

A CLASSROOM OF ONE'S OWN?  
THE RE-DOMESTICATION OF FEMALE TEACHERS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

by

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### **Abstract**

Feminist philosophy continues to challenge gendered divisions of labour; however, at this particular moment in time, some female teachers appear to be embracing a re-domestication of the professional space. A preoccupation with traditional feminine stereotypes risks creating an exclusionary profession that further perpetuates the dominant culture. I take up a critical feminist approach through the conceptual analysis of autotheory and a fictional case study to explore the historical, philosophical, and sociological influences of this phenomenon. The feminization, professionalization, and intensification of teaching has left some female educators confused about the roles and responsibilities of the ‘good’ and ‘caring’ teacher. The relatively new trend of social media teacher influencers and hyper commercialized, stylized, and feminized classrooms suggests that, when all else fails, ‘good teaching’ can be bought. We might consider this gender performativity and consumer-oriented culture of education as strategies of survival within an intensified system.

## Introduction

My beloved grandfather always used to say that a good employee is one who puts in an honest day's work—but that our employer does not own our soul. Growing up in a small Acadian fishing village on Isle Madame, Cape Breton Island, he was not one to allow his job to define him. Instead, he fully embraced the labour movement by fighting for the right to unionize during the Canso Fishermen's Strike of 1970-71 (Cameron, 1977), and eventually becoming president of the first local outside Nova Scotia to join the Newfoundland Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers Union (Inglis, 1985). A not overly religious man, his use of the word soul represented who each of us is as a person—our inherent dignity and worth. My grandmother, in turn, did not need Betty Friedan's (1963/2013) *The Feminine Mystique* to suggest that the struggle for female empowerment could be attained through work performed outside the house. Long evening shifts in a cold, damp fish plant with three kids at home taught her that labour does not necessarily set us free. Indeed, the struggle to remain autonomous within a community largely controlled by the elite few was not unique to my grandparents; but rather, an age-old hardship that has been shared among many.

Their daughter—my mother—grew up immersed in this world, with contracts, grievances, and arbitration regular topics of conversation around the kitchen table. This greatly influenced her career as a teacher and, in turn, shaped my own understanding of the rights and responsibilities of employees. As I worked my way through high school and university, I looked forward to the day when I would be free from the ups and downs of student jobs and settled in my permanent profession. So it was much to my surprise when I finally achieved my dream of becoming a teacher and encountered a different reality altogether; one where the act of maintaining professional boundaries invited personal criticism from what I considered to be the

most unlikely of sources: some of my fellow union members. To call it practice shock<sup>1</sup> (Delamarter, 2019/2020) would be inadequate; perhaps ‘teacher culture shock’ is closer to the truth. Regardless, there seemed to be a blurring of the lines between how I was being judged as an employee, and how I was being judged as a person.

One small, albeit telling, example involved a series of unrelated yet similar interactions between myself and various staff members at the different school locations where I worked over the years. Each of them had to do with the ‘teacher bag’. For unfamiliar readers, the all-important teacher bag is used to lug any manner of unfinished work, school supplies, cleaning supplies, first aid supplies, student clothes, teacher costumes, classroom decorations, electronics, toys, games, prizes, treats, food, et cetera, back and forth between work and home. In fact, in my experience, it is not uncommon to see teachers struggling with the weight of not only one, but two, three, or even four bags through the school parking lot at the end of the day. This symbolizes commitment, hard work, and a willingness to go above and beyond—and, if nothing else, a rather impressive armload carrying capacity.

The problem with me, compounded by the fact that I seldom stayed past my contractual hours, is that I very rarely took work home. I still considered myself to be a dedicated teacher<sup>2</sup> who made sure to put in ‘an honest day’s work’, but—much like everyone else—had other pleasures and responsibilities that I believed were also deserving of my time, money, and energy. And so, at the end of each school day, I would prepare my next lessons, set any unfinished

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Delamarter (2019/2020) defines teacher practice shock as “the disorienting and jarring reality check” that happens to teachers “who uncritically build their expectations off [...] dominant cultural images, which are often out of alignment with contemporary classroom practice” (p. 22).

<sup>2</sup> Here, I will offer up this disclaimer only once; however, the urge to repeatedly reassure readers of my competence as a teacher who does not go ‘above and beyond’ only reinforces my questioning as to why I feel the need to justify this in the first place. To me, dedication means performing my assigned job duties (i.e., *teaching*) to the best of my abilities while treating my charges with dignity and respect.

marking or paperwork aside to be freshly tackled in the morning, and then make the mistake of walking across the parking lot with just my purse in hand.

This would inevitably invite comments from some of my fellow female staff members. The best were suggestions that I was somehow a rebel (for just doing my job), or jokes about how small of a purse I could get away with (would a fanny pack do?). The worst were sarcastic ‘must be nices’, or allusions to the fact that I was a slacker who did not care about my students. My lack of physical baggage had inadvertently become my emotional baggage. What struck me as strange was that these teachers were also free to leave. In fact, as a non-permanent teacher during many of these interactions, I was in all likelihood much more at risk of facing professional repercussions due to the perceived notion that I was unwilling to go ‘above and beyond’ for my job (read: work for free). In *A Room of One’s Own*, when the female narrator is chased off the university grass designated for ‘fellows and scholars only’, and back onto the gravel where the women belong, Virginia Woolf (1929/2021) writes, “If you stop to curse you are lost [...] equally, if you stop to laugh” (p. 139). I eventually reached a point where I could not continue to chalk these comments up to either petty remarks or innocent teasing; neither cursing nor laughing, self-defensiveness nor self-deprecation, would get to the heart of this matter. Something was giving these teachers the message that I was not doing my job by actually, er—doing my job.

### **Significance & Problem**

If I wasn’t performing my job properly, then who was? I began to observe the teachers who were making these comments and started to notice certain characteristics: mainly, a willingness to perform unpaid labour, a specific notion of what the duty to care ‘looks like’, and a preoccupation with classroom appearance. Some expressed a strong sense of pride over one of



these areas in particular, while others embraced all three. Regardless, two interrelated trends seemed to emerge: the first being that all these teachers happened to be women<sup>3</sup> (many were young, white millennials like myself), and the second being that these particular characteristics were reminiscent of what some would call traditional feminine stereotypes. That is, the stereotypes that Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2011) refers to as the ideals and expectations of the middle and upper classes; specifically, women remaining ‘womanly’ through willingly embraced virtues such as devotion, sacrifice, and work as its own reward. What’s more, there appeared to be a social media component to it, as some of these teachers spoke of using ideas from their favourite ‘teacher influencers’ on social media and/or purchasing curriculum content from various online marketplaces (more on this later).

I have always been aware that, for better or worse, teaching has traditionally been regarded as women’s work; as if any woman could do it due to our assumed natural affinity for all things domestic. Although an obviously gendered idea, I have never considered women’s work and domesticity to be synonymous with the class-based feminine stereotypes outlined by Beauvoir (1949/2011) in *The Second Sex*. The domestic work performed by my female family members both inside and outside of the home as mothers, wives, housekeepers, teachers, et cetera, was certainly never glamorous, nor always left room for fragility or sentimentality. This new version of domesticity within teaching seems more akin to Barbara Welter’s (1966) cult of true womanhood than anything that I have ever experienced. This segment of teacher culture appears to desire a specific type of domesticity, and as follows, a specific type of female teacher.

As it stands, a preoccupation with such traditional feminine stereotypes risks creating an exclusionary profession that further perpetuates the dominant culture. It brings forth questions

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<sup>3</sup> Whenever I mention ‘women’ within this thesis, I am referring to those who identify as such.

concerning which abilities, personalities, and cultural expressions are favoured within our education system, and who these include—or exclude—in turn. This preoccupation with traditional feminine stereotypes is also an example of hegemonic complicity sustained through the disciplinary power of this particular segment of female teachers. It is difficult to say whether this phenomenon signifies either an attempt to return to an earlier idea of teaching as an extension of the domestic sphere, or an intensification of the domesticity that never truly left. Either way, a ‘re-domestication’, if you will, appears to have emerged in recent years.

### **Questions**

This re-domestication phenomenon leads to my main question: Are some female teachers embracing a re-domestication of the professional space at this particular moment in time? And if so, how can this be understood in terms of historical, philosophical, and sociological influences? In addition to these questions, I consider the following: What is the history of female teachers in Nova Scotia? Where does the idea of the ‘good teacher’ come from today, and is it being influenced by certain assumptions surrounding domesticity? How might the ethics of care be used against female teachers? How and why have influencers become part of the experience of contemporary teachers? And finally, how do female teachers experience the commercialized classroom?

### **Methodology**

My inquiry will take up a critical feminist approach through the conceptual analysis of a fictional case study. Within the philosophy of education, a fictional case study can be used as “a story or narrative of an incident or series of incidents in a teaching context that raises problems of, for example, a pedagogical or ethical or political nature, or a combination of all of these” (Hare & Portelli, 1998, p. v). As my exploration into the role of women in teaching concerns all

three types—pedagogical, ethical, political—a fictional case study is a particularly appropriate way to “generat[e] a great deal of useful discussion about [these] controversial issues” without having to involve real people and/or events (Hare & Portelli, 1998, p. v). Indeed, as Woolf (1929/2021) writes in *A Room of One’s Own*,

When a subject is highly controversial [...] one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold. One can only give one’s audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker. Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact (p. 4).

Drawing on the work of various educational and feminist historians, philosophers, and sociologists will allow me to examine how my case study illustrates—or fails to illustrate—theories relevant to the described events, as well as the implications that arise from such analyses.

My use of personal stories aligns with the practice of autotheory. According to Lauren Fournier (2018), “theorizing from the first person is well established within the genealogies of feminist practice” (p. 644) as it allows individuals to “take one’s embodied experiences as a primary text or raw material through which to theorize, process, and reiterate theory to feminist effects” (p. 646). Otherwise, it is as Sara Ahmed (2017) explains: that too often what one “describe[s] as material is dismissed as mental”, and that a form of “political labor” is “having to insist that what we are describing is not just what we are feeling or thinking” (p. 6). Similarly, Gloria Anzaldúa’s method of autohistoria-teoría “includes both life-story and self-reflection [...] Writers of autohistoria-teoría blend their cultural and personal biographies with memoir, history,

storytelling, myth, and other forms of theorizing” (Keating, 2009, p. 9). When it comes to my personal voice and, at times, comedic or critical tone,

Autotheory offers a different way of doing theory: a renewed aesthetic practice that spans intermedial art, art writing and criticism, conceptualism, performativity, comedy, new media, sound, postinternet spaces, manifestoes, and other experimental writing and art practices, all resonant with the twenty-first century context of pervasive social media (Fournier, 2018, p. 645).

Because my inquiry also includes an exploration of social media teacher influencers—a relatively new phenomenon—autotheory provides a valuable approach from which to describe and discuss such a rapidly emerging trend within the field of education.

Claudia Ruitenberg (2009) outlines how “philosophy *as* research” within philosophy of education can provide a valuable method “for the elucidation or critique of educational questions” (p. 317). Through my exploration and application of various philosophical concepts to both my fictional case study and personal stories, I hope to gain a better understanding of my own experience as a female teacher and situate this current re-domestication phenomenon within academic literature.

### **Case Study**

Jane and Anna are new, non-permanent teachers at a suburban junior high school in an average-sized Canadian city. Both are white females in their mid-twenties. Anna is from a middle-class background and Jane is from a working-class background.

“Enough is enough,” Anna declares as she strides into Jane’s classroom, arms full of supplies. “If you’re not going to decorate your bulletin board, then I will.”

Jane glances up from her marking and laughs. “You don’t need to do that. It just hasn’t been one of my main priorities.”

“Well, it looks like a prison cell in here. Don’t you care about the kids?” Anna starts stapling brightly coloured cloth onto the cork.

It is a couple of months into the school year and Jane feels that she has done a pretty good job of keeping her students engaged despite an absence of classroom decorations. They have even managed to learn a thing or two. Besides, it’s not like decorating is even a part of Jane’s job description anyway. Anna begins to attach a crayon border to the cloth. The crayons are smiling and holding hands. Jane closes her eyes and prays that the grade eights take pity on her.

“Thanks,” Jane mutters through gritted teeth.

“Oh, don’t mention it,” Anna says cheerfully.

But Anna does mention it. She mentions it in the staffroom in front of the other teachers, and in the office in front of the principal and vice-principal. She even goes into Jane’s class to ask the students how they feel in Jane’s room versus hers, with questions like, “Aren’t you bored?” or “Aren’t you cold?” The kids laugh awkwardly and continue texting under their desks.

