

DANGEROUS MINDS AND DANGEROUS MESSAGES: HOW
FILM ANALYSIS IMPACTS THE CRITICAL
CONSCIOUSNESS OF FUTURE TEACHERS

by

CALI HODGE

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Approved: Alison L. Schmitke

Alison Schmitke

This thesis examines how the representation of schools, teachers, and students in the film *Dangerous Minds* interacts with societal perspectives of race, gender, and class as they pertain to the education system. Specifically, this investigation explores how the University of Oregon’s Educational Foundations program uses analysis of education films in the course EDST 225 “School & Representation in Film” as a way of raising the critical consciousness of preservice teachers. I interviewed three instructors in the College of Education, seven seniors in the Educational Foundations program, and five students from EDST 225. The interviews were analyzed to understand the impact of film analysis on students’ critical consciousness.

The observation from this thesis is that *Dangerous Minds* contributes to inaccurate stereotypes that negatively impact the perception of schools, as well as individuals involved in the education system. Additionally, the course EDST 225 supports students in developing critical consciousness by challenging them to see existing social stratification and systems of oppression in education, in particular through its current position as a pre-requisite to the Educational Foundations major where it functions as a point of reference for continued social justice learning.

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Introduction

Wow, it would be so cool to be a teacher. I feel like she totally comes in and saves these students.

-EDST 225 Student #2

That was definitely the beginning of our education journey.

-Senior Cohort Student #7

The movies we watch, factual or not, shape the way we see and understand the world. As they pertain to education in the United States, films send strong messages about what it means to teach and learn and be in schools. This becomes particularly relevant when we think about the messages (both positive and problematic) that preservice teachers absorb about schools and what their future role as an educator can and should look like.

The quotes above come from two students at the University of Oregon regarding their reactions to the film *Dangerous Minds*. The first, EDST 225 Student #2, had recently watched *Dangerous Minds* in a College of Education course: EDST 225 “School & Representation in Film.” The second, Senior Cohort Student #7, is a graduating senior reflecting back on their early-college experience in EDST 225. This class focuses on using film as a way to open up discussions on power, privilege, and oppression in schools as they are represented on-screen and enacted in reality. The class serves as a foundational course within the College of Education’s undergraduate teacher education program, the Educational Foundations major.

As a current student in the Educational Foundations major, I took EDST 225 “School & Representation in Film” during my freshman year at the University of Oregon. As a young and eager future teacher, I was challenged in this class to unpack

many of the oppressive narratives surrounding students, teachers, and schools that dominate the mainstream conversation about what education can and should be. This was framed by our discussion of *Dangerous Minds* (1995), one of the first films that we watched as a class. Analyzing this film within EDST 225 encouraged me to grow as a future educator and as an ally, demanding that I engage in deeply critical self-reflection to examine how my own identity as a middle-class white woman sits within the context of education. The process of using films to examine mainstream images about education challenged me to look both inward and outward, further developing my critical consciousness as a future educator.

As a graduating senior, I was curious to know if other students who had taken EDST 225 had similar experiences to mine. I recognized that many students may have taken the course with an already-nuanced understanding of both the oppression and possibility that exists within the education system in the United States. I also recognized the growth that I had witnessed in many of my peers as we progressed through the Educational Foundations program together. This curiosity forms the basis of inspiration for this thesis.

Purpose of Study

As there has already been a great deal of research on the broader effects of media representation of school, students, and teachers, my investigation aims to add to this research by exploring the impact of one film in one teacher education program. By focusing in depth on the role of *Dangerous Minds* in the curriculum of the Educational Foundations major within the University of Oregon's College of Education, I aim to clearly demonstrate the impact of this approach to teacher education on the students and

instructors within the program. The small scope of this investigation provides a detailed analysis of how the stereotypes and tropes depicted in this film shape an understanding of schools, as well as how this film within a teacher education program can be used as a point of entry to interrupt and discredit the perpetuation of these inaccurate representations.

Research Questions

In order to analyze *Dangerous Minds* as a cinematic representation of students, teachers, and schools, as well as the impact of this representation on preservice teachers, I developed two research questions to guide this investigation:

1. How does *Dangerous Minds* operate within a broad pattern of film representation to inform the viewer's understanding of race, class, and gender within schools?
2. To what extent does a study of film representation within the University of Oregon's College of Education impact the critical consciousness of future educators?

To explore the first research question, I offer a detailed overview and analysis of how *Dangerous Minds* represents students, teachers, and schools. Much of this discussion is found within the literature review, as *Dangerous Minds* and other urban education films have been extensively explored within the existing literature. The second research question is then primarily addressed through interviews with instructors and students within the College of Education who have participated in the course EDST 225, "School & Representation in Film," and subsequent analysis of the presence of critical consciousness in these responses.

This thesis is divided in four overarching chapters. Chapter 2 is the literature review, in which I situate *Dangerous Minds* as both a part of a longstanding pattern of misrepresenting teachers, students, and schools within urban education films as well as a powerful tool for teacher education programs. In Chapter 3, I explain the methods used for data collection and subsequent analysis. In Chapter 4, I discuss the results of the study, simultaneously integrating an analysis of these findings. In the conclusion, I discuss the implications of this study, its limitations, as well as my recommendations for the Educational Foundations program and for further research.

Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to provide both an overview and analysis of existing literature on *Dangerous Minds* and film in teacher education programs. In the first section, “*Dangerous Minds: Overview & Discussion*,” I offer a brief summary of the plot and analyze the problematic ways in which *Dangerous Minds* perpetuates the white savior narrative, an oppressive construction of urban students of color, and the myth of meritocracy. In the second section, “*Dangerous Minds in Teacher Education*,” I examine the existing literature on the use of film in teacher education programs, situating *Dangerous Minds* as a tool to identify and disrupt stereotypes and a vehicle for using reflection to develop critical consciousness. Lastly, in “*Dangerous Minds in EDST 225*,” I narrow the focus in on the use of *Dangerous Minds* and film within the University of Oregon’s Educational Foundations program.

Dangerous Minds: Overview & Discussion

In 1995, the film *Dangerous Minds* hit theaters. Based on a book written by teacher LouAnne Johnson titled *My Posse Don’t Do Homework*¹ (1992), this film tells the story of Johnson’s first year as a high school English teacher. Set in an urban school that predominantly serves students of color and of lower socioeconomic status, the narrative centers on the attempts of white, middle-class LouAnne Johnson to “get through” to her students and inspire a love of learning within them. The film represents

¹ This investigation primarily focuses on *Dangerous Minds*, the film adaptation of *My Posse Don’t Do Homework*. However, the label “based on a true story” may still impact the ways in which audiences see and understand the film. For more on this, see section “Student Analysis of Representation.”

Johnson as the lone champion for her students in a school and education system that has largely given up on them, and it celebrates her ability to bring hope, determination, and a passion for education and success to her students. What this film fails to illustrate is the degree to which this representation of students, teachers, and schools in general is both unrealistic and highly problematic. *Dangerous Minds* glorifies the white savior narrative, constructs urban students of color as standing in the way of their own success, and perpetuates the myth of meritocracy in the way it defines and represents success.

The White Savior Narrative

Over and over again in films such as *Dangerous Minds*, the possibility that students of color will succeed is depicted as all but nonexistent until a white teacher brings them the opportunity. In a study reviewing the representation of teachers in film, Wells & Serman (1998) note that “the heroic teachers are white and most of the students are African American or Latino” (as cited in Beyerbach, 2005, p. 270). Films such as *Dangerous Minds*, *Freedom Writers*, *The Principal*, *The Substitute*, and *Blackboard Jungle* depict white teachers who “enter their classrooms as timid tenderfoots but soon turn into pedagogical behemoths, vanquishing bad grades and bad attitudes with a single wave of their ruler” (Hughey, 2014, p. 53). Bell (1998) describes the uncannily similar plot structure of these “urban teacher” movies, in which filmmakers “dump middle-class thirty-something, ‘outsider’ adult characters into the glamorized world of urban high schools, where kids in the class are grappling with problems of poverty, violence, and racial prejudice” (p. 23). *Dangerous Minds* offers a blunt example of the problems of urban education films that depict the white savior narrative.

Dangerous Minds opens with a barrage of images that attempt to convey a world of crime, poverty, and delinquency to the viewer: urban housing projects, graffiti, drug dealing, and students being bussed out of the neighborhood to go to school, all set to the sound of Coolio's "Gangsta's Paradise." Henry Giroux (1997) describes this initial framing as a combination of "racial iconography and musical score that constructs minority students as both the objects of fear and subjects in need of discipline and control," leading the presumed-white audience to prepare for "someone to take charge" (p. 47).



Figure 1. Opening Scene

The opening montage of *Dangerous Minds* constructs the film's urban setting as criminal and out of control as a way to construct the low-income students of color as being essentially unteachable.

Over the course of the film, LouAnne Johnson is shown as the sole champion for student success: the rest of the school administration, students' families, and even the

students themselves are depicted as standing in the way of succeeding in school, and by extension in life. This representation embodies the white savior narrative, defining success in terms of the values of middle-class white America and the goal of education being to socialize students to fit within this box as a result of hard work and dedication on the part of a well-meaning white teacher (Hughey, 2014; Chennault, 2006).

