

Review

The Implications of Teacher-Student Relationship Narratives in Educational Films for Real-World Education Models

Jie Liu ^{1,*}¹ Tianjin Sino-German University of Applied Sciences, Tianjin, China

* Correspondence: Jie Liu, Tianjin Sino-German University of Applied Sciences, Tianjin, China

Abstract: This paper explores the portrayal of teacher-student relationships in educational films and examines their implications for contemporary educational practices. Through a review of narrative patterns and analysis of representative films from diverse cultural contexts, the study highlights how cinematic depictions emphasize empathy, trust, and transformation as core elements of effective teaching. While these narratives provide inspiration for fostering creativity and individualized attention in real classrooms, they also tend to oversimplify complex educational realities by focusing on heroic teachers and rapid student change. The paper concludes with reflections on how educators and policymakers can responsibly integrate insights from film narratives to promote more humane, inclusive, and equitable education, and suggests directions for future research on media influence and cross-cultural comparisons.

Keywords: educational films; teacher-student relationship; narrative analysis; pedagogy; media influence; educational reform

1. Introduction

In the realm of popular culture, educational films have emerged as a distinctive genre that resonates widely with audiences around the world. These films often dramatize classroom settings and depict emotionally charged interactions between teachers and students [1]. Their widespread appeal can be attributed not only to their storytelling power but also to their ability to reflect societal hopes, frustrations, and ideals about education. As such, educational films do more than entertain — they shape public imagination and influence how people perceive teaching, learning, and authority within the school environment.

The media's role in shaping educational discourse is especially evident in how it constructs narratives around teacher-student relationships. Through compelling characters and transformative storylines, educational films often present emotionally intense, highly idealized depictions of the classroom [2]. Teachers are frequently portrayed as passionate and unconventional figures who navigate institutional frameworks to reach their students on a personal level, while students are shown as struggling individuals whose lives are turned around by meaningful mentorship [3]. These portrayals, though dramatized, can have a powerful impact on viewers' expectations and beliefs about what education should look like.

This paper aims to explore how such teacher-student relationships are represented in educational films and to examine what insights these portrayals might offer for real-world education. It will analyze the common narrative patterns, emotional arcs, and character dynamics that appear across various well-known films, and assess the extent to which these fictionalized relationships reflect or diverge from the realities of classroom life. In doing so, this paper argues that the idealized and emotionally charged depictions found in educational films provide both inspiration and caution for educators and policymakers. While these stories may illuminate the transformative potential of education, they

Published: 16 June 2025



Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

can also obscure the structural challenges and complexities faced by teachers and students in real educational systems. By critically engaging with these narratives, we can better understand their value — not as direct blueprints for practice, but as imaginative frameworks that both inspire and provoke reflection [4].

2. Literature Review

2.1. Studies on Media and Education

The intersection of media and education has attracted growing interest, particularly with the increasing visibility of educational themes in mainstream cinema. Films, as a form of mass media, do not merely reflect society but also shape it. When it comes to education-themed films, the narratives often go beyond entertainment to present emotionally resonant interpretations of teaching, learning, and institutional culture. These portrayals contribute to public discourse by framing education as a personal, moral, and social mission.

Educational films frequently dramatize classroom environments to highlight tensions between tradition and reform, authority and autonomy, challenges and growth. This cinematic framing influences how viewers conceptualize the role of educators and the emotional intensity of teaching [5]. The recurring images of transformative teachers and redeemed students can shape public expectations of what is possible — and desirable — in educational practice.

From a theoretical standpoint, media representation studies suggest that films construct meanings through selective storytelling, often simplifying complex issues into digestible narratives. Narrative structures are commonly built around individual dedication, where a single teacher changes the trajectory of an entire classroom. While these patterns are engaging, they may inadvertently downplay the structural and cultural factors that affect educational outcomes. In parallel, perspectives rooted in educational psychology highlight the emotional appeal of these films. Viewers are drawn to stories that emphasize empathy, motivation, and personal growth, themes that align closely with psychological models of human development and learning.