The running joke becomes that Jane obviously lacks the skills and sentiments necessary to provide an aesthetically pleasing environment in which her students can flourish. She may as well be from that dystopian town in *The Giver*:<sup>4</sup> you know - the one where no one is allowed any colour. No one bothers to ask what Jane has actually been teaching during this time. On the

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<sup>4</sup> *The Giver* by Lois Lowry (1993) is a young adult dystopian novel in which every aspect of the characters’ lives—how they dress, where they work, who they marry, how many children they have, et cetera—is controlled. Because there are no choices to be made, the characters do not have the need or ability to see any colour.

contrary, the principal and vice-principal continue to select Anna's classroom to show off to their superiors whenever they are paid a school visit—with or without the students present.

Annoyed, Jane decides to check out Anna's classroom while she is not there to see what all the fuss is about. Immediately upon entering, she bashes her leg into a mid-century modern coffee table sporting a collection of wedding photos. Fortunately, the frames do not break as their sideways fall is cushioned by several doilies and a bowl of potpourri.

Rubbing her shin, Jane notices in a panic that her vision has gone dark - until she realizes that the culprit is actually a dim light emanating from a dozen lava lamps. An oil diffuser gently hums as the strong scent of lavender reaches her nose. Somewhere, sounds of the rainforest are playing.

As her eyes adjust, Jane notices other living room paraphernalia: couches, rugs, fake plants, various knickknacks, and even more framed photos. The only proof that this is still a classroom is the collection of desks clustered together in the very center of the room. She can see that some work does get done in here as there are instructions written on the eight-by-ten-inch section of the board not covered by inspirational posters. One screams at her to always be herself in a world that constantly wants her to change.

Jane wanders around the room and thinks about the time, money, and energy that must have gone into all of this, and how the only thing on her walls pre-Bulletin Board Gate was the mandatory faded fire exit map. When did decorating become an unofficial expectation? Why does it seem to matter more what her classroom looks like rather than what goes on inside of it? And how does a teacher even afford all this stuff anyway? Perhaps Anna lives in a very bare, lampless house as penance.

Jane wonders: when did appearance start to replace academics?

## The History of Female Teachers in Nova Scotia

### The Feminization of Teaching

Women began teaching in Nova Scotia public schools in 1838; prior to this date, women who taught had done so almost exclusively within the private sphere. As Alison Prentice (1977) explains, “the feminization of teaching” was “a movement of women into *public* school teaching, at a time when elementary education itself was gradually moving out of the household and into the ever-growing public institutions that would eventually almost monopolize the name of ‘schools’” (p. 6). This push for a reformed, state-supported public school system stemmed from what Janet Guildford (1992) considers to be a single overarching theme: that “universal free public schooling would provide moral training for the young and produce a generation of hard-working, law-abiding citizens” (p. 46). In fact, as Guildford further explains, “these social and political values [were] generally more important to the aims of school reformers than the provision of either religious or intellectual education” (1992, p. 46).

Thus, when the Nova Scotia Assembly permitted the hiring of female public-school teachers in 1838, it did so for two main reasons. The first being that women were considered inherently suited to this “moral training of children”—in this case, specifically the “values and attitudes deemed appropriate by the school reformers”—as it was thought to be a “female activity” within the “private world of the family and reproduction” (Guildford, 1992, pp. 46-47). It is important to note that both men and women shared this sentiment, for as Guildford (1992) points out, “[women], too, believed that they had a natural aptitude for the job” (p. 45). The second reason behind the hiring of female public-school teachers was that they were expected—and willing—to work for lower wages. Cheap and readily available groups of young unmarried women with very few other job opportunities served as a financial benefit to Nova Scotia’s

rapidly expanding public school system. Guildford brings both the ideological and economic hiring rationales full circle when she explains that:

The two were in fact intimately related and mutually reinforcing. Women were paid low wages because they were performing the work of the private sphere, work usually performed outside the formal economy. Women were recruited as teachers because they were believed to have a special aptitude for the job.

Concepts of gender were thus central to the 19th-century division of labour (1992, p. 47).

If a profession was defined by the formal acquisition of skills and knowledge, then it was considered unnecessary to overly compensate female teachers for work that supposedly came naturally to them. Likewise, if women were actually able to perform the same jobs as men, then how much training and education did male teachers really need? This argument would help to delay the professionalization of teaching for both women and men in the decades to come (Guildford, 1992).

By the end of the 1870s, female teachers in Nova Scotia had reached a majority and risen to two-thirds of the entire workforce, with most of the women in lower grades and men in upper classes or supervisory positions. The sheer number of female teachers alone supports what Guildford (1992) describes as a general acceptance of women in education; so long as middle-class notions surrounding separate spheres and divisions of labour were maintained. While male teachers were paid at a rate equal to that of labourers, female teachers were compensated similarly to domestic servants. The forced retirement of married women only solidified the ideology of separate spheres and provided further evidence as to why wages and working conditions should not be improved: there would always be another group of unmarried farmers'



daughters available to fill vacant teaching positions. Thus, there was no need to professionalize what was considered to be a temporary workforce. When all else failed, “the state could and did use professionalism to control teachers, by encouraging them to tie their aspirations very closely to the level of service they provided to the community, thereby discouraging unseemly demands for personal gain” (Guildford, 1992, p. 57). Ironically, when the government did choose to acknowledge and appeal to teacher professionalism, it did so with the ultimate intent to hinder it (Guildford, 1992).

The feminization of teaching describes female teachers’ shift from being confined to the private sphere to being invited into the public one; however, the inclusion of women in these public spaces meant that school came to be viewed through a middle-class lens as an extension of the domestic realm. Both men and women believed that female teachers were more naturally suited to the moral education of young children, which helped rationalize poor wages, little to no training, and gendered divisions of labour within the profession as a whole. When teachers did seek to professionalize against such unfair conditions, they were indeed urged to ‘be professional’—but in an ‘ask not what your job can do for you; ask what you can do for your job’ sort of way. The sentiment in today’s schools is not that different. A still predominantly female workforce is expected to nurture students mentally, emotionally, and often even physically (feeding, clothing, bathing, etc.), in a way more akin to labour typically performed in the home than in other professional settings. Ultimately, this leads me to the question: are we being judged as teachers, or as women?

### **The Slow Revolution to Professionalization**

According to George Perry (2003), Nova Scotia’s “slow revolution” over the next several decades to professionalize its teachers “set it apart from other Canadian provinces and American

states” and gave it the reputation of a place “where politicians were more concerned with keeping taxes low than providing qualified teachers” (pp. 327-328). Little to no training requirements ensured a steady workforce supply, as “the option of teaching was always available when better-paying alternatives could not be found” (Perry, 2003, p. 338). If possible, men tried to avoid teaching altogether, as it was no longer considered to be a ‘man’s job’. The economic hardships of the 1930s saw a cut to already meager teachers’ salaries, as well as an underbidding for teaching positions, which caused the Halifax City Local to withdraw from the Nova Scotia Teachers Union (founded in 1895) and form the Halifax Men Teachers’ Association. The HMTA rejoined the local between 1936 and 1937, and by the end of the 1930s, the NSTU had succeeded in raising licensing standards (Phinney, 2001). For the first time ever, teachers were required to have a full year of compulsory training at the Provincial Normal College in Truro, and as Perry states, “a trend in the direction of greater permanency of service certainly began at this time” (2003, pp. 341-342).

This trend was interrupted, however, by the Second World War and its aftermath. Although 1946 saw the “elimination of salary differentials based on grade level and gender” (Phinney, 2001, p. 10), according to Perry (2003), a teacher supply shortage due to better employment opportunities during and after the war years caused a resurgence of the licensing of under-qualified candidates, and even “previously unwanted married women were also coaxed to help out” (p. 347). Indeed, by 1950, almost seventy percent of Nova Scotia’s rural female teachers were married. This change to the marriage ban presented a particular challenge to separate spheres ideology at a time when, as Sheila Cavanagh (2005) describes, “the postwar *Zeitgeist* [and] traditional gender roles relegated women to monogamous familial units where motherhood, marriage, and household domesticity shaped their identities” (pp. 257-258). Of

course, the choice to adhere to such traditional roles was a luxury afforded to only a certain type of woman; for—as Beauvoir (1949/2011) wrote during the postwar years herself—class informs gender expectations. However, the lack of a readily available workforce meant that the image of the “single, female teacher designated spinster” was forced to make room for the “newer caricature of the married, woman teacher” (Cavanagh, 2005, p. 265). According to Cavanagh,

A will to self-sacrifice was believed to drive the professionalism of the married teacher [...] This more recent portrayal depicts the married, female teacher as selfless, altruistic, and philanthropic. This construction proved necessary to garner social approval of the married woman teacher and to assure skeptics that she is not selfish and, thus, unfeminine (2005, p. 265).

The eventual “loss of the more ‘mature’ married woman from the profession” (Cavanagh, 2005, p. 265), coupled with permissive licensing practices of the time, “sustained [...] traditional attitudes about women’s work” and ultimately caused “serious damage to the prospect of a ‘professionalized’ corps of teachers” (Perry, 2003, p. 331).

In 1950, the Commission on Teacher Education had addressed the “low status” of teachers and recommended that at least some university attendance should be required “in order to attract better students” from more upper-class homes “where the average family income was higher” (Perry, 2003, pp. 342, 355-356). However, it was the economic recession of 1957 through to the early 1960s, and the consequent return of an abundance of available labour, that made it possible—beginning in 1961—to require a mandatory two-year program at the Nova Scotia Teachers College in Truro (Perry, 2003). With this long-awaited move towards professionalization, teachers began making strides. According to Maureen Phinney (2001), teachers “resort[ed] to mass resignations in order to gain minimal pay increases from their

boards”, and by 1970, their salary had doubled to \$6,482 from \$3,196 per year in 1960 (p. 14). In 1972, the NSTC began offering a three-year program which would award an actual diploma upon completion (Alumni Association of the Nova Scotia Teachers College, 2021). The Teachers’ Collective Bargaining Act was passed in 1974, which helped to secure better salaries, benefits, and job security. As Phinney explains, “the NSTU had always been concerned about its role in improving the calibre of teachers entering the profession and in enhancing the status of teacher education [and] it was during this decade that the NSTU achieved significant gains” (2001, pp. 19-20).

The 1980s and 1990s saw government cutbacks to teaching positions, school boards, and the education budget as a whole (Phinney, 2001). In 1989, the NSTC became a four-year degree-granting institution; however, in 1994, the province was shocked at the government’s decision to shut down the college altogether and move teacher education entirely to the university level (Alumni Association of the Nova Scotia Teachers College, 2021). William Hare (2010) describes this move as “a vain attempt to reduce the number of teachers graduating each year”, and goes on to explain that:

The number of teaching certificates granted in the province annually has remained constant as students who did not gain a place in one of the remaining teacher education programs in Nova Scotia simply headed to Maine to gain a teaching credential (p. 82).

At the same time, a new education act introducing EDnet (an online administrative system), a special education policy, and common core curricula and assessments came into effect (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 1998). Thus, by 1995, as a direct result of such rapid changes

and cutbacks, teachers were widely reported to be “discouraged by the government’s actions toward the education system as a whole” (Phinney, 2001, p. 29).

By the turn of the century, the identity of teachers as professionals was not exactly clear-cut; particularly when it came to issues regarding teacher training, prescriptive curricula, and increased workloads due to cutbacks to education and other programs. The constant back-and-forthing of mandatory teacher training alone suggests that standards weren’t always necessary—just convenient—during various periods of economic and employment (in)stability. Even as I write this, Nova Scotia has introduced non-licensed substitutes<sup>5</sup> to help with the COVID-19 teacher shortage (Halifax Regional Centre for Education, 2021). This is a far cry from the mandatory substitute course that I still had to be accepted into even after graduating with a Bachelor of Education program (nearly ten years ago now), or the principals who came to speak to us during the last year of our teaching degree and offered such advice as, “If you really want to impress us, stay after school and sweep” and, “If you can’t get a sub job, it’s not us—it’s you”.<sup>6</sup> However, I digress.

It is interesting to note that other predominantly female professions, such as nursing and secretarial work, did not experience the same outright elimination of qualifications as teaching did at times. Mandatory nurse training schools operating under the Nightingale system were established in most parts of Canada by the end of the nineteenth century (Elliott et al., 2008). Around the same time, aspiring secretaries could attend a growing number of colleges that taught typing, stenography, and bookkeeping, and, as a result, “the earliest generations of clerical workers were better educated than other women workers” (England & Boyer, 2009, p. 313).