Construction of Urban Students of Color

Both in *Dangerous Minds* and in other urban education films, the white savior narrative ignores the agency of students. It ignores the harm to students that will arise as a result of teaching without a competent understanding of students' lived experiences and a pedagogy that validates and centers students' identities and experiences in the classroom. School films tend to represent criminality as an "inevitability" of students of color, further pathologizing black and Latinx students (Chennault, 2006, p. 44).

The construction of urban students of color as unmotivated, as criminal, and – in LouAnne Johnson's words – as "rejects from hell" blames students for obstacles within their own life rather than locating the source of at least some student struggle in the racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression present in their education. Urban education films such as *Dangerous Minds* "portray the individual attitude of students as the *primary* obstacle to their academic achievement" (Bulman, 2005, p. 51). *Dangerous Minds*, which places the blame for perceived failure on the shoulders of students and their families, suggests that the students must change in order to achieve the success shown in the movie's happy ending (Bulman, 2005).

If the movie does indeed depict a happy ending, we must then ask, happy for whom? For the students? For Ms. Johnson? For the audience? The neatly-packaged

happy ending presented in *Dangerous Minds* is an illusion. Though this film is based on LouAnne Johnson's (1992) *My Posse Don't Do Homework*, it is not simply a re-telling of real-life events.

Many of the key differences between the *My Posse Don't Do Homework* and *Dangerous Minds* highlight the choices made within the filmmaking process that represent teaching and learning in a way that is both inaccurate and harmful. For example, the changes that occur in the classroom actually happened over the course of years rather than a single semester, and the students were supported by a team of teachers rather than just Ms. Johnson. The film's choice to condense the timeframe and position Ms. Johnson as the students' lone champion contorts this story to fit the white savior narrative. In reality, approximately half of the class was "composed of middle-class white students" (Bulman, 2005, p. 78), which speaks to the use of existing stereotypes about urban students of color in *Dangerous Minds* to portray a message of school failure.

This adapted screenplay both creates and reproduces oppression through the repetition of normalized denigrating images of urban students of color. Kumashiro (2002) writes:

Oppression is produced by discourse, and in particular, is produced when certain discourses (especially ways of thinking that privilege certain identities and marginalize others) are cited over and over. (p. 50)

As part of a pattern in urban education films, *Dangerous Minds* contributes to this continuous "citing" of urban students of color as criminal and standing in the way of their own success. The success of students of color is determined by the role of a (usually white) teacher in this pattern, playing into a narrative that is already familiar to

audiences and further perpetuating the underlying assumption that academic success is equated with whiteness (Castagno, 2014).

The pedagogy reflected in *Dangerous Minds* is not one of embracing students as they are and still challenging them to grow and to learn. Students are depicted as “other people’s children” (Delpit, 2006), as problems for teachers to fix rather than people to love and to grow. This representation of education does not show a teacher engaging in culturally sustaining pedagogy, which “explicitly calls for schooling to be a site for sustaining the cultural ways of being of communities of color” (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 5). Instead, the film depicts education as a socializing agent, in which students of color receive “moral instruction about individual bootstrapping” and personal responsibility that demand students to adapt to the norms of the white middle class that Johnson perpetuates in her teaching (Hughey, 2014, p. 54; Paris & Alim, 2017).

If the film is designed as an inspirational story of teaching and learning (cue the sweeping orchestra and students calling Ms. Johnson their “light”), then the inspiration is directed towards an audience that is presumed to identify more with Ms. Johnson and similarly be educated, white, and middle class (Bulman, 2005). In that case, Bulman (2005) asks these questions of the critical viewer:

Will the audience be the ones who learn a lesson? Or will the students radically change their behavior as they come under the civilizing influence of the middle-class teacher who will socialize them in the culture of middle-class life? (p. 52)

The socialization of students of color that is represented in *Dangerous Minds* further normalizes the use of measuring educational success against standards based in whiteness and middle-class values.

Myth of Meritocracy

Dangerous Minds' explicit theme of "choice" contributes to the myth of meritocracy, which assumes that every individual is given equal opportunities in society and it is up to them to work hard and achieve success – essentially, success based on an individual's merit. This is an incredibly dangerous narrative, as it neglects to acknowledge systems of power and oppression that function to provide some individuals with opportunities that are denied to others while simultaneously attempting to mask this unequal playing field. In *Dangerous Minds*, LouAnne Johnson perpetuates this idea. She states, "there are no victims in this classroom" (Simpson, Bruckheimer, & Smith, 1995). Everyone is responsible for their own success, which is defined on her terms. In her lessons, Johnson emphasizes the importance of choice in her students' lives. In a grammar lesson, the class analyzes the structure of the sentence "We choose to die." Callie, one of the students, states that the verb "choose" is the most important, "because that's the difference between owning your life and being afraid" (Simpson, Bruckheimer, & Smith, 1995).



Figure 2. We Choose to Die.

In LouAnne Johnson's classroom in *Dangerous Minds*, success is depicted as being available to all, but achieved only by those who choose to work for it. The theme of "choice" that runs through the film contributes to its perpetuation of the myth of meritocracy.

This emphasis on choice places all of the responsibility for succeeding in the hands of the students, rather than both exploring the institutional barriers to success and broadening what the possible definitions of success could be.

This pervasive theme of choice is central to *Dangerous Minds*, but yet is not mirrored in the text upon which the film is based. In *My Posse Don't Do Homework*, rather than emphasize choice as the only key to success within a perceived meritocracy, the real Ms. Johnson maintained (if only slightly) a more nuanced perspective on the unequal realities facing her students:

I understand that some children choose to fail, but I can't help feeling that it's me as a teacher and the school system as a social institution that are, in reality, failing our children and their future. (p. 97)

This emphasis on personal responsibility as the key to success, it seems, is largely implemented only in the film adaptation.

Dangerous Minds' emphasis on choice functions as part of a broader narrative that completely ignores the ways in which our society and the education system systematically disadvantages students based on students' raced, classed, and gendered identities. This meritocratic perspective refuses to acknowledge the institutional barriers and oppressive structures that allow some students to succeed at the expense of others. *Dangerous Minds* fails to recognize the historical legacies of institutionalized racism, segregation, and unequal school funding that shape the possibilities offered to students in schools.

Throughout history, schools in the United States have taught "contempt for people of other nations, races, Native Americans, women" (Zinn, 2005, p. 538). For emerging bilingual Latinx students, schools have enacted policies and practices in which "knowledge of Spanish is treated as a handicap, not as an asset" (Gonzalez, 2011, p. 247). In 1944, the American Council on Education reported on the levels of spending across the nation in different school districts. Out of the 1.56 million children who were educated "in classrooms whose budget was less than \$600," 80% were black (Katznelson, 2005, p. 35).

These examples of our nation's pervasive social stratification in schooling are not just representative of historical practices. Rather, this history directly informs the present-day realities of education. Rosiek & Kinslow (2016) offer an extensive case study of the intentional and pervasive resegregation of schools that has been occurring ever since *Brown v. Board of Education* banned de jure segregation. Even at the height of school integration efforts during the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, "the erosion of federal support for school desegregation was beginning" (Rosiek & Kinslow, 2016, p.

4). Currently, our nation's schools are experiencing a "double segregation based on both income levels and race" (Rosiek & Kinslow, 2016, p. 8).

Similarly, racism embedded in both historical and current housing practices impacts this "double segregation" within our nation's schools. Rothstein (2017) explores how local, state, and federal housing policies have actively discriminated against people of color, thus restricting access to wealth and resources in a country where wealth is strongly based in home equity. Today, when the wealth of a family stems mainly from the value of their house, the average black family has a net worth that is approximately one-eighth that of the average white household (Adelman & Herbes-Sommers, 2003). Katznelson (2005) offers a detailed analysis of one of these policies, demonstrating how the G.I. Bill that helped to create middle-class America was "deliberately designed to accommodate Jim Crow" and restricted the ability of black Americans to access the benefits that it offered (p. 114). Furthermore, when local revenues such as property taxes make up forty-five percent of our nation's school funding (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016, p. xi), the long history of wealth disparities based in racist housing practices impacts the level of funding that schools serving primarily low-income students and students of color are able to receive.

This deeper look at how discriminatory housing practices are tied to school funding and access to resources is just one example of how "success" in schools is not an opportunity that is afforded equally to all students. *Dangerous Minds* itself depicts wealth disparities in education, such as commentary from one of the teachers that the school cannot afford basic supplies for their students:

We're out of Xerox paper and art paper and we're short on pencils. But we do have plenty of students. I guess that, uh, balances things out.

Yet *Dangerous Minds* fails to offer a representation of schools that focuses on effecting positive change by addressing institutional problems as well as supporting individual students. The film perpetuates an ideology that blames students for their perceived inability to do well in school, overlooking the more complex history about access to resources that contributes to a student's ability to perform. Instead, *Dangerous Minds* paints the picture that students simply aren't working hard enough and will succeed only through being saved by their heroic white teacher. This representation perpetuates intensely problematic narratives about what it means to teach and learn in schools in our society.