Overall, educational films operate at the intersection of media imagination and pedagogical aspiration [6]. While they are not academic studies, their emotional force and cultural reach make them significant sources of informal learning and social commentary on education.

2.2. Teacher-Student Dynamics in Practice

Beyond cinematic representations, educational research has long emphasized the importance of teacher-student relationships in shaping academic achievement, classroom engagement, and socio-emotional development. Effective teaching is not solely based on the transmission of knowledge; it also involves creating a supportive, respectful, and emotionally responsive environment in which students feel seen and valued. In this sense, the quality of interpersonal dynamics can be as critical as curriculum content or instructional strategy.

In real classrooms, the formation of positive teacher-student relationships is influenced by multiple factors, including communication style, empathy, consistency, and cultural awareness. Pedagogical approaches such as student-centered learning and differentiated instruction emphasize the need for teachers to adapt their methods to the diverse needs of learners. These approaches recognize that students thrive when they experience a sense of connection, autonomy, and competence in the learning environment.

Emotional intelligence is another essential component in fostering effective relationships. Educators who are self-aware, emotionally regulated, and capable of understanding students' emotional cues are more likely to create trusting and resilient classroom

communities [7]. Unlike the dramatic arcs often seen in films, real-life teacher-student relationships tend to develop gradually and require sustained effort within the constraints of school systems — such as limited time, large class sizes, and administrative pressures.

While educational films may portray exaggerated versions of these relationships for narrative impact, the core values they highlight — empathy, encouragement, and belief in students' potential — are consistent with the principles found in contemporary educational theory. However, real-life implementation of these values requires systemic support, professional development, and an awareness of the social and institutional challenges that educators routinely face.

3. Narrative Patterns in Educational Films

Educational films often rely on emotionally engaging narrative patterns to deliver powerful messages about teaching and learning. These narratives are shaped by recurring tropes and archetypes, as well as cultural perspectives that influence how education is framed for different audiences. By analyzing the common structures and character dynamics found in such films, we can better understand how cinematic storytelling constructs an idealized vision of the teacher-student relationship and what these stories imply about educational values and possibilities.

3.1. Common Tropes and Archetypes

A dominant narrative trope in educational films is that of the "inspirational teacher". This figure is typically portrayed as a passionate, unconventional educator who challenges outdated norms and transforms the lives of students through personal commitment and creative teaching methods [8]. The character is often positioned in contrast to rigid institutional structures, serving as a catalyst for change not only in the classroom but also in the students' lives. This archetype reinforces the idea that education is not just about academic success, but also about personal growth, critical thinking, and self-discovery.

Another recurring storyline centers on the "troubled student turned achiever". In this arc, students facing social, emotional, or academic difficulties undergo dramatic personal change after encountering a supportive teacher. Their journey from resistance or disengagement to confidence and achievement provides emotional resolution to the narrative, often suggesting that empathy and attention from a caring educator can reverse a history of failure or neglect. These stories are compelling because they tap into a widely shared belief in the redemptive power of education and mentorship.

While these tropes serve an inspirational function, they also simplify the complex realities of education by framing success as the result of individual heroism rather than systemic change. The focus on exceptional teachers and dramatic turnarounds may inadvertently obscure the challenges that ordinary educators face on a daily basis and the structural barriers that limit student potential.

3.2. Character Dynamics and Emotional Arc

At the heart of educational film narratives lies the emotional evolution of the teacher-student relationship. These relationships often follow a recognizable arc: initial resistance or mistrust, gradual connection and understanding, conflict or crisis, and eventual transformation or reconciliation. This pattern mirrors common storytelling structures but is especially effective in the context of education, where trust, motivation, and identity development are central themes.

The emotional journey is often portrayed through intense personal moments — breakthrough conversations, acts of defiance, moments of vulnerability — that mark turning points in the relationship [9]. The teacher is frequently shown as navigating both emotional and ethical dilemmas, while students undergo a process of self-realization. These

arcs are designed to evoke empathy and suggest that education is not merely transactional but deeply relational and transformative.