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<sup>5</sup> Non-licensed substitute teachers will receive the same daily rate as their Bachelor of Education counterparts. If replacing someone long-term, they will be paid the same as a teacher who holds an education diploma from the NSTC (Halifax Regional Centre for Education, 2021; Province of Nova Scotia, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> I remember this vividly as it was a former teacher and former vice-principal that I had growing up.

Over time, nursing programs only became more stringent; and, during periods of employee scarcity—such as in the post-World War II years—secretaries could be recruited straight from high school since clerical training had begun to be offered at the secondary level (Elliott et al., 2008; England & Boyer, 2009). Up until the end of the twentieth century, the rationale behind how teachers were both recruited and trained was elusive at best, and purely economically driven at worst. Even now, the Bachelor of Education program—the distinguishing training that can only be received after the completion of another post-secondary degree—is the first requirement to be dropped when times get tough. It might be said that it was this (prevailing) attitude toward the profession, coupled with decreased government funding and—as a result—increased workloads of the 1990s, that brought further confusion to the roles and responsibilities of teachers as they entered the twenty-first century.

### **The Intensification of Teaching**

In a series of interviews conducted among twenty-eight Ontario elementary school teachers, Andy Hargreaves (1991) explores how educators have been impacted by the intensification thesis, which he describes as “embod[ying] important propositions concerning compression of and changes in the time demands of teaching [...] these changes—which are really forms of work degradation—are often ‘misrecognized’ by teachers themselves as enhanced professionalism” (p. 1). Hargreaves makes sure to note that “claims and inferences that intensification is part of a long, linear process of degradation in teachers’ work, are difficult to support through longer-term historical study” as “many studies of teaching in the nineteenth century indicate that in quantitative terms, teaching may have been just as hard and demanding as it is now. In qualitative terms, it may also have been less rather than more skilled” (1991, pp. 25-26). What Hargreaves does claim is that current teaching intensification is driven by both

external and internal sources, as “many teachers appeared to drive themselves with almost merciless enthusiasm and commitment in an attempt to meet the virtually unattainable standards of pedagogical perfection they set themselves” (1991, p. 11). Here, he gives examples such as the teacher “who spent over \$1000 of her own money over the summer, on materials and resources for her class” as well as the teacher “who came in one Saturday for several hours a month to sort out the staffroom bulletin boards” (Hargreaves, 1991, p. 12). Hargreaves suggests that teachers may be motivated by “the diffuse definitions and expectations that attach to teaching in Ontario and other similar systems”, such as the increasing concern over child welfare, as well as social and emotional goals (1991, p. 11). Indeed, he notes that:

The ethic of care was a powerful source of motivation and direction for these teachers—not surprisingly given the importance of care as a key reason among elementary teachers for entering teaching, and given its pervasiveness as a central moral principle among women more generally (Hargreaves, 1991, p. 19).

Unsurprisingly, intensification “may not impact on all teachers in the same way [and] may be felt less keenly by others” (Hargreaves, 1991, p. 26). Increased preparation time is sometimes only a band-aid solution where these ideological issues are concerned, as it “can be used for purposes other than its promoters intended [and] can yield a range of unintended consequences that cannot easily be explained within the parameters of labour process theory” (Hargreaves, 1991, p. 27). Indeed, Hargreaves outlines that “unless there was a commitment to collaborative working relationships [...] preparation time became absorbed by the deep-seated culture of individualism and classroom-centredness that has become historically and institutionally ingrained in the prevailing patterns of teachers’ work” (1991, pp. 17-18).

In 2000, after years of government cuts to the education sector, Andrew Harvey and Jamie Spinney conducted a time-use study of over 800 Nova Scotia teachers: 77% of whom were female, and 60% of which were 45 years of age or older. The authors attribute the low number of young teacher respondents with “the low number of full-time jobs available to new teachers” at the time (Harvey & Spinney, 2000, p. 6). Results from diary reports show that the average amount of time spent in the classroom per week was 26.25 hours; however, teachers were spending 52.5 hours per week on teaching-related activities—meaning that exactly half of this time was being spent on unpaid ‘homework’. The reason for this, according to Harvey and Spinney, is that:

Over recent years, teachers’ responsibilities have become more extensive, and their roles have become more diffuse. Teachers’ work has become increasingly intensified, with teachers being expected to respond to greater pressures and to comply with constant innovations under conditions that are at best stable and at worst deteriorating. The timing of this intensification coincides with governmental cuts to funding of the education sector. Basically, teachers are required to do more with less (2000, p. 23).

Teachers also reported “working harder than they have in the past” yet being less appreciated (Harvey & Spinney, 2000, p. 14). In fact, teachers asserted that “other people’s perceptions of the teaching profession have changed for the worse over the past five years” (Harvey & Spinney, 2000, p. vi). Along with the job intensification, this perceived change in public opinion helped to create what Harvey and Spinney describe as “a sense of hopelessness, cynicism and demoralisation among Nova Scotia’s teachers” (2000, p. vi).



In 2015, Kevin Kelloway, Tabatha Thibault, and Lori Francis conducted another study on the time use of Nova Scotia teachers. Of the 581 teachers who completed the survey, 75.9% identified as female, and the average age was 42.08 years. Similar to Harvey and Spinney's 2000 study, teachers reported working an average of 52.2 hours per week; however, 33.5 of those hours were now spent at work, while 18.7 hours were spent at home. Kelloway et al. outlined that "along with long hours, teachers reported role overload, high workload, high work-family conflict and low recognition" (2015, p. 24). Suggestions for a better work-life balance included teacher input on policy changes, potential job restructuring, and increased prep time (Kelloway et al., 2015).

On the contrary, Sean Wiebe and Craig MacDonald (2014) explore why teachers "struggle increasingly with work intensification despite increasing 'prep' time and decreasing 'class' time", through narrative accounts of seven Prince Edward Island teachers (p. 19). Unsurprisingly, part of this intensification is due to a large, complex education system that continually "regulates, redistributes, and normalizes the input/output discrepancy" (Wiebe & MacDonald, 2014, p. 10). The authors explain that "there is little or nothing an individual teacher can do to make the input and output balance [and] with output demands always outpacing the inputs of teachers, we thus have a working theory for why teachers experience increased intensity in their worklives" (Wiebe & MacDonald, 2014, p. 10). However, along with demands from the system come demands from oneself that can be just as unattainable. As Wiebe and MacDonald explain:

Children are the future. Teaching matters so much that it can change the world in a single generation. At once noble and absurd. The solidarity implied in producing such an unmeasurable social good cannot help but create a system of

professionalism that comes to rule harshly over the teachers who are complicit in its maintenance (2014, p. 10).

The authors go on to state that “teachers seduced by their own professionalism may not always be cared for as they feel called to care [...] degraded in witness to their own (desired) professional discourse [...] they *consort* with their own exploitation” (Wiebe & MacDonald, 2014, p. 11). Here, this becomes “a question of what teachers wish to put up with—a question of where they’d prefer to mete out their complicity, or to draw the line sometimes” (Wiebe & MacDonald, 2014, p. 12). Ultimately, Wiebe and MacDonald implore that:

The pressure of intensification [...] must be overcome to some extent if teachers are to discover that they find it hard to find time, not only to talk to each other, but, to cite another popular theme, even to pass an evening with family.

Meanwhile, the accountability by which their ‘professionalism’ is measured and rationalized, with its standards and ‘ethics,’ threatens to diminish who they are as individuals, unless they are willing to define, in public engagement, their own preferences for defining the profession (2014, p. 23).

In other words, it is imperative that teachers themselves find a way to define their roles and responsibilities within an increasingly indefinable profession (Wiebe & MacDonald, 2014).

Stephen Brookfield (2005) applies Antonio Gramsci’s analysis of Marxist theory to the metaphor of vocation as hegemony to describe how some educators willingly engage in this kind of competitive and self-destructive behaviour in order to demonstrate their competence and dedication. Meanwhile, it is the school system that benefits from the unpaid labour and additional resources that are poured back into the classroom at the teachers’ expense. Brookfield defines hegemony as “the way we learn to love our servitude”, and asserts that to view teaching

as the fulfillment of an innate and selfless calling can leave educators open to further exploitation and manipulation (2005, p. 94). Geoff Shullenberger (2014) refers to this phenomenon as “the rise of the voluntariat” who work “without being compensated, but out of a sense of altruism”; however, “its contribution of uncompensated work accelerates deskilling and undermines the livelihood of those who do not have the luxury of working for free”. Brookfield also examines Michel Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power; namely that, unlike more obvious sovereign power, it is the people (in this case: teachers) who work to govern themselves and others through both individual and horizontal influences. Foucault (1982) explains how the insidious nature of power “consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome”, and that “it incites, it induces, it seduces” (p. 789). We might relate both hegemony and disciplinary power back to Wiebe and MacDonald’s (2014) claim that teachers may consort with their own exploitation and become seduced by their own definition of professionalism, which is dependent in part on whichever form of ‘conduct’ is most desired by the external and internal sources explored by Hargreaves (1991). The comments that I received from my peers regarding my ‘undesirable conduct’—leaving school once my contractual hours were finished, refusing to take work home with me, and even the size of the bag that I carried—could all be considered examples of hegemony and disciplinary power in action. Through their blatant disapproval of my unwillingness to work for free, these teachers became complicit in maintaining a version of professionalism that was harmful not only to me, but also to them—and, arguably, our students. For as Brookfield writes, “As long as teachers view taking on heavier and heavier workloads [...] and as long as they take pride in the level of commitment this shows, then smaller and smaller resources can be devoted to education” (2005, p. 103).

Ultimately, the teaching intensification of the last few decades has left some educators struggling against both external and internal expectations—and, consequently, with a distorted view of themselves as professionals. With a predominantly female profession historically linked to the private sphere, it is little wonder that this intensification would eventually lead to the exploitation of domestic labour and traditional female roles. Feeding, clothing, nursing, and decorating—jobs typically performed in schools today—are not actually the responsibilities outlined in a teacher’s job description (Halifax Regional Centre for Education, 2009); however, they are the duties of a true woman within Welter’s (1966) cult of domesticity. Indeed, Welter explains that “woman understood her position if she was the right kind of woman, a true woman [and] was to work only for pure affection, without thought of money or ambition” (1966, pp. 159-160). In a similar vein, Beauvoir (1949/2011) writes that women are persuaded to “remain women” through the “bourgeois ideal of happiness” and “refinements of a civilization ‘of quality’” such as “children, laundry, jams and jellies, family gatherings, clothes, salons, balls, suffering but exemplary wives [and] the beauty of devotion and sacrifice” (p. 746).

As teaching intensifies, and the input/output discrepancy continues to grow larger, perhaps some female teachers seek to understand their positions as educators through what Judith Butler (1988) refers to as performative acts of gender: acts that “are usually interpreted as expressive of a gender core or identity” and that “either conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in some way” (p. 527). Perhaps—to relate back to the question of whether we are being judged as teachers or as women—if an educator appears to fail at ‘being a teacher’, they can at least succeed at being the type of woman described by Welter (1966) and Beauvoir (1949/2011). We might consider this type of gender performance to be an example of what Butler calls a strategy of survival: “the situation of duress under which gender performance

always and variously occurs” (1988, p. 522). In this sense, perhaps these teachers do not feel as if they must conform to the increasingly unattainable standards of their profession; they only have to rely on their bodies, the acts that those bodies are expected to perform, and the cultural celebration that results from such acts. In other words, is it possible that gender performativity as a response to teaching intensification is the reason behind some of these instances of teachers seeking to re-domesticate the twenty-first century classroom?

