives on a learning experience, based on viewing and analyzing a film with educational content. This work adds to the repertoire of examples from the specialty literature, related to the ways in which film can be used in training courses for future teachers. Using film as a starting point for encouraging reflection on teaching and teachers turned out to be an effective and pleasant learning experience for preservice teachers, and a good way of demonstrating a connection between the theoretical concepts used within the course and professional practices illustrated in the video. Connecting the Pedagogy course with watching the film was done through a questionnaire with 5 open questions. Completing them allowed the students to explore the pedagogical universe of the chosen film, both cognitively and emotionally. Students identified multiple pedagogical concepts, explained how they were illustrated in the film, learned lessons, and emotionally connected to the film. We appreciate that the film we used has proven to be a valuable resource for gaining insight into the teaching profession. Exploring the chosen school film and the fictional teacher of it can help preservice teachers to develop as teachers themselves.

As a limit of the study, we appreciate that these results are valid on the studied sample group and can not be generalized. Future research should investigate a wide range of preservice students, coming from different specializations, at various stages of their studies. The creation of an updated set of films with educational content for viewing and analyzing (by various methods, questionnaires, interviews, group discussions) could provide advanced data on the use of films for gaining insight into the teaching profession.

The voice of the students was at the forefront of this work, through the extracts from their responses. We would like the end of this paper to belong to the students as well, through the voice of one of them who wrote at the end of the questionnaire: "It was like a life lesson. I'm glad I had the opportunity to see this great movie!"

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