***Dangerous Minds* in Teacher Education**

Why study film in teacher education? Why analyze *Dangerous Minds*? Scholars of teacher education have explored the role that studying films centered on teachers, schools, and students can have on developing the critical consciousness of future educators in teacher preparation programs. Brazilian educator and education theorist Paulo Freire (2000) discusses critical consciousness as a process of both reflection and action, which entails “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 35). Across the literature, two key aims stand out as strong rationale for incorporating a study of film in teacher education as a tool in developing critical consciousness: identifying and disrupting stereotypes as they are represented in media, and engaging the viewer in self-reflection as it relates to their role within systems of oppression.

Identifying and Disrupting Stereotypes

As detailed in the previous sections, the majority of urban education films portray students of color as lazy, criminal, living in poverty, and unmotivated to achieve success (Solorzano, 1997). Teachers are represented as white, middle-class, and the lone savior of students. These stereotypes enforce a dangerous narrative of what education can and should look like, ignoring the realities that students, teachers, and schools experience every day.

If these are the stereotypes represented in and perpetuated by *Dangerous Minds*, what impact does that have on the ways teachers engage with students in reality? Allport (1979), defines a stereotype as “an exaggerated belief associated with a category. Its function is to justify (rationalize) our conduct in relation to that category” (p. 191, as cited in Solorzano, 1997, p. 8). If teachers believe the stereotype of students of color as lazy and/or criminal, then that belief can be used as justification for associating whiteness with success and (explicitly or implicitly) marginalizing students of color in the classroom.

Part of the responsibility of teacher education programs is to identify and disrupt stereotypes in the minds and actions of preservice teachers. Kumashiro (2002) describes oppression as the repetition of such stereotypes “throughout many levels of society” (p. 51). He writes that “people often associate certain identities with certain attributes because over time those associations have been repeated and thus naturalized” (p. 52). Many preservice teachers may hold these “naturalized” oppressive stereotypes of urban schools, students of color, and their own role in education. To use Kumashiro’s language, films such as *Dangerous Minds* both *cite* these stereotypes and *supplement*

them, drawing on viewers' previous ideas about race, class, and gender in schools and reinforcing problematic narratives through repeated representation of these stereotypes.

The association of the word "urban" with both students of color and poverty exemplifies the harm that can come from the repetition of stereotypes in education. In her article "What Do You Mean When You Say Urban?," Dyan Watson (2011) demonstrates that "urban was constructed as a code word for *race*, specifically black and Latina/o, and often for *poor*. Teachers equated urban with students of color and the characteristics they perceived as belonging to students of color" (p. 48). Researchers Hampton, Peng, & Ann (2008) conducted a study investigating preservice teachers' preconceptions of urban schools. Their study found that preservice teachers associated urban schools with violence, crowded classrooms, neglected facilities, students of color, students from poor or working-class families, lower-paying teaching positions – stereotypes that are all enforced by films such as *Dangerous Minds* (Hampton, Peng, & Ann, 2008). However, the study's results also indicated that participants "do not completely trust media portrayals of urban schools" (p. 286), indicating the possibility for teacher education programs to engage in analysis and discussion of media representations as a way to question some of these deeply rooted and oppressive stereotypes (Beyerbach, 2005).

Through supporting preservice teachers in identifying the ways in which films create and perpetuate harmful stereotypes, teacher education programs can challenge their students to disrupt the presence of these stereotypes in their own worldview and future pedagogy as educators.

Reflection in Developing Critical Consciousness

In order to support students in their future classrooms, preservice teachers must go beyond identifying and disrupting stereotypes found in others. Rather, they must extend this process of disruption to include exploring their own role within systems of power and oppression. In order to fully see and understand students, teachers must see and understand themselves. This requires that teachers “face and accept their own identities” (Nieto, 2000, p. 184). Teacher education programs need to provide all of the future educators that they serve “with opportunities to reflect on their identities and privilege before teaching students from diverse backgrounds” (Nieto, 2000, p. 184).

By using film, teacher educators can encourage preservice teachers to explore how their own understandings of schools are shaped by how they are represented in the media (Beyerbach, 2005). This reflection is an integral part of developing critical consciousness, challenging educators to examine how their own beliefs and actions are never neutral in an education system that perpetuates oppression (Trier, 2001; Valenzuela, 2016).

Teacher education programs can incorporate films to facilitate a variety of reflection experiences. Trier (2001) describes how he uses films to “engage students in reflections about the issue of the relationship between the personal and professional lives of teachers” (p. 131). He also describes the use of school films in teacher education as a way to articulate a “social or analytical theory” that informs critical pedagogy (Trier, 2009, p. 121). Beyerbach (2005) discusses how reflection and analysis of film can be used to question the “hidden assumptions about power relations implicit in representations of social interaction” (p. 269). Schwarz (2001) echoes Beyerbach’s

work, describing the usefulness of films such as *Dangerous Minds* in the early stages of teacher education to ask important critical questions about “how realistic these portrayals are and what messages about schools and children are offered” (p. 116).

Schwarz also extends this conversation to include the work that preservice teachers are doing in classrooms, using these field placement experiences as a way to evaluate the truth of these media representations in comparison with the “real school experiences in which these preservice teachers are involved” (p. 116).

If teacher education programs are to effectively prepare preservice teachers (of all identities) to teach diverse populations of students, then reflection – and specifically self-reflection – are integral to this work. These scholars of education have found that the use of film in teacher education classrooms offers a tool to engage preservice teachers in this reflection as a method for developing critical consciousness.

The Study of Film in the University of Oregon’s College of Education

As illustrated in the previous section, the practice of using film as a tool within teacher education programs challenges preservice teachers both to identify the stereotypes and oppressive narratives present in school films and to reflect on their own identities as it relates to teaching. The University of Oregon’s College of Education primarily integrates this practice into their Educational Foundations program through the course EDST 225, “School & Representation in Film.” This course has been taught at the University of Oregon under this title since 2013, though pilot renditions of this course under the title “Hollywood’s Teacher” had been offered in years prior (A. Schmitke & E. Olivos, memorandum, January 23, 2013).

As stated in the proposal to permanently establish this class, the purpose of EDST 225 is to “examine the various influences of popular culture on schools and teachers, along with the mediating factors of race, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexuality, religious, language, and nationality” (A. Schmitke & E. Olivos, memorandum, January 23, 2013). The most recent rendition of the course syllabus restates and expands on this purpose: EDST 225 “examines the narratives about teachers, schools, and schooling—both those we tell ourselves about our own school experiences and those told to us by popular films” (course syllabus, March 31, 2018). This thesis aims to investigate how the goals of this course are met or unmet in the commentary of students, both immediately following their participation in EDST 225 and after continued learning within the Educational Foundations program.

Chapter 3: METHODS

Research Design

In order to more fully investigate the impact of studying *Dangerous Minds* in teacher education, I employed two main approaches to my research. The first phase of research was an investigation and analysis of *Dangerous Minds* itself, exploring how it operates within a broader pattern of film representation to inform the viewers understanding of race, class, and gender within schools. Much of this has been discussed previously in the literature and has been addressed in the literature review of this thesis. Additionally, I was more specifically interested in how *Dangerous Minds* and the process of studying this film and others in the context of teacher education programs impacted students' critical consciousness and their understanding of teachers, students, and schools. I chose to focus this question narrowly on the College of Education at the University of Oregon, looking at how students and instructors in EDST 225: School & Representation in Film unpack *Dangerous Minds* and use this film as a vehicle for discussion and critical analysis. In order to investigate how the study of *Dangerous Minds* within EDST 225 impacts the critical consciousness of future educators, I used interviews to gather qualitative data on how students and instructors interacted with this film in the context of teacher education at the University of Oregon.

Interviews

In order to investigate the impact that a critical study of *Dangerous Minds* within EDST 225 has on students in the Educational Foundations major at the University of Oregon, I interviewed a sample of students and instructors involved with

this course. I aimed to better understand how students conceptualized *Dangerous Minds* as a representation of teachers and how they related these ideas to their own roles within education. To do so, I interviewed three different populations related to EDST 225: students who were enrolled in EDST 225 during the fall or winter terms of the 2017-2018 academic year; students in the 2017-2018 Educational Foundations cohort in their last year of study in the Education Studies department; and instructors who taught the course during the 2017-2018 academic year. By interviewing individuals from these three areas, I hoped to get a broader understanding of how EDST 225 and a study of *Dangerous Minds* fit into the larger aims of the Educational Foundations program.

EDST 225 Students

I interviewed 5 students enrolled in EDST 225. These students had enrolled either as part of their Pre-Education requirements, or to fulfill an American Cultures general education requirement set forth by the University of Oregon. I chose to interview students currently or recently in this course to gather information about students' initial reactions to *Dangerous Minds*, both the film itself and the study of the film in the context of the course. I asked each participant three questions (see Appendix A), as well as occasional follow-up questions to clarify their answers or to ask them to elaborate more on their statements.