## The ‘Good Teacher’ and the Ethics of Care

### What Makes a ‘Good Teacher’?

I return now to my case study and the steps that I took to make sense of this re-domestication phenomenon. Indeed, as Hare and Portelli (1998) write, “case studies are capable of generating a great deal of useful discussion” (p. v). To begin with, there is a general sense from Jane’s coworker, Anna, that Jane is not a good teacher because she fails to live up to the classroom appearance standards that Anna has set for herself. I emphasize that these standards are Anna’s standards, as Jane’s job description does not include such non-teaching related activities as decorating one’s classroom. My own job description also fails to mention such an activity within its list of teacher responsibilities, competencies, qualifications, and job components (Halifax Regional Centre for Education, 2009). In fact, I have yet to find a provincial or territorial government within Canada that places such an emphasis on classroom appearance. Common themes include instruction, assessment, diversity, technology, collaboration, communication, classroom management, and professional development. The closest possible references to decorating have more to do with how the physical environment should always remain conducive to learning. With that being said, I am not here to argue about whether the addition of classroom decorations can be conducive to learning or not; I am, rather, suggesting that learning itself is not necessarily the intention behind such non-teaching related activities in the first place, and, as such, appears to be supported by the fact that no education department across Canada actually includes decorating as a teaching and learning standard. In an already intensified system (Hargreaves, 1991), perhaps its usefulness—or clear connection to learning—is simply too difficult to determine (Alberta Education, 2020; BC Teachers’ Council, 2019; Gouvernement du Québec, 2021; Government of New Brunswick, 2021; Government of

Newfoundland and Labrador, 2005; Government of Northwest Territories, 2018; Government of Nunavut, 2020; Government of Yukon, 2022; Halifax Regional Centre for Education, 2009; Manitoba Teachers' Society, 2021; Ontario College of Teachers, n.d.; PEI Department of Education, Early Learning and Culture, 2015; Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, 2017).

Since decorating and other non-teaching related activities that rely not only on unpaid labour, but on teachers' actual earnings as well, could not be found in any job description, I turned to philosophers of education and their respective concepts of the good teacher, as perhaps this messaging had filtered down through teacher training programs and I had simply missed it along the way. John Dewey's (1903) *democracy and education*, Bertrand Russell's (as cited in Hare, 2002) three qualities of kindness, knowledge, and courage, Israel Scheffler's (1993) tongue-in-cheek 'seven deadly sins'<sup>7</sup> of educational effectiveness, Richard Stanley Peters' (1966) teacher in authority, and William Hare's (1993) eight virtues of humility, courage, impartiality, open-mindedness, empathy, enthusiasm, judgment, and imagination, collectively paint the picture of a courageous and knowledgeable teacher who is empathetic towards their students while still being discerning, self-determined, and comfortable in authority. In fact, contrary to some of the practices stemming from the current teaching intensification (Hargreaves, 1991), Peters, Russell, and Dewey almost appear to forewarn good educators against participating in benign child-minding, vague benevolence, and external conformity.

While the child-minding that Peters (1966) refers to is indeed an important contribution to society, the fact that it is performed in school does not mean that it is the point of school. This

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<sup>7</sup> Here, Scheffler (1993) explores how ignorance, negativity, forgetting, guesswork, irrelevance, procrastination, and idleness should in fact be "wisely promoted or exploited by the sensitive teacher" (p. 106). He writes that we must acknowledge our ignorance, learn from negative events of the past, remember the significant and forget the trivial, encourage guesswork, explore the irrelevance that gives other things meaning, procrastinate performing less important tasks, and embrace idleness as an alternative to excessive productivity (Scheffler, 1993).

lack of distinction only contributes to the historical notion that schools are mere extensions of the private sphere, and, by default, teachers are the performers of such domestic activities (Guildford, 1992). When it comes to the idea of vague benevolence—in Jane’s case, some of the ‘nice’ things that Anna does for her students with her own time, money, and energy—Russell (1979) writes that “It is not enough to go about overflowing with vague benevolence. The world is full of kindly feeling, but a great deal of it is ineffective” (p. 10). If Jane is fulfilling her job description, is she not an effective teacher in the eyes of her employer? This pressure for Jane to conform to certain classroom appearance standards is not even coming from what Dewey (1903) refers to as the régime of authority<sup>8</sup> per se; however, what complicates the situation is that Anna’s self-sacrificial efforts are often publicly celebrated by those in charge, creating a set of both official and unofficial requirements—a hidden curriculum for teachers, if you will.

Educational philosopher Maxine Greene (1978) responds to such instances of conditioning and manipulation by cautioning the good teacher to embrace and critique their own personal reality; namely, “what [they] are trying to bring into being” through teaching (p. 27). Out of touch teachers run the risk of allowing themselves to be identified by their roles, and, as a result, may reproduce the very conditioning and manipulation that seek to define them (Greene, 1978). Similarly, Jane Roland Martin (1991) makes it a point to note that the good female teacher’s role in this instance does not include sacrificing themselves in the name of their profession, thus further contributing to “the devaluation and denigration of women and of the positive functions and traits that have been assigned to us historically” (p. 24). Here, Martin’s

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<sup>8</sup> Dewey’s (1903) régime of authority dictates educational methods and subject matter; specifically teaching and discipline, as well as curriculum and textbooks. He makes no mention of classroom appearance standards. Dewey critiques this authority for its “external dictation and direction [that] ten[d] automatically to perpetuate the very conditions of inefficiency, lack of interest, inability to assume positions of self-determination, which constitute the reasons that are depended upon to justify the régime” (1903, p. 198).



philosophy aligns with Beauvoir's (1949/2011) critique that sacrifice is considered a womanly virtue, and similar to Beauvoir, cautions that the good female teacher must "take to heart the genderization of the attributes both included in and excluded from our present ideal" (1991, p. 24). Both Martin and Beauvoir can also be connected to Butler (1988), who examines our "tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders" and how "The authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one's belief in its necessity and naturalness" (p. 522). For the insinuation that attributes such as sacrifice, devotion, and domesticity are stereotypically female—even when intended as compliments—suggests that other attributes, in turn, do not come as easily to women (Tronto, 1987). We might take this one step further by applying Beauvoir's willingly embraced female virtues against Greene's warning that teachers should not allow their roles to be defined for them, in order to consider the following: perhaps some female teachers (in this case: Anna) do indeed embrace being defined in this way.

Ultimately, what I did not find within the literature of Dewey (1903), Russell (1979), Scheffler (1993), Peters (1966), Hare (1993), Greene (1978), and Martin (1991) turned out to be just as important as what I did find. To these philosophers of education, the concept of the good teacher does not include benign child-minding, vague benevolence, external conformity, being defined by one's role, or sacrificing oneself for the profession; yet in my case study, Jane feels as though these are in fact the markers of a good teacher for some of her coworkers (and even her bosses). Jane rejects the unofficial (and often unpaid) domestic duties that Anna appears to embrace and wonders why Anna is willing to give up so much of her own time, money, and energy to perform such non-teaching related activities. To suggest that this is simply how some teachers 'are' despite actual job descriptions and warnings of educational philosophers seems

fatalistic and premature; however, we cannot ignore what is perhaps the most obvious rebuttal with which Anna could respond:

Because she *cares*.

### **The Ethics of Care**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, embedded within the image of the good female teacher lie assumptions surrounding women and the ethics of care. Even a quick Google Images search of “caring teacher” brings up pages upon pages of mostly young, mostly white, white-collared women (as in, women literally wearing white collars) laughing and sitting shoulder to shoulder with a student or two. Seven out of the thirteen provinces and territories of Canada mention care somewhere within their teaching standards documents. Both Alberta and British Columbia name care as part of a core competency; with Alberta Education (2020) writing, “A teacher establishes, promotes and sustains inclusive learning environments where diversity is embraced and every student is welcomed, cared for, respected and safe” (p. 4), and BC Teachers’ Council (2019) stating, “Educators care for students and act in their best interests” (p. 4). The Government of Northwest Territories (2018) calls for a “caring environment” for the “Development of [a student’s] Self” (p. 9); while PEI Department of Education, Early Learning and Culture (2015) includes caring as a requisite for the Language Arts learning environment only. The Government of Nunavut (2020) outlines how care is part of the Inuit Qaujimagatjuqangit’s (IQ) principle of *innuqatigiitsiarniq*, which means “respecting others, relationships, and caring for people” (p. 1); whereas the Gouvernement du Québec (2021) makes a brief mention of teachers’ “caring attitude toward their students” overall (p. 26). Interestingly, Ontario’s teaching standards are divided into two categories—ethical and practical—with care placed under the former; stating that “The

ethical standard of Care includes compassion, acceptance, interest and insight for developing students' potential" (Ontario College of Teachers, n.d., p. 1).

While neither Dewey (1903), Russell (as cited in Hare, 2002), Scheffler (1993), Peters (1966), Hare (1993), nor Greene (1978) include care as a requisite for the ideal teacher, one might argue that it is implied within such concepts as Dewey's "sympathy with children" (1903, p. 198), Russell's "ally of the child" (as cited in Hare, 2002, p. 495), and Hare's empathetic teacher. Martin (1991) does indeed include care within her philosophy of education and writes that while it is "absolutely essential to the sound practice of [caring] professions", women care workers face such challenges as "being trapped in the stereotypical female role of self-sacrificer" and "laps[ing] into a well-meaning but ineffectual sentimentality" (pp. 20-21). Here, we might suggest that Martin's ineffectual sentimentality is similar to Russell's (1979) vague benevolence and Peters' benign child-minding.

Although a little more than half of Canada's provinces and territories, and almost none of the aforementioned educational philosophers, explicitly include care in their definitions of the ideal teacher, one could argue that care is still an obvious practical expectation of teachers; particularly as it relates to their job descriptions: that teachers' 'duty to care' involves both educating students and keeping them safe during school hours. Indeed, as Tracy Barber (2002) writes, "There is no doubt that teachers and schools are expected to care"; however, she adds that the problem arises when "we assume that the public school system's duty of care is especially devoted to looking after the difficult children, and making up for negligent parents" (p. 386). She goes on to state that:

Teachers, reflecting societal expectations and ideals, assume this requires a particular sort of caring; a greater need for support of the child's general welfare.

These students are perceived to particularly need the school as a haven from their families' social, emotional and economic difficulties (Barber, 2002, p. 393).

If the concept of the good and caring teacher has transformed into assuming care for all facets of a student's life, then, as with Hargreaves' (1991) intensification thesis, it is not surprising that this would lead to a re-domestication of sorts through the exploitation of teachers' domestic labour and perpetuation of traditional female roles; for we cannot ignore the bodies that are expected to perform such acts. As Butler (1988) writes, the body "is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and *reproducing* a historical situation" (p. 521). If schools must 'make up' for any issues within the private sphere, then this relegates teachers into being mothers, nurses, cooks, dressers, drivers, decorators, playmates, and party throwers in the public one. As we see in my case study, the comment "Don't you care?" is used as a weapon to pressure teachers into performing these types of tasks; and, because they are not officially part of the school curriculum, are often the ones that require the use of the teacher's own time, money, and energy. How then do teachers like Jane reconcile the concept of the good teacher with the duty to care when the parameters surrounding care are loosely referred to within job descriptions at best—and not even included in them at worst? Let us turn now specifically to the ethics of care philosophers.

Much like Martin's (1991) philosophy that sacrifice is not synonymous with the good female teacher, Joan Tronto (1987) states that female is not synonymous with care; and, to come full circle, Eva Feder Kittay (2011) posits that the ethics of care is not synonymous with sacrifice. Kittay explains that "when a carer sacrifices her own self for the sake of the other, there are no longer two selves that can stand in relationship" (2011, p. 115). Annette Baier (1982) adds that such a loving relationship should "not be parasitic and so one-sidedly

dependent” that we cannot maintain the ability to examine and evaluate our reasons for caring in the first place (p. 287). The word relationship is key here, as Carol Gilligan (2014), Nel Noddings (1988), and Virginia Held (2002) all define the ethics of care as behaving ethically in relation to another; however, what makes it an ethic of care is that it:

Guides us in acting carefully in the human world and highlights the costs of carelessness. It is grounded less in moral precepts than in psychological wisdom, underscoring the costs of not paying attention, not listening, being absent rather than present, not responding with integrity and respect (Gilligan, 2014, p. 103).

One’s capacity for the ethics of care is neither masculine or feminine, but human, as Gilligan, Noddings, Kittay, Tronto, and Sara Ruddick (1980) point out. In fact, Noddings makes the distinction that “the mother-child relation [is] rarely appropriate for other relations” (1988, p. 219); which provides an interesting counterargument to Barber’s (2002) observation that schools now face societal pressure to recreate the private sphere within the public one. Gilligan (2014) goes so far as to state that the romanticization of traditional female stereotypes such as sacrifice, selflessness, and care itself can actually be regarded as a failure to care as falsely gendered stories of ourselves could be considered examples of internalized gender binary and patriarchal order. Similarly, Ruddick refers to such romanticized feminine stereotypes as virtues of subordinates and writes that “praising cultures of oppression comes close to praising oppression itself” (1980, p. 346). This only highlights Greene’s (1978) warning that teachers must stay in touch with their biographical situations lest they risk perpetuating systemic inequities.