Such dynamics are powerful not only for their dramatic effect but also for how they reflect broader questions about authority, care, and personal change [10]. However, they may also raise unrealistic expectations about the speed and ease with which meaningful educational bonds can be formed in real classrooms, where trust-building is often slow, uneven, and shaped by external pressures.

3.3. Stylistic and Cultural Framing

Narrative patterns in educational films are also influenced by stylistic choices and cultural contexts. In many Western films, the teacher is depicted as a progressive individual who challenges established systems in pursuit of a higher educational ideal. These narratives tend to emphasize personal freedom, self-expression, and the dismantling of traditional hierarchies. Education is framed as a journey toward autonomy, with the teacher acting as a liberator rather than an authority figure.

In contrast, non-Western educational films may present a different set of values. Teachers are more often portrayed as figures of discipline, dedication, and moral guidance [11]. The classroom is seen less as a space of individual liberation and more as a platform for social responsibility, respect for elders, and community development. These cultural differences influence not only the portrayal of educators but also the depiction of learning, student behavior, and the broader purpose of schooling.

Stylistically, Western films often rely on dramatic crescendos and emotionally charged scenes, while non-Western films may adopt a more restrained, realistic tone, focusing on everyday challenges and incremental change. These differences shape how viewers interpret the impact of education and the nature of the teacher-student bond.

4. Case Studies of Representative Films

To further examine how educational films construct and communicate the teacher-student relationship, this section analyzes five representative works from different cultural and historical contexts. Each case reveals distinct narrative strategies, pedagogical values, and social commentaries embedded in cinematic portrayals of education.

4.1. *Dead Poets Society*

Set in an elite American boarding school during the 1950s, *Dead Poets Society*, as shown in Figure 1, presents a teacher who encourages students to think independently and challenge conformity. The central interaction style is based on emotional provocation and intellectual awakening, with the teacher breaking from traditional instruction to inspire creativity and critical thought.



Figure 1. Snippet of the *Dead Poets Society*.

Pedagogically, the film emphasizes experiential learning and personal expression, where literature becomes a vehicle for self-discovery. However, the outcomes are complex:

while some students thrive under this approach, others face serious emotional consequences, highlighting the tension between idealism and institutional rigidity.

The film reflects a Western value system that celebrates individualism and resistance to authority, yet it also critiques the cost of non-conformity within a conservative academic structure.

4.2. *Freedom Writers*

Based on real-life events, as shown in Figure 2, *Freedom Writers* depicts a young teacher working with disadvantaged students in a racially divided American high school. The interaction style centers on building trust, mutual respect, and emotional safety, achieved through active listening and cultural responsiveness.



Figure 2. Snippet of the *Freedom Writers*.

The pedagogical method relies on student journaling, storytelling, and personal narrative, which helps foster identity reconstruction and empowerment. The film suggests that meaningful learning begins when students feel seen and heard, particularly in environments marked by trauma and marginalization.

Institutionally, the film critiques systemic inequities in education, pointing to the transformative potential of empathy-driven pedagogy in under-resourced schools.

4.3. *To Sir, With Love*

Set in an inner-city London school, as shown in Figure 3, *To Sir, With Love* follows an unemployed engineer who reluctantly becomes a teacher. His interaction style evolves from formal discipline to respectful mentorship, blending authority with emotional availability.



Figure 3. Snippet of the *To Sir, With Love*.

The pedagogical approach shifts from standard academics to life-skills instruction, emphasizing manners, responsibility, and respect over textbook learning. This practical focus helps students reconnect with education by relating it to their real-world struggles.

Socially, the film reflects 1960s British attitudes toward class, race, and discipline. It promotes a vision of education as a bridge between personal dignity and social integration, underscoring the teacher's role in shaping moral character.

4.4. *Les Choristes*

This French-language film, widely known in China as, as shown in Figure 4, it tells the story of a music teacher in a strict boarding school for troubled boys. The interaction style is gentle and nurturing, gradually winning over resistant students through music and consistency.



Figure 4. Snippet of the *Les Choristes*.

The pedagogical method centers on choral singing, which serves as both a disciplinary structure and an emotional outlet. Through shared musical practice, the students gain self-confidence and develop a sense of community.