Senior Cohort Students

I interviewed 7 students from the 2017-2018 Educational Foundations cohort in their senior year of study. These students had taken EDST 225 anywhere from 1-3 years prior to our interview, as part of the pre-requisites for being accepted into the

Educational Foundations program. I decided to interview students in their final year of study in the program as a point of comparison to students who had just taken EDST 225. I aimed to investigate how these students' recollections and understandings of *Dangerous Minds* and EDST 225 compared to those of students fresh out of the course. In the subsequent analysis, I discuss the similarities and differences between these two groups of students, as well as the possible factors that could contribute to these different ways of understanding the film and the course. The interview questions asked of these students are listed in Appendix A.

Instructors

I interviewed all three instructors who taught EDST 225 over the course of the 2017-2018 academic year. All three instructors were doctoral students in the Critical and Sociocultural Studies in Education program, and taught this course as part of their roles as graduate employees at the university. I chose to interview these individuals as a way of framing student responses within the course goals for how *Dangerous Minds* is studied in the context of EDST 225. What are the instructors goals for showing this film? How do they know if they've met these goals? These questions are examples of what we discussed in our interviews—the exact questions are listed in Appendix A.

Methods of Analysis

After interviewing all participants, I coded each of the interviews to identify similarities and patterns across the different responses. By doing so, I was able to find common themes shared across experiences, as well as where students and instructors differed in their understanding of *Dangerous Minds* and the role of film study in teacher

education. This method of analysis allowed me to explore each interview in depth, as well as examine trends across the various experiences of students and instructors. By doing so, I was able to more clearly identify how and when the goals of studying *Dangerous Minds* in EDST 225 were met, and where patterns in responses indicated a need for improvements and growth in the program. I supplemented the analysis of these interviews by continuing to refer back to the scholarly work that has already been done exploring how *Dangerous Minds* and film study operates in teacher education, identifying how the findings from the interviews fit in or differed from these broader themes and patterns.

Limitations

The design of this study limits its ability to be generalizable. This study offers an in-depth look at one film within one class within one teacher education program. Thus, while it offers an in-depth and focused examination, it is limited in its ability to be applied to other courses at other universities. The study is also limited by the potential differences in intended career paths of student participants. Though the majority of Educational Foundations senior cohort students plan to enter the field of education as teachers, some of the EDST 225 students had declared other majors such as biology or business and were not planning to continue in the Educational Foundations program or become teachers. This may impact the type of messages that students take from the films and the course, though instructors of EDST 225 teach the course to be applicable to a variety of fields of study in its emphasis on critical thinking and media literacy.

Chapter 4: FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

In interviews where students and instructors reflected on how *Dangerous Minds* and EDST 225 impacted students' critical consciousness, three overarching themes emerged: the role of both *Dangerous Minds* and EDST 225 as a central point of reference for students, the differences in the content of student analysis as discussed in their interviews, and how students talk about *Dangerous Minds* in explicitly and implicitly raced, classed, and gendered ways. These themes allowed for different ways of discussing and analyzing students' critical consciousness as it relates to their experience with *Dangerous Minds* and EDST 225 and will be the overarching structure for this chapter.

The Role of *Dangerous Minds* and Film in Education Studies

Why study *Dangerous Minds*? Why center an entire course on studying film representations of teachers, students, and schools? In interviews conducted with both students and instructors, many individuals discussed what they perceived as the goals and possible benefits of studying *Dangerous Minds* and education films in general within the context of teacher education. All of the instructors cited themes similar to those present in the literature, such as using these images as a vehicle for deeper conversations and as a tool for self-reflection. I asked instructors to share their reasons for choosing to show this film in their classes. In addition to brief references to precedence in the course curriculum, all three instructors cited how *Dangerous Minds* serves as a central point of reference for students throughout the course with its clear depiction of systems of difference, a sentiment echoed by many students' responses.

A Central Point of Reference

Dangerous Minds has “historically been shown in the class” (Instructor #1), which is reflected in its inclusion in the initial course proposal from 2013. This speaks to its continued relevancy for students and instructors in representing key ideas of the course. One instructor noted that while simply citing precedence is a “terrible reason to do anything,” it continued to hold a key position in the course because “it gets at *everything*” (Instructor #1). Instructor #2 echoed this sentiment, stating that they chose to show the film in part because “it’s on the curriculum,” but acknowledging that they “changed other things in the curriculum” but kept *Dangerous Minds* as a constant because it’s a “simple example of some of the more complicated things” that the class discusses later in the term. The continued presence of *Dangerous Minds* in EDST 225 reflects the literature, in which *Dangerous Minds* is referenced time and time again as a film used in media studies in teacher education (Beyerbach, 2005; Brown, 2015; Bulman, 2005; Chennault, 2006; Hughey, 2010; Morrison, 2007; Schwarz, 2001; Solorzano, 1997; Trier, 2001; Trier, 2009).

All three instructors discussed how *Dangerous Minds* functions as a simple example of more complex ideas as one of the reasons that they not only show the film but choose to begin the course with it. “Oh my god, the depictions are just so out there, right?” exclaimed Instructor #1, referencing what Instructor #2 described as a “hyperbolized” representation of how race, class, and gender are portrayed in representations of teaching and school. “I chose to show [*Dangerous Minds*], and really start with that film, because I feel like it embodies so many archetypes of a typical, made for middle class white America education film,” stated Instructor #2. “It’s a really

great starting off point for some deeper critical analysis throughout the course of the term.”

Choosing to show *Dangerous Minds* as the first film of the term allows it to become a “central point of reference” for how students engage with the key ideas of the course (Instructor #2). All three instructors cited its usefulness as a “teaching tool,” how it helps them facilitate a space in which even students “who are not necessarily engaging critically with the films that they watch, watch that and go ‘wait a minute’” (Instructor #3). This film frames how students engage in “talking about white-savior narratives, talking about the construction of urban students of color” (Instructor #2), acting as an “entry point to a lot of the larger metaphors that we see all the time but usually in a lot more complicated situations” (Instructor #2).

For example, Instructor #2 described how later in the term, such as “in Week 7, students are still referring back to *Dangerous Minds* even though that was like Week 2.” Instructor #3 noted that after using *Dangerous Minds* as a first example of the teacher-savior trope, students were able to identify that representation “in more complicated situations” in other course films through direct comparison back to *Dangerous Minds*. These references occur “consistently in writing, in conversations that we’re having in class,” establishing this film as an integral piece in unpacking larger ideas later in the course.

These same ideas were present in some of the student responses to interview questions. One student from EDST 225 spoke of the prevalence of *Dangerous Minds* in class discussions: “when we watched more movies in the class, we always went back to this one” (EDST 225 Student #4). In a slightly different vein, students from the senior

cohort spoke more so of the entire EDST 225 course as being a beneficial point of reference in their broader experience within the College of Education. Senior Cohort Student #3 called the class “a good tool to base everything off of,” which is reflected in the connections students made to other courses throughout their experience in the program.² Other students described the class as “a good way to start the conversation” (Senior Cohort Student #5), as well as a “really cool segue into something slightly different that was helpful in later class discussions (Senior Cohort Student #6). One student gave an example of how they continued to utilize this class as a point of reference in their continued course of study, stating “I still look back at that class, and look at my papers for certain topics” (Senior Cohort Student #4). These interview responses offer another perspective for how *Dangerous Minds*, and EDST 225 as a whole, can function as a point of reference for students in more complex discussions.

Student Analysis of Representation

In films that are based on a true story, the line between fact and fiction can become easily blurred. What elements of *Dangerous Minds* are accurate portrayals of the students, teachers, and school in the real-life LouAnne’s Johnson’s (1992) book *My Posse Don’t Do Homework?* What aspects of the film are Hollywood dramatizations, building on preexisting narratives about what it looks like to teach and learn in urban education? In interviews, students from EDST 225 and the senior cohort demonstrated varying ways of interpreting *Dangerous Minds* as a representation of teaching and

² For more on the connections that students made to other courses and experiences within the Educational Foundations program, see “Connections” section within “Complex Conversations: How Students Talk about *Dangerous Minds*.”

learning in schools. These interpretations differed based on conceptions of representation and the impact of representation based on identity.

Conception of “Representation”

In their responses, students discussed their ideas about media representations in very different ways, generally as either a factual depiction of struggle and success or as an image perpetuating problematic myths. Forty percent of students interviewed who had just taken EDST 225 discussed *Dangerous Minds* as if it were a real-life representation of teaching and learning in schools, while the other sixty percent demonstrated a more complex understanding of the film as a representation created on purpose that both produces and reproduces oppressive narratives about students, teachers, and schools.

EDST 225 Student #3 described the film as “sen[ding] a message about American public schools really needing help and really struggling,” specifically in “urban contexts in which this film was set.” To this student, *Dangerous Minds* represented what they perceived to be real-life problems facing schools, students, and teachers. EDST 225 Student #2 echoed these ideas, stating that it was “interesting to see what a teacher has to go through being a teacher in a classroom like that versus like teachers I grew up with” implying that Ms. Johnson’s struggles as an educator reflected a real-life experience with which their own K-12 education could be compared.