Here, I return to my previous consideration that some female teachers, such as Anna in the case study, seem to willingly embrace (Beauvoir, 1949/2011) the very female stereotypes that philosophers such as Gilligan (2014), Noddings (1988), Baier (1982), Held (2002), Kittay

(2011), Ruddick (1980), and Tronto (1987) caution against. Baier's parasitic love, Ruddick's virtues of subordinates, and Noddings' critique of the misplaced mother-child relation paint a different picture from what some female teachers appear to have accepted as the standard meaning and display of care. If romanticizing traditional female stereotypes may in fact be a failure to care, why do some women continue to embrace this internalized gender binary and patriarchal order (Gilligan, 2014)? As Wiebe and MacDonald (2014) write, it is as if some teachers actually "*consort* with their own exploitation" (p. 11); which suggests that hegemony and disciplinary power are at play. Here, hegemony is exercised through the disciplinary power of teachers embracing and imposing feminine stereotypes onto themselves and others. What's more, if the modeling of these gendered dichotomies and hierarchies can be damaging to teachers, surely it is less than ideal for the students themselves; ironically, the intended recipients of such 'care' in the first place.

While an examination of what is taught in schools<sup>9</sup> is certainly beyond the scope of this thesis, it is worth considering which acts can even be considered caring in the first place. Daniel Engster (2005) argues that we should limit the definition of care to the basic needs and capabilities required to achieve well-being and function in society; namely, "food, sanitary water, clothing, shelter, rest, a clean environment, basic medical care and protection from harm" (p. 51), as well as the abilities to "sense, feel, move about, speak, reason, imagine, affiliate with others, and in most societies today, read, write, and perform basic math" (p. 52). In contrast, he explains that complex capabilities such as play, knowledge, religion, and aesthetic appreciation should not be included in the definition of care as "We would then be defining what it means to care for others in terms of a Western bourgeois notion of the good life" (Engster, 2005, p. 52).

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<sup>9</sup> Here, what I am referring to is not only subject matter, but also the skills, attitudes, and dispositions that are communicated directly and/or indirectly through various interactions with students.

While basic capabilities “are necessary for basic functioning and pursuing any conception of the good life”, complex capabilities are what “different individuals may or may not want to foster depending upon their preferences and traditions” (Engster, 2005, p. 53). What’s more, Engster posits that if we include complex capabilities alongside basic capabilities within the definition of care, parents and guardians who are only able to provide basic needs to their children—or who do not subscribe for whatever reason to certain complex capabilities—could then be considered uncaring. He uses the example of parents who meet their children’s basic needs and are religious versus parents who also meet their children’s basic needs and are artistic and athletic to explain how:

It seems wrong to judge either of these parents as uncaring on the grounds that they fail to develop one or another of their children’s complex capabilities.

Indeed, by their own visions of the good life, both are raising their children in what they consider to be highly caring ways. Yet, the implication of associating caring with the higher capabilities is that any parents or care givers who did not give their children the opportunity to develop all of their higher capabilities would be uncaring. It thus seems best to define caring in terms of the basic practices that all good parents engage in regardless of their other beliefs. When parents choose to foster their children’s complex capabilities [...] they seem to be doing something else than caring for them (Engster, 2005, p. 53).

I would argue that teachers do indeed support basic needs and capabilities at times; for example, protection from harm, basic medical care, and the aforementioned abilities to “sense, feel, move about, speak, reason, imagine, affiliate with others [...] read, write, and perform basic math” (Engster, 2005, p. 52). However, I would also argue that the main function of school is to foster

complex capabilities such as higher-level knowledge, athletics, and the arts; particularly as—unlike basic capabilities—these complex capabilities are not necessarily able or expected to be fostered at home. If for argument’s sake we say that the fostering of complex capabilities is indeed a version of care, then we still cannot consider Anna’s classroom decorations and personal mementos to be tools of care as she most likely does not use these items for her students’ survival and/or function (basic needs) nor as educational aids to engage with higher-level knowledge and aesthetic appreciation (complex capabilities). Instead, these familiar and meaningful items (wedding pictures, etc.) probably serve as a comfort to Anna herself. Thus, when Anna asks, “Don’t you care?” in response to Jane’s absence of classroom decorations, she is doing what Engster cautions against and equating care with her own notion of the good life.

Lexico.com (2022) defines care as “The provision of what is necessary for the health, welfare, maintenance, and protection of someone or something”. Gilligan (2014), Noddings (1988), Baier (1982), Held (2002), Kittay (2011), Ruddick (1980), Tronto (1987), and Engster (2005) demonstrate how care can indeed be used to justify the maintenance and protection of gender binary and patriarchal order, as well as the Western bourgeois notion of what constitutes the good life; and—to come full circle—the good female teacher. When we apply Engster’s Western bourgeois good life to Barber’s (2002) school as a haven, we must consider whose haven, whose home, whose private sphere, that some female teachers attempt to recreate. The issue is not only that they practice domesticity within the public realm, but also what it looks like when they do. As I mentioned in my introduction, my grandmother’s version of domesticity looked vastly different from Welter’s (1966) cult of domesticity. What about those teachers who are disadvantaged by their class, gender, abilities, race, and/or culture through this Western,



patriarchal, bourgeois stereotype of ‘the good female teacher’? In other words: who benefits from this ideal—and who does not?

### **The ‘Downside’ to Care: Who Benefits and Who Does Not**

I once asked during a staff meeting regarding a multi-day, overnight class trip if we would receive time in lieu to prepare for the substitute teachers who would be covering for us in our absence, as well as to get caught up on all our missed work when we returned (the answer was no). A coworker of mine leaned across the table towards me, and, with a sympathetic expression on her face, said, “Don’t you think that those types of questions are kind of poor taste?”

*Poor taste.*

If refusing unpaid labour opens teachers up to be judged as poor, then ‘poor’ is obviously not something that teachers are supposed to embody. As Robin Zheng (2018) explains, “being able to work out of love, and viewing the demand for compensation as ‘bad taste’ or evidencing insufficient devotion to the craft [...] is a luxury available to the leisure rather than the working class” (p. 241); however, there is another layer to this. The luxury of sacrifice, devotion, and work as its own reward signifies not only a certain type of teacher, but also a certain type of woman; the kind that has been traditionally celebrated within society (Beauvoir, 1949/2011). As Beauvoir writes of the working woman, “she is expected to be a *woman as well*, and she must add to her professional work the duties that femininity implies” (1949/2011, p. 346). On the surface, it may seem ‘virtuous’ that Anna is willing to sacrifice so much of her own time, money, and energy for her students; however, we cannot ignore the fact that she receives praise for it—the “psychic income” that women “are assumed to receive from the joy of helping others, rather than, say, gender discrimination” (Zheng, 2018, p. 242). I had performed a female faux pas by

airing my dirty laundry and asking for lieu time; by not having my material needs met by the psychic income of work as its own reward. Due to her financial situation, Jane is also at a disadvantage when it comes to competing with Anna on a socioeconomic—or class—level (although arguably, even if she had the money, she should not have to spend it competing with her coworker). Anna, on the contrary, appears to willingly embrace this ‘caring’ role, and, as such, is celebrated for being a good teacher through the lens of being a good woman.

Along with these class incentives, Annette Braun (2011, 2012) draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1990) to apply the concepts of vocational habitus and cultural capital to describe teachers’ manipulation by, but also manipulation of, school gender imperatives. Bourdieu’s habitus challenges the binary notion of structure versus agency, or constraint versus freedom, and suggests that agency can still work to reproduce dominant power structures and gain capital in various forms. Teachers who accept and even accentuate stereotypical feminine (and masculine) behaviours, such as being ‘caring’, in order to compete and gain control further perpetuate gender norms and make it that much more difficult for others to escape such socially constructed expectations. Braun even goes so far as to state that this type of gender performativity (Butler, 1988) reinforces professional hierarchies and discourages the creation of a heterogeneous workforce (2011). As Butler (1988) writes, “gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences [...] those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (p. 522). Indeed, after learning that non-expressive or non-nurturant dispositions often have a negative effect on teacher evaluations, Alison Bartlett (2005) states, “I have to learn how to pass as a woman” (p. 201). In a similar vein, Laura Hirshfield (2014) explains how the consequences of ““doing gender”” incorrectly “can include things like being called selfish [...] or experiencing erasure of their membership in groups or workplaces” (p. 602). According to Hirshfield, female

leadership, such as teaching, often becomes precarious leadership, as these positions “become less about power and more about service” to others (2014, p. 603). Teaching does, of course, involve service to others; however, female teachers who display power, agency, and authority may at times defy the “gender norms that dictate that women should be warmer, nicer, and humbler than men” (Hirshfield, 2014, p. 603). It is as if female teachers must hold power, but without appearing to do so. Perhaps one of Jane’s ‘errors’ is that she does not attempt to ‘even out’ her position of power through a performance of unpaid domestic services.

Along with these violations of gender norms come violations of cultural norms and other racial injustices (Cantillon & Lynch, 2017). Shoshana Magnet, Corinne Lysandra Mason, and Kathryn Trevenen (2014) explain how feminized concepts such as caring—or, as these authors refer to it, ‘kindness’—have been used historically as weapons of white bourgeois moral superiority. According to Magnet et al., “colonization was often referred to as a ‘do-good’ activity [...] it was perceived as an act of kindness to help those who could not help themselves”; ‘those’ being the backwards ‘Others’ who needed civilizing (2014, p. 4). More recently, the institutional exploitation of kindness has cast female teachers as the ‘caring police’ who are willing to “work for lower wages, forego promotions, and sacrifice their own interests in the name of nurture and love for their students”, and who are “compelled to practice a pedagogy of compassion while simultaneously being forbidden from expressing anger” (Magnet et al., 2014, pp. 2, 4). This ‘caring police’ role has the potential to create racial and cultural injustices for both students and staff. First, to return to Engster’s (2005) good life and Barber’s (2002) school as a haven, teachers must indeed be *careful* that their ‘do-good’ activities do not stem from a place of white Western bourgeois moral superiority and knowing ‘what’s best’ when it comes to their students’ private lives. As Lisa Delpit (1988) asks, “Will Black teachers and parents continue to

be silenced by the very forces that claim to ‘give voice’ to our children?” (p. 296). Second, what a kind and caring teacher looks and acts like may differ across class and cultural divides. An expectation of kindness and forbiddance of anger—that is, whatever the institution in question defines as kindness and anger—casts women of colour especially as “always-already angry and refusing to behave ‘kindly’ or with gratitude to the institutions that oppress them” (Magnet et al., 2014, p. 2). As Magnet et al. explain, “It is naive to exhort teachers to be ‘more kind’ as if all bodies and faculty exist in the same circumstances” (2014, p. 5). They sum it up by stating that “who is allowed to claim kindness, and on behalf of whom, remains tied to existing structures of white supremacist heteropatriarchal ablelist domination” (Magnet et al., 2014, p. 2).

By now it may seem as though I am arguing for an *uncaring* teaching environment, which I can assure you is not the case. To help me better explain, I borrow the words of Ahmed (2017), who writes:

It is when we are not attuned, when we do not love what we are supposed to love, that things become available to us as things to ponder with, to wonder about. It might be that we do destroy things to work them out. Or it might be that working them out is perceived as destroying things (p. 41).

I was not raised to be a ‘good’ woman. I do not draw pride from being called ‘selfless’. I do not love what I am supposed to love. Although it would undoubtedly be easier for me than others to “learn how to pass” (Bartlett, 2005, p. 201) as this particular version of the good and caring female teacher, I cannot help but wonder why my own version of care is not enough. It is the version that I learned from my mother and other female relatives after all; both as women and as teachers. What’s more, as we have seen, the domestic practices that some female teachers have come to accept as good and caring are not mentioned in job descriptions or by educational

philosophers, nor supported by philosophers on the ethics of care or contemporary authors on workplace inclusion. Why then, is there such a commitment to behaving in this way? What is influencing this behaviour? It is time to examine just that: teacher influences and influencers.