The film reflects post-war European values of redemption, compassion, and the humanizing power of the arts. It contrasts authoritarian educational systems with creative, emotionally intelligent alternatives.

4.5. *Hello Teacher*

Set in China during the 1980s, as shown in Figure 5. *Hello Teacher* portrays a traditional but deeply caring teacher guiding a class of teenagers during a time of social transition. His interaction style combines strict discipline with underlying warmth and commitment to student success.



Figure 5. Snippet of the *Hello Teacher*.

Pedagogically, the film highlights moral education, perseverance, and collective identity. Classroom scenes often involve ideological instruction, but also moments of personal connection that reveal the teacher's understanding and emotional investment.

Institutionally, the film mirrors the evolving values of Chinese education during a reform era — balancing authority with care, and national ideology with individual development. It offers a culturally specific image of the "teacher as parent", deeply rooted in Confucian tradition.

5. Implications for Real-World Education

The teacher-student relationships portrayed in educational films, while often dramatized and idealized, offer valuable insights into the emotional and moral dimensions of education. These narratives highlight core human values such as empathy, trust, and transformation, which resonate across cultures and systems. At the same time, the cinematic lens can distort educational realities, producing overly simplified solutions to complex problems. This section explores the positive lessons that can be drawn from such films, as well as the potential risks of misinterpretation, concluding with reflections relevant to educational practice and policy.

5.1. Positive Lessons and Inspirations

One of the most compelling takeaways from educational films is the central importance of empathy in the learning environment. Stories that show teachers taking the time to understand their students' backgrounds and emotional struggles underscore the need for compassion and patience in real classrooms. These portrayals affirm that trust is not a byproduct of authority, but the result of consistent, respectful, and sincere engagement with learners.

Films also inspire educators to value individuality and adapt their methods to the diverse needs of students. The focus on personalized attention and encouragement reflects the growing awareness in pedagogy that one-size-fits-all models are inadequate for fostering genuine learning. Characters who promote creativity, autonomy, and critical thinking mirror the aspirations of modern education, where success is not defined by memorization but by intellectual curiosity and self-confidence.

In this light, cinematic representations of exceptional teaching can serve as motivational models, reminding both educators and learners of the emotional and transformative potential of the classroom experience.

5.2. Challenges and Unrealistic Expectations

Despite their inspirational power, educational films can create unrealistic expectations about teaching and its outcomes. The "hero teacher" trope often exaggerates the role of individual charisma while minimizing the influence of systemic constraints. In real-life contexts, teachers operate within bureaucratic frameworks, face time limitations, manage large class sizes, and cope with varying degrees of institutional support. These conditions are rarely addressed in cinematic narratives, which tend to resolve conflicts through personal effort alone.

Furthermore, the speed and scale of transformation depicted in films are often improbable. While real educational progress typically occurs over months or years, film narratives compress character development into a few dramatic scenes. This may lead to disillusionment among educators who enter the profession with expectations shaped by media portrayals, only to encounter far more complex and less gratifying realities.

The emotional weight placed on the teacher-student bond may also overlook the contributions of other key stakeholders, such as families, school leaders, and community support systems. By framing success as the product of isolated teacher action, such stories risk reinforcing the myth of the lone savior, rather than promoting collaborative, sustainable approaches to educational change.

5.3. Policy and Pedagogical Reflections

Despite these limitations, educational films can offer constructive insights for policy and practice — if interpreted critically. For educators, these narratives can function as reflective tools, prompting discussions about values, motivations, and ethical dilemmas in teaching. In teacher training programs, carefully selected film scenes may enhance emotional awareness and spark dialogue on classroom dynamics, student engagement, and the role of personal identity in professional practice.

For policymakers, these films provide indirect but powerful commentary on what societies expect from their educational institutions. The repeated cinematic emphasis on schools facing diverse challenges, students with varied needs, and complex educational environments suggests a public yearning for more supportive and inclusive models of education. While films should not dictate policy, they can alert decision-makers to gaps between ideal and actual practice, encouraging reforms that prioritize student well-being, teacher development, and equity.