These students’ responses reflect one of the key problems that stem from education films: viewing them as objective truth rather than a purposefully constructed representation of schools based on previously existing narratives, stereotypes, and ideologies about what education can and should be. When *Dangerous Minds* is

interpreted as truth, the stereotypes in the film continue to live on with “tangible consequences” in the worldviews and actions of the viewer (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 50). The film confirms the oppressive narratives that viewers may already hold. But when *Dangerous Minds* is critically analyzed in a context such as EDST 225, then the possibility arises for a more complex and accurate discussion of the problems of interpreting such film representations of schools as truth.

The other sixty percent of EDST 225 students that recognized the film as inaccurate made explicit references to filmmakers and characters and audiences in their interviews. EDST 225 Student #1 stated that the “audience for that [*Dangerous Minds*] was probably for the middle-class audience,” identifying how filmmakers may use tropes or familiar narratives to appeal to a certain audience. EDST 225 Student #5 discussed filmmakers and characters in their analysis of the film:

It was interesting in the movie how she was like a stand-alone rebellious teacher. That was her thing, other than being the ‘light’ for these students. I thought it was interesting that they made her character so that the administration wasn’t gonna work with her and the other teacher wasn’t really either... But I don’t think that’s realistic.

In this quote, this student offers a nuanced analysis of how “they,” meaning filmmakers, make explicit choices while creating characters, choices that shape how audiences are primed to react to the storyline. This student identifies how portraying LouAnne Johnson as in opposition with the administration and other teachers positions her in the role of the white savior. These students who discussed the film not as real life, but rather as a representation created on purpose, explored how this representation both reproduces and creates damaging stereotypes about urban students of color, white teachers, and the myth of meritocracy.

Students from the Educational Foundations senior cohort elaborated on the inaccuracies of this representation, complicating how representations function to inform our understandings of people. These interview responses went beyond a mere identification of the problematic elements of the film, complicating their analysis to discuss the nuances of race, class, and gender as they are related to the broader social context of teaching. Senior Cohort Student #1 discussed “some of the cinematic things about it that helped to portray” the white savior narrative, such as the “opening scene where they’re playing ‘Gangsta’s Paradise.’” Here we see another reference to “they” – the filmmakers – and analysis of how the choices made in the film shape the way audiences are supposed to react. This student’s analysis of the film’s opening imagery and music reflects Giroux’s (1997) critique that *Dangerous Minds* opens with “racial iconography and [a] musical score that constructs minority students as both the objects of fear and subjects in need of discipline and control” (p. 47). Senior Cohort Student #1 is demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of how the audience is primed from the very opening of the film to expect the white savior narrative of schooling.

Senior Cohort Student #5 explored another element of media literacy, naming the tension that comes when a film is “based on a true story.” This phrase “can mean a lot of things,” stated Senior Cohort Student #5, emphasizing the importance of critically analyzing these films to identify “what parts of it are overemphasized for the viewer’s enjoyment.” This quote highlights the importance of separating fact from fiction, especially in a fictional film based on fact, as a way of identifying how representations can contribute to oppressive dominant narratives when filmmakers choose to play into preexisting ideologies. The ability to situate *Dangerous Minds* within a broader social

context is reflective of Paulo Freire's (2000) discussion of critical consciousness as being able to both read the word and read the world. In this instance, Senior Cohort Student #5 is both reading the "word" – *Dangerous Minds* – and reading the "world" – how the actions and choices of filmmakers create a representation that both produces and reproduces damaging narratives about students, teachers, and schools. This is especially important considering the "based on a true story" label applied to *Dangerous Minds*, despite the fact that the film "borrows loosely" from the real LouAnne Johnson's (1992) *My Posse Don't Do Homework* (Bell, 1998, p. 26). Senior Cohort Student #5's recognition that these differences exist between the film and the book, as well as between the film and reality, speak to the power of analyzing and discussing *Dangerous Minds* in EDST 225 as a way raising students' critical consciousness.

Impact of Representations: Identity Represented on Screen & In the Classroom

Dangerous Minds portrays LouAnne Johnson as a relatable and sympathetic character to the audience, and as a film it is designed to appeal to a presumed middle-class, white, educated audience (Bulman, 2005; Giroux, 1997). This audience is positioned to root for her and to see the "at-risk, poor, and inner-city students" as secondary characters and as problems to be fixed (Bulman, 2005, p. 52). For white students in EDST 225 who have not done the work of unpacking how this is problematic, the centralization of LouAnne's experience may appear normal and familiar. Until this point, discussion of an imaginary "viewer" has largely focused on identifying and disrupting the oppressive narratives present both in *Dangerous Minds* and in the viewer's own mind – primarily white students who have the privilege to be able to ignore and normalize the presence of oppression in *Dangerous Minds*. But what

about students in EDST 225 who don't fit the characteristics of the film's intended audience?

Most of the students who I interviewed, and all of the instructors, identified as white. Some of these named their whiteness explicitly, while others did not. The silence of participants who visibly present as white reflects how silence often appears as a characteristic of an individual in possession of privilege (Lipsitz, 2006; Mazzei, 2011). Only one student verbally identified as a person of color in their interviews, which speaks to the lack of racial diversity in this study, in the overall demographics of the Educational Foundations program, as well as in the profession of K-12 teaching in general – in which approximately twenty percent of teachers are people of color (Taie & Goldring, 2017, p. 3).

Senior Cohort Student #2 stated, “I think for me, just because I am Mexican-American, I watched it a little bit differently.” This student shared that their K-12 education consisted mainly of “all white teachers” and “all-white peers,” and how this environment made impacted the way they were able to show up in the classroom: “I felt like I have to prove myself a little more.” This student discussed how, even though they may have lived experiences based on their identity as a person of color that already point them toward a critical perspective while watching *Dangerous Minds*, studying the film in the context of EDST 225 was helpful in their preparation to become a teacher. “The conversations we had... were really concrete and definitely helpful in taking apart the movie, piece-by-piece” (EDST 225 Student #2). This classroom, in teaching about systems of oppression that impact people's lived experiences, walks the delicate balance

between opening the eyes of the privileged and being challenging enough to welcome the knowledge of students from marginalized communities.

Two of the instructors discussed how they approach teaching about race and racism in EDST 225 in classrooms that tend to be white-majority spaces. Instructor #3 stated that they sometimes saw “real resistance to engaging in any kind of discussion about race,” reflective of how silence can manifest as a form of privilege (Lipsitz, 2006; Mazzei, 2011). “White people,” said Instructor #3, have essentially “been trained not to” engage in conversations about race. Castagno (2014) supports this instructor’s observations of their class, stating that students are taught that “silence is the expectation around issues of race” (p. 84). However, this silence normalizes whiteness and further marginalizes the voices and experiences of students of color.

Both Instructor #1 and Instructor #3 mentioned the potential harm faced by students of color when conversations about race center on the experiences and ideologies of white students. “A lot of the time [the class] is ninety-eight percent white, and then there is that 2% too,” said Instructor #3. Instructor #1 noted that while conversations in class may improve incrementally if their white students have come from racially diverse backgrounds, “it doesn’t make the students of color feel any better about being one of twenty-eight here.” Unfortunately, these instructors’ statements reflect the demographics of teaching across the nation, where approximately eighty percent of public school teachers are white (Taie & Goldring, 2017, p. 3). A report by Simon, Johnson, & Reinhorn (2015) found that “Black and Latino teachers are unlikely to enter a profession where they do not anticipate having colleagues of color who are successful and satisfied with their work” (p. 40). This extends out to teacher education

programs, which tend to reflect the overall demographics of the profession. For students of color, the experience of EDST 225 may present an added burden of being surrounded by white peers in the process of realizing the presence of systems of power and oppression that many people of color are already forced to know intimately.

In her book *Other People's Children*, Lisa Delpit (2006) shares the experiences of students of color in teacher education classrooms centered on recognizing race and racism in schools. One student, a black woman with years of education experience as a principal, discussed her experience with white classmates as a doctoral student:

If you try to suggest that's not quite the way it is, they get defensive, then you get defensive...I try to give them my experiences, to explain. They just look and nod. The more I try to explain, they just look and nod, just keep looking and nodding. They don't really hear me.

As with all teacher education spaces, finding a balance of supporting the identities and various lived experiences of students of color and white students in EDST 225 is essential for instructors to integrate into their classroom. Instructors of EDST 225 recognized and discussed these differences, specifically as they pertain to race, in their responses. The way EDST 225 students interpreted *Dangerous Minds* and discussed their experiences of analyzing the film in class differed in part as a result of their racialized identities. However, similarities remained in how all students discussed the class' impact on raising their critical consciousness as it relates to understanding media representation, whatever their prior knowledge and experience.

Complex Conversations: How Students Talk About *Dangerous Minds*

One of the primary goals of showing *Dangerous Minds* is to engage in more complex conversations. According to the most recent course syllabus (2018), students

will “practice using the inquiry tools of critical discourse analysis to explore and critically analyze how popular media represents teachers, students, and education systems” (p. 1). The ways in which students discussed *Dangerous Minds* and their experience in EDST 225 reflect various aspects of their critical consciousness. This subsection within “Findings & Analysis” explores first the ways in which instructors assess their students (both formally and informally) to gauge how students are doing in relation to the course objectives, and secondly discusses elements of student responses as possible indicators of critical consciousness.