## Teacher Influence(r)s

### Personal Influences

Growing up, I idolized my female teachers. Yet they were not what I would describe now—and perhaps even then if I had had the language and understanding—as particularly ‘feminine’ or ‘maternal’ in the traditional sense. Their classrooms were not flashy, they wore plain adult clothes, and while they made me feel both safe and smart, I never felt as though I could just run up and throw my arms around them. Their bodies were not there for public consumption. Nor did I expect them to be. They were my teachers—not family or playmates—and their job was to teach. I do not ever recall being shocked that these women failed to act as though they were my mother, or disappointed that they weren’t ‘pretty’ or ‘girly’ enough as female role models. It is not even that they did or did not live up to any of these ideals: to me, there were no ideals. They just were who they were.

My female teachers also had boundaries. Again, this did not surprise me. The women in my family were anything but passive, and I was taught from an early age that strength, firmness, and even anger, did not belong solely to men. When we, as students, crossed a line, my female teachers reacted accordingly. One of my most beloved teachers (and perhaps the strictest of all) taught English and had only an old analog wall clock for a classroom decoration. She was a wealth of knowledge, but also ran a tight ship, which, for a teenager trying to safely navigate the often-hostile world of adolescence, counted for a lot. At one point in my teaching career, I ended up back at my old school and assigned to her former classroom. To come full circle and inhabit the very space that your own teacher once did—now as a teacher yourself—is a humbling and even disorienting experience. *I met my best friend in that class. Got my heart broken in that cafeteria. Cried in that bathroom.* (And, as an aside, no one should ever be subjected to having

to walk past their old grad photo hanging on the wall at work each day—humbling, indeed.) Ironically, this simultaneous past and present space of mine would also be where I experienced the strongest feelings of shame, frustration, and unbelonging within the teaching profession (if I was not good enough to teach the students *who I had been*, then who was?); ultimately leading me to this very analysis and use of autotheory as a “critical memoir” in order to help make sense of these feelings (Fournier, 2018, p. 645).

### **Literary Influences**

Looking back, I am not exactly sure what sort of message that girls (like me) who grew up in the mid ‘90s and early 2000s were supposed to receive when it came to being a female teacher. I myself gravitated towards classic literary heroines such as Anne Shirley, Jo March, Jane Eyre, and Laura Ingalls, who, although fictional characters (with the exception of Ingalls), portray what we might imagine to be some of the real-life experiences of Lucy Maud Montgomery, Louisa May Alcott, and Charlotte Brontë as teachers and governesses. What made these women so fascinating to me was not their goodness, but rather their plucky personalities in the face of difficulties. Teaching is indeed depicted as a difficulty at times within these stories through passages such as, “Anne was very tired and inclined to believe that she would never learn to like teaching. And how terrible it would be to be doing something you didn’t like every day for... well, say forty years” (Montgomery, 1909/1976, p. 46, as cited in Gates, 1989, p. 171), as well as “‘Do you like teaching?’ her friend Ida asks. ‘No, I do not!’ Laura asserts” (Wilder, 1943/1953, pp. 40-41, as cited in Gates, 1989, pp. 168-169). Similarly, when it came to her position as village school-teacher, Jane Eyre states, “I could not go on forever so” (Brontë, 1847/1966, p. 415, as cited in Devine, 2013, p. 392). Finally, in “How I went out to service”, Alcott (1874/2010) herself writes that she “had tried teaching for two years, and hated it” (p. 67).

Perhaps surprisingly, these attitudes did not deter me from wanting to be a teacher. There were proud, joyous, and even hilarious teaching moments present within these stories as well. But more importantly, I felt that these accounts were realistic of the trials and tribulations that teaching often involves. As Nesta Devine (2013) explains of Brontë's writing, "the role of school teacher is a tough intrusion on a romantic world view, and is presented without any attempt to turn the teacher into a shepherdess or the classroom into an idyllic mountaintop" (p. 392), and that "romantic idealism as a template for teaching has serious shortcomings, both in the quality of the pedagogy that emanates from it, and in the sustainability of the teacher's life when romantic expectations dominate" (p. 394). Here, we might pause and consider whether just as the romanticization of selflessness can result in a failure to care (Gilligan, 2014), the romanticization of teaching may result in a failure to teach. Regardless, there has certainly been a shift in how we idealize both teachers and teaching since Brontë's day, for as Devine states, "Although Jane Eyre was not herself romantic about teaching, her intellectual successors tend to be 'passionate' about it" (2013, p. 394).

Like Brontë, my female relatives did not grow up with a romanticized view of teaching either; rather, it was one of the limited options available for women who did not want to work at the local fish plant. However, with situations such as these—when teaching is borne not from passion but from necessity—Devine makes an important distinction when she writes:

I am struck, not by the unsuitability of the two heroines, Jane and Lucy, to be teachers, but by the desperateness of their situations, from which teaching offers an important escape route, and by the honesty and professionalism of their responses to their task and their charges (2013, p. 386).



I, too, witnessed such honesty and professionalism from the female teachers in my life. They respected education because of the opportunities that it could provide for a person. Ironically, one might suggest that this indeed led to somewhat of a passion for the profession; however, it would have been more so for the learning component rather than the “warm, fuzzy feeling that makes people [in this case: teachers] kind and likable” (Noddings, 1995, p. 676). In other words, they became driven by education, not ego. While Devine writes that “the conflation of caring with teaching for women whose passion is learning may not have been a good move” (2013, p. 394), Noddings (1995) writes that “caring implies a continuous search for competence” (p. 676). Their version of caring was making sure that their students were indeed competent, which brings us back to the question of what a caring teacher is assumed to look like today—and whether that ideal is actually based upon a Western bourgeois notion of the good life (Engster, 2005).

Ultimately, I do not believe that necessity breeds unsuitability; that those who pursue teaching in order to make a living are less suitable than those who are driven by their passion for the profession. In fact, if we only select individuals who are passionate, romantic, ‘care’ in a stereotypically feminine way, and have a seemingly unlimited supply of time, money, and energy, then we leave no room for alternative stories, backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. Indeed, drawing from the work of Alex Moore (2004), Braun (2011) asserts that teachers’ “histories and positioning, as well as wider social and cultural contexts, are part of every learning situation” (p. 289).

### **On-Screen Influences**

Other more contemporary—and at times conflicting—messaging surrounding female teachers in the ‘90s and 2000s came in the form of film and television shows. According to Delamarter (2019/2020), the hand-me-down images or secondhand impressions of teachers

portrayed through various media can be a driving factor for entering the profession in the first place but may also lead to practice shock when expectation and reality fail to align; namely, “these films’ implicit promises that teachers can singlehandedly change students’ lives” (p. 21). As Mary Dalton (2004) writes, “there are few, if any, actual teachers whose work for and nurture of children is repaid with the immediacy and intensity accorded teachers in the movies” (p. 97).

When it comes to the expectations of female teachers specifically, Dalton explains how:

Commercial films not only tell women teachers how other people construct them and re-articulate them as characters on the movie screen but also shape the way students and parents respond to teachers and the way women teachers respond to public opinion in the construction of their own lives (2004, p. 103).

I have found that these female teachers are often one-dimensional and tend to fall into the same reductionist categories for women that we see play out on-screen time and time again. The following examples all happen to be single and childless—perhaps implying that they have that much more time to dedicate towards their profession.

Some of the most stereotypical portrayals of female teachers (and women in general) include motherly Miss Honey from *Matilda*,<sup>10</sup> virginal Emma Pillsbury from *Glee*,<sup>11</sup> and ‘spinsterly’ Professor McGonagall from the *Harry Potter*<sup>12</sup> series. Miss Honey is young,

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<sup>10</sup> Based upon Roald Dahl’s children’s book of the same name, *Matilda* is about a young, exceptionally smart girl with magical powers who is neglected by her family. When they finally agree to send her to school, her teacher is Miss Honey, a beautiful and benevolent young woman who takes a special interest in Matilda and her extraordinary intelligence. Miss Honey’s aunt, Miss Trunchbull, is the evil headmistress. Matilda eventually drives Miss Trunchbull out of the school (and town) by using her magical powers, leaving Miss Honey as the new headmistress. Matilda’s family also decides to leave town due to her father’s crooked financial dealings, and so Miss Honey adopts Matilda in order for her to receive better care (DeVito, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> *Glee* is a network television musical ‘dramedy’ series about the staff and students involved with a high school glee club. Emma Pillsbury is the guidance counselor and eventual love interest of one of the male protagonists, the glee club’s teacher director. Sue Sylvester is the gym teacher and part of the show’s focus is around her attempts to destroy the glee club (Murphy et al., 2009-2015).

<sup>12</sup> Based upon the fantasy books by J. K. Rowling, the *Harry Potter* series centers around the staff and students of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Professor McGonagall, a skilled and seasoned teacher, is the head of

attractive, warm-hearted, and soft-spoken. She loves Matilda, and rather than lose her as a student and friend, she adopts her when Matilda's family decides to move away (DeVito, 1996). Emma Pillsbury possesses all the same womanly attributes as Miss Honey; however, due to her obsessive-compulsive disorder, remains a virgin (a major plot line of the show)—rendering her figuratively and literally untouchable. For the male teacher protagonist, she serves as the other woman that the audience roots for, as—unlike his wife—she understands and shares his passion for his students (Murphy et al., 2009-2015). Funnily enough, Professor McGonagall is the one who most closely resembles my own teachers growing up; not because of her 'spinsterhood', but because of her knowledge, toughness, dry sense of humour, and lack of emphasis on physical appearances (Columbus et al., 2001-2011). Alas, where she happens to differ is in her ability to turn herself into a cat—another over-the-top expectation of female teachers.

In both *Clueless*<sup>13</sup> and *Mean Girls*,<sup>14</sup> we have, respectively, the 'lovable klutzes' of Ms. Geist and Ms. Norbury. To the audience, these women fail at 'being female' with their wardrobe malfunctions and inability to either find or keep a man. Ms. Geist is shown having lipstick in her teeth, runs in her pantyhose, and her slip hanging out from underneath her skirt. Her students give her a makeover (the classic 'once her glasses are removed, you realize that she was beautiful the whole time' trope) and arrange a 'meet-cute'<sup>15</sup> with a fellow teacher whom she marries at the end of the film (Heckerling, 1995). Ms. Norbury's first scene has her spilling

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Gryffindor, one of the school's four houses that students are sorted into based upon their strengths; Gryffindor being known for bravery and loyalty (Columbus et al., 2001-2011).

<sup>13</sup> *Clueless* is a modern retelling of Jane Austen's *Emma*. Through her ignorance, naïveté, and superficiality, Cher, the main character, always tries to do what she thinks is best for people, even when her meddling is unwanted. One of the major plotlines of the film is about how she helps her teacher, Ms. Geist, find love (Heckerling, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> *Mean Girls* is a satirical teen comedy about high school cliques. The main character, Cady, excels in math, but fails on purpose in order to try to get closer to her love interest. Her math teacher, Ms. Norbury, eventually helps her and the school's other female students to accept themselves and each other (Waters, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> The Cambridge Dictionary (2022) defines a 'meet-cute' as "(in a film, etc.) a humorous or interesting situation in which two people meet, that leads them to developing a romantic relationship with each other". It is a common trope of the romantic comedy.

coffee all over herself and then accidentally flashing the male principal in front of the class while attempting to change her shirt. Later in the film, she tells her students, “I’m divorced. I’m broke from getting divorced. The only guy that ever calls my house is Randy from Chase Visa<sup>16</sup> [...] I pushed my husband into law school—that was a bust [and] I push myself into working three jobs” (Waters, 2004). However, by the end of the film, she is shown shyly slow dancing with the principal at prom (Water, 2004).

Of course, there are female teacher counterexamples as well. Femme fatale Tamara Jacobs from *Dawson’s Creek*<sup>17</sup> is portrayed as being every teenage boy’s fantasy, and even goes so far as to become involved with her fifteen-year-old student. Eventually, despite committing a crime, her character is redeemed and begins a new life somewhere else (i.e., not in prison) (Williamson et al., 1998-2003). *Matilda*’s Miss Trunchbull and *Glee*’s Sue Sylvester both present as our classic villains. Miss Trunchbull, a shot put, javelin, and hammer-thrower, routinely inflicts punishments onto her students. Gym teacher Sue Sylvester, enemy of staff and students alike, is intent on dismantling the school glee club. Sylvester’s character is redeemed slightly when the audience learns that her sister is disabled. If she does not appear to care about her students, perhaps it is a relief to know that she is capable of caring about someone. It might be suggested that this makes her easier to ‘figure out’ as a woman (Murphy et al., 2009-2015).

### **The Particular Influence of The Maverick**

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<sup>16</sup> Chase Visa is a type of credit card.