Ultimately, storytelling — when used responsibly — can bridge the gap between data and experience, theory and empathy. By acknowledging both the inspirational and fictional elements of educational films, real-world stakeholders can draw nuanced lessons that inform thoughtful, meaningful educational transformation.

6. Conclusion

This paper explored how educational films depict teacher-student relationships and the implications for real-world education. These films often emphasize empathy, trust, and transformation, offering inspiring but idealized portrayals of teaching. While highlighting key emotional and pedagogical elements, they tend to simplify educational complexities by focusing on heroic individuals and rapid change.

Such portrayals may shape public expectations and educators' self-perceptions, often overlooking systemic challenges and collective efforts. Reaffirming the thesis, these dramatized narratives offer both inspiration and caution — encouraging connection and creativity, while requiring critical reflection on their limitations.

Future research could include longitudinal studies on how media shapes teacher perceptions and cross-cultural comparisons to examine narrative differences and their impact on global educational reform. By critically engaging with media, scholars and educators can better use storytelling to foster authentic, equitable, and effective education.

References

1. N. Nigar and A. Kostogriz, "Navigating affective and sensory fluidity in plurilingual and intercultural pedagogies in English language and literacy classrooms," *Aust. J. Lang. Lit.*, vol. 47, no. 3, pp. 379–401, 2024, doi: 10.1007/s44020-024-00068-4.
2. P. A. Ryan, "Mr. Dixon and Mr. Kotter: How the media image of the past is prologue for the present secondary social studies teacher," *Educ. Stud.*, pp. 1–32, 2025, doi: 10.1080/00131946.2025.2467911.
3. N. Bremner, N. Sakata, and L. Cameron, "Teacher education as an enabler or constraint of learner-centred pedagogy implementation in low-to middle-income countries," *Teach. Teach. Educ.*, vol. 126, p. 104033, 2023, doi: 10.1016/j.tate.2023.104033.
4. A. Söken, "Promoting future teachers' critical consciousness: How do we teach critical media literacy?," 2024.
5. F. Dursun and A. Aykan, "Exploring teachers' narratives: Challenges and strategies for enhancing the teaching process," *SAGE Open*, vol. 15, no. 1, p. 21582440251332557, 2025, doi: 10.1177/21582440251332557.
6. S. Jones and K. J. Some, "Pop culture media as curricular text: Designing an interdisciplinary undergraduate seminar using Abbott Elementary," *Educ. Sci.*, vol. 14, no. 11, p. 1241, 2024, doi: 10.3390/educsci14111241.
7. O. Simile, "'Hapa ni wapi? (Where is this?): A linguistic and discursive examination of students-teacher dynamics in education," *Cogent Educ.*, vol. 11, no. 1, p. 2354140, 2024, doi: 10.1080/2331186X.2024.2354140.
8. Y. Yang, X. Guo, and Z. Xing, "Teacher-student interaction in an intelligent education environment: The impact of teachers' discourse on students' depth of thinking in information technology courses," *Interact. Learn. Environ.*, pp. 1–19, 2025, doi: 10.1080/10494820.2025.2468977.
9. M. Assalihee, N. Bakoh, Y. Boonsuk, J. Songmuang, et al., "Transforming Islamic education through lesson study (LS): A classroom-based approach to professional development in Southern Thailand," *Educ. Sci.*, vol. 14, no. 9, p. 1029, 2024, doi: 10.3390/educsci14091029.

10. S. Akin-Sabuncu, S. E. McDevitt, C. C. Lee, A. L. Goodwin, et al., "Reimagining teacher education for immigrant students in the context of global migration: Teacher educators' perspectives," *Teach. Teach. Educ.*, vol. 143, p. 104550, 2024, doi: 10.1016/j.tate.2024.104550.
11. Y. Gao and Y. Cui, "English as a foreign language teachers' pedagogical beliefs about teacher roles and their agentic actions amid and after COVID-19: A case study," *Relc J.*, vol. 55, no. 1, pp. 111–127, 2024, doi: 10.1177/00336882221074110.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of SOAP and/or the editor(s). SOAP and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.