Course Objectives

What do these complex conversations look like? The instructors of the course referenced the importance of in-class conversations paired with writing assignments as two possible methods for students to work through ideas and explore the themes present in the film. Instructor #1 noted that, in terms of conversations about race, they see “a hesitation to talk about race from the beginning,” particularly with “freshmen” and “overwhelming white courses.” The conversations in these white-majority spaces, especially at the beginning of the term, struggle to move past “Well, racism is bad” (Instructor #1). This instructor sees evidence of growth in their students through both in-class discussions and in writing over the course of the term: “There are conversations that happen at the end of the term that aren’t possible at the beginning of the term. And there are papers written at the end of the term that aren’t possible at the beginning of the term.”

Instructor Assessments

Discussion. Teachers are constantly assessing their students to check for understanding, prior knowledge, confusion, emotional responses, types of engagement—the list goes on. In their interview responses, all three instructors emphasized how in-class discussions around *Dangerous Minds* and other films gave them a better sense of how students engaged with the film. Instructor #3 discussed how students learn from their peers in these settings, specifically referencing students who are not engaging with the films on a critical level:

There’s always a couple students who watch [the films], and are like “yeah, absolutely” – who don’t really do the critical engagement with it, until they see everyone else in the class is, and then they’re like “oh wait.”

In this comment, Instructor #3 explored how nuanced ideas get unpacked in class, emphasizing how these conversations are used as a tool for engaging with more complicated critical analysis. Instructor #1 echoed these ideas, stating “by the end of the term, people are more comfortable having complex and nuanced conversations about race, gender, class – about complex connections between films.” This instructor spoke specifically about conversations about race representation in film, stating that conversations elevate from a simplistic “racism is bad” way of interpreting film to exploring how the films “all talk about race in some way, or that most of them do, especially the ones with black and brown people” over the course of the term. Some students begin to see nuance, such as recognizing whiteness as a racial identity and naming it rather than letting it pass in silence. This is reflective of how whiteness operates in our society, as a racial category that “never has to speak its name” (Lipsitz, 2006, p. 61). In EDST 225, instructors use these in-class discussions to challenge

students not only to identify race and racism as it pertains to students of color in education, but to complicate their worldview to include an explicit analysis of whiteness: “*Bad Teacher* talks about race as well, by showing suburbia rich kids as mostly white,” said Instructor #1. Instructor #3 summarized their experience with class discussions as being “helpful for initial reads” of how their students are engaging with the class, which can then be more fully interrogated through writing assignments.

Writing. Each of the instructors stressed the role that writing assignments play in their class, both as a tool to further the growth of their students and as a means to assess how their students are understanding the films and course content. The instructors shared a foundational reason for using writing within their courses, which is to use it as a tool to respond to individual students – both to provide them with feedback and to understand more deeply what messages and ideologies students are bringing into the class and taking away from the discussions.

Instructor #1 shared how they choose to “make extensive comments on student writing” as a way of using written feedback to catch areas where student interpretation “comes off as surface level, maybe, or the analysis isn’t terribly complex or it’s missing.” This instructor stated that in-class conversations potentially make it “easy for people to—not hide, like they’re individually choosing to hide, but to not be visible or to not speak up or to get kind of lost in the crowd.” So, Instructor #1 supplements class discussion with extensive writing, where they have the platform to “respond to that kind of nuance on an individual level much easier.”

Instructor #2 echoed these ideas, stating that students’ take-home writing assignments are “where I can see that students are kind of going through and

synthesizing these different points that they're getting from different sources.”

Instructor #2 also mentioned that they use “comments and feedback on writing” as a way to engage with students who may not be demonstrating the level of critical analysis that the instructor would like to see. Instructor #3 gave a specific example of how they use writing in their class. “There’s always people who talk more than others,” said Instructor #3 about the limitations of solely relying on discussion, “so having some part of a written component helps too.” In this instructor’s class, the writing process involves peer revision and commentary on rough drafts:

In my section of the class, you don’t just write your paper and hand it in. We respond to it, everybody writes a rough draft, and everybody responds, we respond to each other’s rough drafts and I respond to all the rough drafts. In part because that’s a major part of the learning, even for students who don’t necessarily participate in the discussions that much.

All instructors discussed choosing to pair discussion with writing as a way to deepen students’ interpretations of the films, as well as develop a more complex understanding of how people and places are (mis)represented on screen. However, they noted that these conversations (both in class and in writing) are “never fully resolved” (Instructor #1). Instructor #2 noted that some students, while they may not appear to be resistant to class discussions, simply “check out of class.” Instructor #1 stated that they usually have “a couple papers” at the end of the term with “I want to be a savior teacher” still present as an interpretation of the films and the course.

I was particularly intrigued by this disconnect that the instructors discussed, at how some students could go through a course that is designed specifically to counter the oppressive and denigrating narratives about education that are perpetuated through film and still leave with those ideas reinforced. I was also interested in how instructors

described their class discussions, and I wondered how students would articulate their interpretation of *Dangerous Minds* and EDST 225 in their conversations with me in ways that aligned with and differed from the instructors' commentary. Much of the research within the use of film within teacher education has come from the research and perspective of teacher educators, so this thesis begins addressing some of these current gaps in the research. Though the scope of this investigation does not include observing conversations that occur within the EDST 225 courses or examining student writing samples, the interviews that I conducted with students offered potential for exploring what students take away from the course.

Student Responses

Across the interviews, students demonstrated a wide range of interpretations and reflections of the film. I noticed patterns, not only in *what* students spoke about in their responses (discussed more fully in "Student Analysis of Representation"), but *how* they framed their ideas and reactions to the film. These patterns revolve around four key themes: awareness of self, connections to other experiences, the use of language to describe their interpretations, and their emotional responses to the film.

Self-Awareness

One of the students from the senior cohort that I interviewed stated that "you teach who you are before you teach any sort of curriculum" (Senior Cohort Student #7). This statement reflects Nieto's (2000) work on identity within education, that the "process of affirming the diversity of students begins first as a teacher's journey" throughout introspection and reflection of self (p. 184). This student's response

demonstrates a high level of self-awareness, of how your own positionality and identity inform and shape what, how, and why you teach. In the interviews, the ways that students spoke about their identity – or the way silence presented itself in their responses – demonstrates a wide range in how students saw *Dangerous Minds* as a commentary about race, class, and gender in schools.

PARTICIPANTS	REFERENCE TO RACE, CLASS, AND/OR GENDER	REFERENCE TO THEIR OWN RACE, CLASS, AND/OR GENDER
EDST 225 Students	40%	0%
Educational Foundations Senior Cohort Students	100%	43%

Table 1. References to Society and to Self

This table shows the percentage of students that made reference to race, class, and/or gender as it relates to society, as well as how the percentage of students that referenced their own identities as an expression of self-reflection and awareness.

In the interviews that I conducted with students from EDST 225, no participants referenced their own race, class, or gender in their reflections about the film (as shown in Table 1). Not only did participants stay silent on these aspects of their own identity, but only two students out of the five interviewed from EDST 225 made any explicit references to race, class, gender, or any other specific systems of difference and oppression in our society. In a course that is designed to challenge students to name and reflect on these aspects of identity, the continued presence of silence in three out of the five interviews with students from EDST 225 is concerning. It speaks to a possible lack of critical self-reflection and understanding of how students’ and teachers’ identities intersect with positions of power in the classroom. However, in my interviews with students from the Educational Foundations senior cohort, this silence had vanished.

Four out of the seven students interviewed from the Educational Foundations senior cohort made explicit references to their own identity, and every student made explicit references to race, gender, and/or class. This demonstrates that students have continued the learning that may have been started in EDST 225, developing critical consciousness over time as they participated in the Educational Foundations program and other learning experiences while in college.

One student from the Educational Foundations senior cohort identified as a student of color and as multiracial in their interview. “I think for me, just because I am Mexican-American, I watched it a little bit differently,” stated Senior Cohort Student #2, comparing how their experience watching the film differed from those of their white classmates as explored previously in “Student Analysis of Representation.” This student demonstrated self-awareness through reflecting on their own identity, as well as how the different identities of their classmates may shape the way that other people saw and interpreted *Dangerous Minds*.

Senior Cohort Student #1 and Senior Cohort Student #7 spoke about their positions as white women entering the teaching profession. Senior Cohort Student #1 stated:

Dangerous Minds in particular was helpful particularly as a white woman going into teaching, there’s this balance that we’re always walking in this major - or I am - of like understanding the oppression that happens in schools and wanting to change that and be an advocate for students, but not taking over or fulfilling that “oh I’m gonna save you” sort of thing.