<sup>17</sup> *Dawson’s Creek* is a network television teen drama about a group of high school students living in small-town New England. Main character and student rebel, Pacey Witter, becomes involved with his English teacher, Tamara Jacobs. When their secret is revealed, Witter tells everyone that he made the entire situation up in order to protect Jacobs from punishment. Jacobs decides to leave town and Witter is left brokenhearted (Williamson et al., 1998-2003).

With all these caricatures set aside, perhaps the most problematic portrayal of female teachers—due to both its being admired and imitated—comes to us in the form of what Robert Dahlgren (2017) calls *The Maverick*. According to Dahlgren, *The Maverick*:

Was always portrayed as caring deeply about the welfare of his or her students and about the true mission behind education, as he or she defined it. This character built intensely close relationships with his or her charges and often stepped over the ethical line in his or her dealings with them (2017, p. 109).

What's more, *The Maverick* “devot[es] all of his or her energies towards work. When challenged by parents, partners and friends about their single-minded focus, *The Maverick* reminds them in haughty tones that he or she is ‘doing it for the kids’” (Dahlgren, 2017, p. 117). *The Maverick*'s adversaries are always their “cynical colleagues and corrupt administration” (Dahlgren, 2017, p. 121), as well as “the teachers union, with its supposed petty concerns” (Dahlgren, 2017, p. 122). As Dahlgren explains, “The key element to the *Maverick*'s personality make-up is that he or she exists in a vacuum outside the social context of the school community, or, at times, in active resistance to it” (2017, p. 109). Similarly, Adam Farhi (1999) writes:

There can only be one superteacher in a movie. Many times, that means that the other teachers in the school are incompetent, bitter, or drab and boring. Frequently those coworkers have given up on the students. They are burned-out individuals who warn the hero not to bother trying (p. 158).

Indeed, this attitude is present within my case study: drab and boring Jane is treated as too incompetent or bitter to even decorate a bulletin board without the help of her fellow (super)teacher.

Examples of female Mavericks can be found in such films as *Dangerous Minds*, based on LouAnne Johnson's (1992) book, *My Posse Don't Do Homework*; and *Freedom Writers*, from the *Freedom Writers* and Erin Gruwell's (1999) similarly named book, *The Freedom Writers Diary*. Although *Dangerous Minds* is rated R, *Freedom Writers*' PG-13 rating means that it has been allowed to be shown in junior high and high schools (which I have personally witnessed over the years). In more recent years, these films and books have come under criticism for being examples of white saviour narratives (Dahlgren, 2017). Indeed, both *Dangerous Minds* and *Freedom Writers* take place in inner-city Californian schools during the 1990s and follow a similar plot: "a strong motherly white woman reforms racialized students through her teaching" (Petersen, 2009, p. 33). Dahlgren (2017) explains how:

In these narratives of The Maverick, Hollywood was preparing the way for a new movement within corporate education reform, an era in which the individual teacher came to be seen as the leader of a new Civil Rights Movement aimed at rescuing inner city students from a corrupt and unfixable public education system (p. 112).

Education aside, these teachers are also intent on 'reforming' and even 'rescuing' their students from their own families and backgrounds, further highlighting "the insidious manner in which Hollywood subtly and not-so-subtly constructs race as a problem to be solved [and] conceive[s] of difference, poverty, and race in similar terms: as problems solved only through strong white leadership" (Petersen, 2009, p. 31).

Despite never having taught before, both Johnson and Gruwell immediately reject "the uninspiring, standard curriculum and simplistic texts assigned to [their] classes" in favour of what they feel is best for their new students (Dahlgren, 2017, p. 121); leading the audience to

believe that “even the most casually hired temporary teacher has the license to contest school board-approved curriculum frameworks” (Dahlgren, 2017, p. 117). In *Dangerous Minds*, Johnson’s strategies include bribing the students with treats and prizes for doing their work, allowing them to practice karate on one another in the middle of class, and paying for an unauthorized field trip to the amusement park (Smith, 1995). Dahlgren (2017) makes the point that:

In portraying the lives of public school teachers in a highly unrealistic manner, the film does a disservice to all teachers who labor each day to engage their students in the academic language, content and skills of their subject matter, without resorting to the cartoonish antics that Johnson is shown employing (p. 119).

In *Freedom Writers*, Gruwell picks up not one but two additional jobs (a factor that plays into her eventual divorce) in order to help pay for weekend field trips and all the books that she has decided that the class should not only read, but own. In a particularly ‘heartwarming’ scene, one student marvels, “These books are brand new!”, while another is seen smelling the pages. In a scene prior to this, most of the students share that they own the latest Snoop Dogg album. They are also shown driving cars, buying food, and picking out clothes, makeup, and jewelry (LaGravenese, 2007). It does not appear as though the students and their families necessarily need Gruwell to buy new books for them, unless the assumption is supposed to be that everything they have has been either donated or stolen. However, to be fair, if books are unable to be a priority for these families—or are simply not included within “their own visions of the good life” (Engster, 2005, p. 53)—it is still not the mark of a ‘bad teacher’ to not personally gift students with brand new reading material each year (if anything, that would be an issue for departments of education). Whether books are even new at all might be considered an example

of Bourdieu's judgement of taste. As Wynter (1992) reads Bourdieu, this judgement of taste concerns the question "of whose *class* our present mode of aesthetics is a member [and] the signifying practices which institute its psycho-affective field" (Wynter, 1992, p. 244). As a member of the middle class, Gruwell is presumably the gatekeeper to new, clean, untouched, and desired possessions as opposed to the old, dirty, used, and undesired ones provided by her students' lower-class families.

At the same time as Johnson and Gruwell are reimagining the school system on their own terms, they are also refashioning their students into being more like them. As Gruwell first steps foot into her new classroom,

The camera catches on dirtied walls and floors, scarred and graffitied desks, an uncleaned blackboard. The room, like the students who will soon inhabit it, are immediately coded as broken, less-than, and abject. Again, a problem to be solved, a mess to be cleaned (Petersen, 2009, p. 38).

In this way, 'fixing up' the classroom becomes a symbolic act. However, before the students can be rebuilt, they must first be broken down. Both Johnson and Gruwell use profanity with their students, and Johnson insinuates to them that the people from their neighbourhoods sell drugs and murder people (LaGravenese, 2007; Smith, 1995). During a particularly impassioned speech, Gruwell tells her fourteen- and fifteen-year-old students:

You know what's gonna happen when you die? You're gonna rot in the ground, and people are gonna go on living, and they're gonna forget all about you. And when you rot, do you think it's gonna matter whether you were an original gangster (LaGravenese, 2007)?



Later, during a ‘bonding activity’, she asks them to share publicly the answers to such questions as, “How many of you are gang members?”, “How many of you live in the projects?”, and “How many of you have been in juvenile hall or jail?” (LaGravenese, 2007). There is no room for dignity in this racialized and poverty-stricken classroom. As Petersen (2009) explains, “Gruwell indeed conceives of herself through this desire to reform. She yearns for contact with the Other, but only if she can simultaneously cleanse them of their deviance and difference” (2009, p. 37).

Through these unorthodox methods, Johnson and Gruwell are slowly “transformed from teacher to mother” (Petersen, 2009, p. 41). Conveniently, “the audience is almost never introduced to any of the actual mothers of the film—the students appear as orphans, desperate for guidance” (Petersen, 2009, p. 41). Gruwell stays late into the night with them at school, drives them home, and takes them out to fancy restaurants (LaGravenese, 2007). Johnson lets them sleep over at her house, pays off their street debts, and takes them out for nice meals; smiling conspiratorially with the waiter as they seemingly learn table manners for the first time (Smith, 1995). As each film progresses, the students start to talk, act, and even dress more like Johnson and Gruwell. Indeed, as Petersen (2009) writes:

This renaissance of sorts, for all of its affirmative aspects, nevertheless suggests that the sole route to success requires cutting ties to the past, to one’s heritage, and to the former conception of oneself. Only through rejection of their own qualities of abjection (importantly, deemed abject by the white subject) can these students reconstitute their own subjectivity (p. 40).

While Johnson goes through a brief period of ‘dressing tough’ (i.e., a leather jacket) in order to gain control over the class, Gruwell—with her blazers, skirts, pearls, and Starbucks coffee in hand—never attempts to emulate her students (LaGravenese, 2007; Smith, 1995).

Ultimately, what do these films teach teachers? To begin with, that good and caring teachers act as pseudo mothers (that is, certain types of mothers) and assume responsibility for aspects of their students' lives that extend far beyond the boundaries of the classroom. In other words, the school becomes a haven from their families' social, emotional and economic difficulties (Barber, 2002, p. 393). Similar to Noddings' (1988) previously mentioned distinction that "the mother-child relation [is] rarely appropriate for other relations" (p. 219), Dalton (2004) explains that "the maternal seems to be embedded in the ethic of care, but conceptually they are not the same thing" (p. 85). On January 5th, 2022, in response to the ongoing issue of the COVID-19 pandemic and in-person schooling, Nova Scotia's Premier Tim Houston remarked, "for some kids, school is the place where they are safest [...] it's sad but it's true [...] and, the reality for many children in this province [...] is that school is the place where they are most warm" (MacLean, 2022). Aside from the fact that Houston's comment strikes me as ironic considering I have never worked in a classroom that either a) had functioning heat and/or b) did not have at least one broken window (to the extent that students had to wear their coats to class anyway), his point about safety is undoubtedly true for some. However, as we have seen through the writing of Delpit (1988), Cantillon and Lynch (2017), and Magnet et al. (2014), there is also danger in assuming through Western bourgeois moral superiority that teachers—particularly new teachers, as is the case in *Dangerous Minds* and *Freedom Writers*—somehow always know how to care best for their students over and above the people and places that they come from.

Lastly, what these films teach teachers is that 'knowing better' than their students' families also extends into knowing better than experts in the field of education. Indeed, these teachers are depicted:

Challeng[ing] and often recklessly disregard[ing] school policy, without any apparent consequence. The Maverick teacher has no need for union negotiations [...] Instead, he or she would rather forge an individual path, responding to union issues with an apathetic shrug of the shoulders (Dahlgren, 2017, p. 125).

Needless to say, this portrayal that “teachers should ‘suck it up’ and cultivate individualist and competitive professionalism” (Magnet et al., 2014, p. 11) from teachers themselves flies in the face of the old adage that ‘a union is only as strong as its members’. What’s more, Johnson and Gruwell’s individualism and competitiveness often have little to do with actual academics; in fact, “we rarely see Hollywood’s teachers teaching at all” (Farhi, 1999, p. 158). As Farhi (1999) points out, “Perhaps they have so little time to teach because they are too busy trying to solve all of their students’ personal problems” (p. 158). Contrary to what I am sure is the intended messaging behind both films, Johnson and Gruwell’s cartoonish antics (Dahlgren, 2017) appear more as authority than in authority (Peters, 1966). Peters (1966) explains how the downside to such misguided, yet infectious enthusiasm can lead to authoritarianism and indoctrination; a.k.a., the teacher as authority. In comparison, the teacher in authority “can wean [their] pupils away from fascination for [them] to fascination for the enterprise to which [they are] trying to get them to commit themselves” (Peters, 1966, p. 10). Indeed, as Roger Ebert (1996) once observed of the Hollywood teacher: “At the end of a great teacher’s course in poetry, the students would love poetry; at the end of this teacher’s semester, all they really love is the teacher” (as cited in Farhi, 1999, p. 159).

After receiving permission to teach the same students throughout all four years of high school, the real Erin Gruwell left the profession upon their graduation and started the Freedom Writers Teacher Institute. Its description reads: “While most professional development for

educators emphasizes pedagogy or classroom management, Ms. G's primary focus at the Institute is developing you, the educator, as an individual" (Freedom Writers Foundation, 2020). While other professional development does indeed explore such topics as pedagogy and classroom management, the Freedom Writers institute offers instead "First-hand insights about Ms. G's teaching methodology [and] a renewed sense of purpose in the classroom" through a five-day, \$5000 workshop; complete with Gruwell's entire personally created collection of classroom activities (Freedom Writers Foundation, 2020).

Enter the era of the 'teacher content creator'; or, if you will, the 'teacher influencer'.