This individual demonstrates a strong grasp of how her own identity intersects with the representation of white female teachers present in *Dangerous Minds*, actively working to counter the white-savior narrative while still acting as a positive change agent for

students. “It definitely prompted me to be more self-reflective in how I think about this situation,” she continued, “and not to elevate myself to that place of ‘oh I’m gonna fix this situation’ even though I can be passionate and work towards change.” As this student prepares to enter a field where “current teaching forces in urban schools are predominantly White women” and “the current student population is predominantly African American or Latino American” (Hancock, 2011, p. 97) they reported that critical analysis of *Dangerous Minds* within the context of EDST 225 helped them to identify the white savior narrative as a way of practicing self-reflection and avoiding implementing this ideology within their own future work as an educator.

Senior Cohort Student #7 also discussed her identity as a white woman in her interview, reflecting on how her race and gender impacted the way she understands *Dangerous Minds*. “I think that this film really had me evaluate my own privilege because I am very similar to Michelle Pfeiffer in the way that I am a white woman who is going into teaching,” she stated. She referred to her presence in the classroom as a being a “dominant force” based on how her identity puts her into a position of power in school spaces, connecting this position to a need for “intersectional curriculum” in the classroom as a way of validating and empowering students whose identities may be marginalized in classrooms and other institutional education spaces.

Though some individual students demonstrated high levels of self-awareness in their interviews, the overall lack of self-awareness found within EDST 225 students and still present in students from the Educational Foundations senior cohort (as shown in Table 1) reflects the ways in which whiteness and other forms of privilege manifest themselves in our society. To look specifically at the manifestation of privilege in race,

the choice to name one's own race is not generally afforded to people of color, who move through the world as racialized beings. In contrast, the way in which whiteness is racialized is often through silence, through the ideology of seeing oneself as an individual rather than a group member. As a program that is primarily comprised of white students preparing to enter a field in which eighty percent of teachers are white (Taie & Goldring, 2017, p. 3), this silence is both unsurprising and unsettling. How can educators be allies and advocates if they do not recognize their own positions of power and how they potentially impact the experiences of their students? The use of films like *Dangerous Minds* as a vehicle for social analysis can be a useful tool in demanding that white students come to terms with their identities as racialized beings, yet classes like EDST 225 are not the end of the conversation. As demonstrated by the increase in explicit references to race, class, and/or gender in Educational Foundations senior cohort students as compared to EDST 225 students, the process of learning to recognize privilege, power, and oppression as it manifests in daily life is ongoing and must continue to be expanded upon after the end of an impossibly-short 10-week class.

Connections

While both naming one's identities and interrogating how they impact interpretations and actions is one way to dive into more complex conversations, students also expressed their ideas about *Dangerous Minds* through making connections to representations and experiences outside of the film. In the interviews, students made connections to other films, both from the class and their own experiences, as well as to the larger Educational Foundations program and to their own K-12 and higher education

experiences. In this section, I will explore these different types of connections that students made in their interviews as a demonstration of students’ critical consciousness.

Participants	Connection to Films	Connection to Prior K-12 Education	Connection to Other Educational Foundations Experiences
EDST 225 Students	40%	20%	20%
Educational Foundations Senior Cohort Students	71%	43%	86%

Table 2. The Power of Connections

This table shows the type of connections that students made related to *Dangerous Minds* in their interviews, as well as the percentage of students from both EDST 225 and the Educational Foundations senior cohort that made these connections.

In interviews with students from EDST 225 and the Educational Foundations senior cohort, many individuals made explicit references to other education films. This pattern emphasizes how *Dangerous Minds* functions as a central point of reference upon which students were able to engage in deeper critical analysis of other films. Students and instructors referenced five other films: *Freedom Writers*, *Bad Teacher*, *Waiting for Superman*, *Backpack Full of Cash*, and *Cheaters*. The most frequently named film was *Freedom Writers*. After stating that they might have viewed *Dangerous Minds* as a heartwarming film had they not seen it in this class, EDST 225 Student #4 said:

I had seen—what’s the other one? *Freedom Writers*—which is similar, without being in an academic setting, and I thought it was like really nice and sort of empowering to teachers to be like having an impact on students. But in the class, when I was like analyzing it, it’s not really a good representation of urban teaching because it sort of makes like a white savior type of teacher.

This student saw such strong similarities between *Freedom Writers* and *Dangerous Minds* that they referred to it as “the other one.” One of the students in the Educational

Foundations program, Senior Cohort Student #6, got the two films confused in their interview: “It’s not *Freedom Writers*? I think I’m remembering *Freedom Writers* right now.” Both *Dangerous Minds* and *Freedom Writers* perpetuate the white savior narrative, using similar cinematic tropes to do so. The two films portray a young and inexperienced white female teacher as the protagonist, positioned as the savior of her students of color who are “transformed, saved, and redeemed” through the challenges and sacrifices undertaken by their teacher (Hughey, 2010, p. 476). These similarities are representative of the broad pattern of representation in which *Dangerous Minds* operates, in which students of color are positioned as perpetually troubled and as secondary characters to the journey of a white savior (Bulman, 2005). The connections (and even points of confusion) that students made across films within their interviews reinforce the role of *Dangerous Minds* as a central point of reference, while additionally framing how narratives and representations that get repeated over and over again (Kumashiro, 2002) become both normalized and oppressive in our worldviews.

In addition to connections to other education films, students made references to their own K-12 education in their discussion of *Dangerous Minds*. While connecting the film to broader experiences (like Freire’s word to the world) often reflects an engagement with critical consciousness, some students in both EDST 225 and the senior cohort also connected their history as students to *Dangerous Minds* in ways that continue to “other” urban students of color by emphasizing a difference in educational experiences. For example, EDST 225 Student #2 stated that they “grew up going to private schools” and “didn’t really grow up with a classroom or schooling like that at all.” They said it was “kind of interesting to see what a teacher has to go through being

a teacher in a classroom like that versus like teachers I grew up with, there were nothing to that extent.” Though this student made connections to their own experience in K-12 education, they did so in a way that both sees *Dangerous Minds* as truth and subscribes to the narrative embedded within *Dangerous Minds* that portrays students of color as problems and people to be fixed.

Conversely, the three out of seven students in the Educational Foundations senior cohort who made explicit connections to their K-12 education did so within discussion that engaged in critical consciousness. The students discussed how a critical study of *Dangerous Minds* encouraged them to reflect back on their past educational experiences, while simultaneously noting the inaccuracies of how urban education and students of color are represented in *Dangerous Minds*. These connections challenge students to “de-center whiteness” and other forms of privilege that may have been normalized in their K-12 education in future efforts to engage in culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017, p 3).

In addition to K-12 education, many students from the senior cohort made connections to other learning experiences that they have engaged in through the Educational Foundations program. Many senior cohort students discussed how EDST 225 prepared them for more theoretical discussions that occurred in later courses (see Table 2), which is reflective of Trier’s (2009) work on using film to open up theory within teacher education. Senior Cohort Student #2 discussed how this class had opened the conversation of the white savior narrative, which was continued and complicated in another College of Education course (EDST 453: Equal Opportunity – Racism).

Students in the senior cohort also discussed their role as practicum students in their field

placements, reflecting on how these later in-person experiences deepened the ways in which they understood *Dangerous Minds*.

These connections emphasize how EDST 225 can function as a central point of reference for students, as another source of visuals with which they can compare and analyze their experiences. “When I was in my practicum, I saw similar teachers doing similar things, seeing some students as people that need to be saved because of their identities or their backgrounds,” stated Senior Cohort Student #4. “I watched the movie and we talked about how problematic that is but seeing the effect of it from a student’s perspective was a lot bigger.” The later connections that Senior Cohort Student #4 made to *Dangerous Minds* and EDST 225 while experiencing field placements is echoed in Trier’s (2009) work on subversive engagement in teacher education, in which film study can challenge preservice teachers to apply “their theoretical understandings to actual classrooms” (p. 122). In this instance, the student’s connection to how they see the white savior narrative perpetuated by *Dangerous Minds* and other films in some of their field placements encouraged them to set clear goals centered on social justice in their future role as an educator:

You just kinda want to do everything she didn’t do. Like I don’t see myself as better or as someone who-- my students don’t need saving, you know? That’s not my role as a teacher.

Senior Cohort Student #4’s response demonstrates a culmination of learning and growth that has happened over the course of their time within the Educational Foundations program, which is reflective of the slow and careful process of developing the consciousness of preservice teachers (Valenzuela, 2016).

The connections that students from the senior cohort made reflected a greater sense of purpose and position as an educator, possibly stemming from continued learning into the details of teaching as part of the College of Education. As a whole, students in both EDST 225 and the senior cohort used connections to other films, personal experiences, and the overall Educational Foundations program as a way of engaging in complex conversations around *Dangerous Minds*.

Language

In order to add greater depth and nuance to the discussion, two of the instructors emphasized the importance of supplementing the viewing of the film with complementary readings. For students to better understand the construction of urban students of color in *Dangerous Minds*, Instructor #2 pairs the film with Dyan Watson's (2011) "What Do You Mean When You Say Urban?" to explore how the word "urban" gets equated with students of color. Instructor #1 discussed using Ta-Nehisi Coates' (2015) *Between the World and Me* as a way "to give a different vision of what 'urban' could be" for students. This emphasis on the word "urban" is representative of the way students, especially white students, talk about race through silence and coded language.

As a whole, students generally made explicitly-named references to race, class, and/or gender in their interview responses (see Table 1). However, two students from EDST 225 (both white students) did not name or discuss race explicitly in their interviews. Rather, they made racial commentary through the use of coded language like "urban." EDST 225 Student #2 empathized with the character of LouAnne in the film, discussing how the "students were so destructive" in what they called an "urban setting." They added, "I didn't really grow up with a classroom or schooling like that at

all.” Similarly, EDST 225 Student #3 discussed seeing “struggling students, savior teacher” in *Dangerous Minds*, stating that it was “a very common theme, especially in the urban school films we watched.” In this individual’s response, all of the complexities of urban schools and students of color get reduced to “bad kids, bad areas, bad times.”

The use of coded language to refer to race, and to some extent class, is common in the field of education. Watson (2012) found that “even though race is rarely named, it is often at play in the teachers’ descriptions of urban teaching” (p. 983). This interview depicts a worldview that takes the film at face value rather than engages in a critical analysis of how race, class, and gender are represented in a way that demeans the lived experiences of students of color. Here, ideas of a white savior went unquestioned. Students used language about “urban” schools and “difficult” students to actively differentiate this film from their own experience. These distinctions function as a way of “othering” the representations of students in *Dangerous Minds*, because they represent a colorblind approach to thinking about race in schools rather than acknowledging the lived experiences of students of all racial backgrounds. Colorblindness, in turn, gets linked to “deficit thinking” (Watson, 2012, p. 24), which further prevents educators from appreciating students as whole and complex beings. Though this type of language was only present in forty percent of students from EDST 225, its presence still represents an area for further growth and learning.

Emotional Responses

Students also used language as a way of conveying their emotional responses to the films. In their interviews, all students referenced their emotional response to

watching *Dangerous Minds* and/or their experience in EDST 225. When students described in greater detail what they liked about it, however, the reasons behind their emotional responses got more complicated. Forty percent of EDST 225 described *Dangerous Minds* as an inspirational film that they enjoyed watching. EDST 225 Student #3 stated that *Dangerous Minds* “had this inspiring message at the end,” and that they “left the film feeling good.” EDST 225 Student #2 described Johnson’s character and the way she connects with students as “cool.” These reactions reflect the way in which *Dangerous Minds* is designed to present itself as a heartwarming story of redemption – when the presumed audience is middle-class, white America (Giroux, 1997).

The other sixty percent of EDST 225 students described their enjoyment as stemming from the use of film as a tool to unpack more complicated narratives rather than from the film itself. EDST 225 Student #4 emphasized the importance of the class in shaping how and why she enjoyed *Dangerous Minds*, stating: “I think that if I had watched the movie not in the EDST class, I probably would have thought it was heartwarming.” Another student described the film as “absurd” in its representation (EDST 225 Student #5), but that they enjoyed having the class as a platform to discuss what Instructor #1 called the film’s “absurdity in high definition.” These students exemplify the type of learning and reflection that is possible when film analysis is used in teacher education programs as a way of raising critical consciousness (Trier, 2001; Beyerbach, 2005). By emphasizing how the class experience shaped the way in which they understood *Dangerous Minds* and the messages it carries, sixty percent of EDST

225 students demonstrated that they had reflected on how the movie perpetuates harmful stereotypes and how, as future teachers, they fit into this narrative.

Instructor #2 stated that *Dangerous Minds* embodies “entertainment that is being made out of degradation...of entire groups of people.” The class aims to challenge and problematize a positive emotional response to a narrative arc that is designed to entertain middle class white America at the expense of students and communities of color—in this particular film, black and Latinx urban youth. As one of the first classes that students are exposed to in their progression through the Department of Education Studies at the University of Oregon, EDST 225 functions as an entry point for discussions that grow more nuanced and complex as students progress further into the teacher education program (Beyerbach, 2005).

Conclusion

This investigation began with a question: how do the movies we watch impact the way we understand the world and operate within it? As a future teacher and student of the world, I will always be curious about how people do or don't see themselves represented in media, and how a critical study of these images can open the door to seeing the world in all of its complexities. This thesis narrowed the focus of this question, exploring the impact of the film *Dangerous Minds* in the University of Oregon's Education Studies course, "School & Representation in Film." Within this study, I aimed to answer two key questions:

1. How does *Dangerous Minds* operate within a broad pattern of film representation to inform the viewer's understanding of race, class, and gender within schools?
2. To what extent does a study of film representation within the University of Oregon's College of Education impact the critical consciousness of future educators?

To answer these questions, I analyzed the film *Dangerous Minds* to explore the messages it conveys about race, class, and gender in schools. Using the preexisting body of literature, as well as referencing other urban education films of a similar time period, I discussed how *Dangerous Minds* both creates and reproduces problematic and oppressive narratives about students, teachers, and schools as it relates to their raced, classed, and gendered identities. Three key problems stood out in my analysis: the white savior narrative embodied by the character of LouAnne Johnson, the construction of

urban students of color as standing in the way of their own educational success, and the perpetuation of the myth of meritocracy.

In general, this investigation finds that EDST 225 “School & Representation in Film” is largely effective in meeting its goals and complicating students’ ways of understanding and being in the world. This class, and the use of *Dangerous Minds* specifically, supports students in developing critical consciousness by challenging them to see the world in ways that highlight social stratification and systems of oppression. Based on instructor and student interviews, I additionally see this investigation as supporting the placement of EDST 225 as a pre-requisite in the Educational Foundations program to best utilize its function as a central point of reference for more theoretical, complex, and detailed learning that occurs later in this teacher education program.

This investigation also highlighted some of the current shortcomings of the class and its use of *Dangerous Minds* as a teaching tool, demonstrating areas in need of further consideration and further study. Students appeared to gain more from the class retroactively as they progressed through the Educational Foundations program, a slow-acting form of raising critical consciousness in which students continued to reflect on *Dangerous Minds* and EDST 225 as it related to the in-depth study of education in later classes. However, forty percent of EDST 225 students came away from the class still subscribing to the very representations that the course seeks to disrupt (such as the use of coded language, continued internalization of the white savior narrative, and the belief in a meritocracy). While much of this complex learning may occur in additional Education Studies courses, not all students in EDST 225 continue to take classes within

the department (because some students may eventually change majors, and others are non-majors who only took the course for general education credit).. For students who complete the class still possessing the dominant narratives, a lack of continued exposure to social justice education may result in thoughts and actions from students that perpetuate oppressive systems and ideologies. I recommend that the Educational Foundations program continue to investigate how it can maximize the learning experiences for students in a short 10-week class. One possible approach to addressing this problem could include introducing a “lab” component to the class, in which films are watched in a separate section which would allow for more in-class time to discuss and analyze the films under the guidance of the instructor.

I would also recommend more focused research into the experiences of students of color in the Educational Foundations program. This particular investigation is limited both in its scope and in its generalizability due to the overrepresentation of white participants (both students and instructors) in the program itself and thus as the representative voices of the impact of this class. In the College of Education, EDST 225 is but one example of a course that tends to sway in the direction of challenging white students to come to terms with their privilege and power. This class, the program as a whole, and future College of Education students could benefit from continued research into the experiences of students of color in a white-majority space and the emotional labor attached to continually participating in the experience of waking people up to their privilege.

In EDST 225, the use of *Dangerous Minds* represents an opportunity. It is an opportunity to learn, to think critically about the representation of people and schools,

and to engage in reflection as a way of developing critical consciousness. And if left unexamined and undertheorized, *Dangerous Minds* holds the potential to further create and perpetuate damaging narratives about what education can and should be. A course like EDST 225, placed within a teacher education program that emphasizes critical thinking and self-reflection, has the power to disrupt these narratives in the minds of preservice teachers – the people who will soon be in classrooms and with students. Media literacy is not just a skill to be taught in K-12 education; rather it must be learned and practiced by teachers themselves in the context of representations of their own profession. In order to know and love and teach students, we as educators must see them as full and complex human beings. While *Dangerous Minds* neglects to show us that, the analysis of EDST 225 is a powerful tool to enact positive change within education. By unpacking the problem, we often find ourselves closer to a solution.

Appendix A: Interviews

Questions for Instructors:

1. Why did you choose to show this film?
2. Based on your goals for showing *Dangerous Minds*, do you see your students engaged in critical conversation and reflection? Were you able to meet your learning goals for showing the film? How do you know what students learned? What evidence do you have of critical conversation and discussion?
3. What do you see as the role of film in shaping your students' understanding of teaching and learning?

Questions for EDST 225 Students:

1. What are your initial reactions to *Dangerous Minds*?
2. How has this film impacted your understanding of teaching and school?
3. Will this film impact your approach to teaching? If yes, why? How?

Questions for Educational Foundations Senior Cohort Students:

1. Thinking back to watching *Dangerous Minds* in EDST 225, what stands out to you now?
2. How has this film affect your understanding of teaching and school?
3. Will this film impact your approach to teaching? If yes, why? How?

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