### **Teacher Influencers**

Teacher influencers are an offshoot of the more general category of social media influencers. As Jeffrey Carpenter, Catharyn Shelton, and Stephanie Schroeder (2022) explain, "SMIs [social media influencers] use social platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok to attract attention, display a certain lifestyle, create personas and personal brands, and develop social capital" (p. 3). Other popular social platforms include blogs, Pinterest, Facebook, YouTube, and—in the case of education influencers specifically—the commercial website Teachers Pay Teachers. Influencers often seek to gain financial capital as well through product placement, brand promotion, and (as is the case with Gruwell's personally created collection of classroom activities) the direct selling of their own content. Carpenter et al. note that "SMIs may seem a logical extension of trends in some professions, but in education their place is complex", as "the pursuit of individual ends by education influencers could affect conceptions of education as a public good and other values that have sustained school systems" (2022, p. 1, 10). What's more, the prevalence of white education influencers, along with the "biases inherent in social media algorithms, governance, and platform designs have been shown to reflect and reproduce

racism and other biases present in society at large” (Carpenter et al., 2022, p. 3). While social media can certainly be beneficial at times, “the stylized and idealized nature of some educators’ posts could prompt social comparisons that mislead or discourage early career teachers, or cause them to develop distorted senses of what it means to be a teacher” (Carpenter et al., 2022, p. 3). We do indeed see such potential distortions within the following examples of (as of October 22nd, 2021) the ‘most followed teacher influencers’ (FeedSpot, 2021).

In a blog post on the website Lessons and Lattes (2019), teacher influencer Mrs. Poe writes the following:

I remember last summer when I was preparing for my first year teaching in my first ever classroom and being so excited. I had taken over the classroom of a retired teacher, so by the time I had cleared away the old, worn out, and out-of-date items, I was left with basically a blank slate. I looked at Pinterest for hours scoping out exactly the theme I was going to use to decorate and what resources I just HAD to have. Honestly, it was overwhelming. And being a first-year teacher, I had no idea what I was actually going to need.

Clues as to what she might have needed may have indeed been found within the old, worn out, and out-of-date items left behind by said retired (see also: veteran) teacher; however, even if we assume the opposite, it is interesting to note that first-year teacher Mrs. Poe’s initial priority was her decorative theme rather than, say, pedagogy and classroom management. In another post, she declares, “My classroom theme is all about COFFEE this year” (Lessons and Lattes, 2020). Perhaps an odd choice, given her lower elementary student base; however, teacher influencer Mrs. Munch made a similar post on Instagram about hosting ‘Starbucks Day’ in her grade two classroom, complete with an Amazon link to the over \$300 worth of products used specifically

for the occasion (Munch, 2022). While some influencers like Southern Belle Teaching (2022) claim that, unless you are married, the only way that you can make it as a teacher is by working multiple jobs (for her, influencing is one of them), other influencers state that “Even with the supplementary income [...] much of their earnings go straight back into the classroom” (Reinstein, 2018).

In a similar vein, blogger Head Over Heels For Teaching (2016) states, “One of the most effective ways to HOOK your students is to transform your classroom [...] your students will love it!”; while Proud to Be Primary (2022) writes:

Your school may have the basic things like pencils, paper, sticky notes, and even bulletin board decorating supplies. But do you have the extras? You know, the things that make teaching FUN! These things are certainly classroom essentials for any teacher [...] They’ll thank you with smiles on the first day of school.

Aside from the fact that ‘extras’ and ‘essentials’ are by definition not the same thing, the last lines in each of these posts almost appear to be reminiscent of the housewife ads of the 1950s. As Andi Zeisler (2016) explains, “The business of marketing and selling to women literally depends on creating and then addressing female insecurity” (p. 8). Indeed, with her *Sex and the City* themed social media accounts (another odd—to say the *very* least—choice), teacher influencer School and the City (2022b) claims that “A fabulous bulletin board will make it look like you have it all together... even if you don’t”. This statement also illustrates Hargreaves’ (1991) claim that teachers do not always use their time appropriately; in fact, one could argue that a teacher could actually ‘have it all together’ if they replaced the time that it takes to decorate a ‘fabulous bulletin board’ with something more directly applicable to their day-to-day teaching practice. Other blog posts by School and the City include topics such as “It’s okay if you still have desks”,

student and staff back-to-school gifts, student and parent end-of-year gifts, as well as advertisements for various products: “Because I’m worth it... and you are, too! Honestly!” (2022a, 2022c, 2022d, 2022e, 2022f). These examples illustrate what Peters (1966) and Held (2002) respectively referred to as “The teacher [...] identif[ying] himself with the attitudes of a consumer-orientated society” (p. 10), and “the classroom [...] being commercialized as never before” (p. 25).

### **Influencer Implications**

In a study conducted on 18 Instagram ‘edu-influencers’, Catharyn Shelton, Stephanie Schroeder, and Rachelle Curcio (2020) examine what they have coined the Teacher-to-Teacher Online Marketplace of Ideas (TOMI); which includes previously mentioned social media platforms (Instagram, Pinterest, etc.) as well as educational marketplaces (Teachers Pay Teachers, Amazon, etc.). Their study shows that contrary to popular belief, “teachers are not exclusively ‘sharing’ resources on these sites—they buy [and] sell”, and that entrepreneurship is central to the activity of edu-influencers (Shelton et al., 2020, p. 532). In fact, some teachers purchase their entire curriculum from TOMI sites, which can be problematic as “content on the TOMI is not formally monitored through a substantive peer or expert review process and author credentials may be difficult to verify” (Shelton et al., 2020, p. 532). This is also problematic as it suggests that, like *The Maverick*, some teachers are completely eschewing mandated curricula in order to promote their own subjectivities (i.e.: coffee, *Sex and the City*, and in Anna’s case, lava lamps and rainforest soundscapes). Some Instagram posts advertise the purchase of print-and-go materials for ‘theme park’ or ‘9/11’ (as in, the September 11 attacks) themed bulletin boards, while others include pictures of their own children’s birthday party setups; to which Shelton et al. respond, “The bulletin board design was precise, but a justification for why a teacher should

invest in the approach was not present” (2020, p. 545), and “some of the overtly stylized and posed photos also came across as attention-seeking or even vain” (2020, p. 542). They go on to state that “Keeping in mind the power of social media influencers in creating and defining teacher culture, we see these posts as sending a potentially dangerous message to teachers about the need to consume constantly” (Shelton et al., 2020, p. 547). Finally, they pose the rhetorical question: “If teaching and teachers come to be visualized as highly stylized, strategically posed microcelebrities with picture-perfect bulletin boards, how will an actual teacher ever measure up?” (Shelton et al., 2020, p. 547).

Over a four-year period, Kaitlin Torphy, Sihua Hu, Yuqing Liu, and Zixi Chen (2020) analyzed such ‘teacherpreneurial’<sup>18</sup> behaviour through 135,000 ‘pins’ shared on the bulletin board-esque social media platform, Pinterest. They write, “Through curation, teachers present the ideas and resources of others as a coherent set situated throughout their boards, representing their professional perspectives on what they find worth knowing and sharing” (Torphy et al., 2020, p. 54). They found that 82.19% of pins linked to educational marketplaces (with some content priced at more than \$100 per download), while only 7% of pins linked to resources originating from educational organizations. Torphy et al. explain how teachers and teacherpreneurs can:

Circumvent traditional stakeholders within the field, such as universities, textbook companies, and special interest groups. This autonomous and concurrent action across teachers may create a potential “disruption without signal” in which traditional diffusion of innovation, ideas, and resources competes in a global market (2020, p. 55).

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<sup>18</sup> According to Barnett Berry and The Teachersolutions 2030 Team (2010), the term ‘teacherpreneur’ was used by their co-author, Ariel Sacks, during a team writing session.



Indeed, at the time of their study, Teachers Pay Teachers—the most pinned educational marketplace—had 4 million active members and \$330 million earned by teacherpreneurs. Torphy et al. also found that the content of the pins themselves “predominantly reflect[ed] potential for cognitive demand in the lower two categories—remembering and understanding—of the revised Bloom’s taxonomy<sup>19</sup>” (2020, p. 68). Echoing the concerns of Shelton et al. (2020), they caution that “Taken en masse, lower-quality resources implemented within classrooms may decrease teachers’ professional learning and development within the profession” (Torphy et al., 2020, p. 71). Lower-quality resources? Who cares? Just add a swirly border and funky font. As long as it looks good, it would appear to count as good teaching.

Elizabeth Pittard (2017) also examines how platforms such as Pinterest and Teachers Pay Teachers “produce conceptual and literal re-configurations of teachers’ understandings of what counts as *good enough* within the context of teaching” (p. 37). She writes:

I was learning to recognise what ‘Pinterest worthy’ classroom materials looked like, and if teachers could not re-create those ideas because of lack of ability or time, they could still gain access to *good enough*—if they were willing and able to pay for it (Pittard, 2017, p. 37).

As a result, “those who have the necessary extra resources can buy access to what counts as the *good enough* teacher within neo-liberal educational discourses” (Pittard, 2017, p. 40). What’s more, “it is not just the materials that are being bought, but an image of who gets to count as good enough” (Pittard, 2017, p. 40). I have witnessed this play out at the local school level, when

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<sup>19</sup> Bloom’s taxonomy is “a framework for categorizing educational goals” (Armstrong, 2010). It depicts a pyramid consisting of six hierarchical categories: (from bottom to top) remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create (Armstrong, 2010). However, not everyone agrees with Bloom’s framework. According to Brett Bertucio (2017), “The predominant critiques find fault with the Taxonomy’s pragmatic ideology, strict dichotomy between cognitive and affective faculties, conception of behavior independent of content and context, and claim to philosophical neutrality” (p. 478).

administrators ‘show off’ the classrooms of the real life ‘Anna’s to their superiors—particularly when there are no students present. With enough time, money, and energy, teachers can signify through appearance, not even practice, that ‘good teaching happens here’; while Jane’s ‘barren’ and/or ‘distasteful’ classroom, on the other hand, falls lower on the aesthetic “value-hierarchy” (Wynter, 1992, p. 248), suggesting, if you will, that ‘not-as-good teaching happens here’. In these instances, teachers with the ‘best’ classrooms are sometimes given access to extra money or decision-making opportunities. This demonstrates to fellow staff that, as Wynter (1992) reads Bourdieu’s critique of evolved taste versus backward taste, these “bearers of this ‘evolved’ taste” are the “ostensibly a-culturally determined criterion of human ‘life value,’ whose behavioral model and existential experience [...] should be optimally imitated” (p. 250). As such, similar to Shelton et al. (2020), Pittard warns of the “potentially damaging consequences” when “women who cannot afford to purchase these materials or have time to produce ‘Pinterest worthy’ lessons may ultimately not have access to what counts as *good enough* in teaching” (2017, p. 43).

Ultimately, if one were to go by even the limited number of influencers mentioned above, the good teacher appears highly stylized (themes/products/decorations) and hyper feminized (heels/Southern belles/*Sex and the City*)—with a penchant for popular coffee. Most of the teachers on FeedSpot’s (2021) list also present themselves in a similar fashion—reinforcing the message that this is what teachers should imitate and reproduce. Perhaps Pittard (2017) summarizes it best when she explains how:

With this gendered production of subjectivity within the context of neo-liberal education,<sup>20</sup> she is not only constructing the teaching materials, but these material

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<sup>20</sup> Here, Pittard (2017) defines ‘neo-liberalism’ as “an extension and intensification of capitalism in the arenas of policy formation, ideological discipline and modes of internalised governing” and explores how it manifests itself within education (p. 30).

actants work, at the same time, on the material and discursive production of her subjectivity. This perpetual making-over of what counts as good teaching influences how other women and teachers produce and makeover themselves [...] women are not only being acted upon and disciplined by these external material actants but they are also taking part in this disciplining through the active production of themselves as the idealised feminine subject who is understood to be ‘empowered’ by the ways she ‘chooses’ to present herself in both real embodied ways and in virtual ways in online spaces (p. 43).

This disciplining by these external material actants, as well as by the women themselves, is another example of how hegemony is exercised through disciplinary power. While one could certainly argue that mandated curricula are not without their faults, teacher influencers—along with Mavericks like Gruwell—for better or worse, can actually exercise enough power collectively to steer the culture of education in a specific direction: in this case, towards (or perhaps, returning to) a particular image of femininity and domesticity. For as we have already explored, our feminine and domestic ideals are rooted in class-based value-judgements (Beauvoir, 1949/2011; Bourdieu, 1984, as cited in Wynter, 1992). This increasing pressure to consume indeed suggests that only a certain ‘class’ of teachers (those with disposable time, money, and energy) can provide what is considered good teaching today. In order to help safeguard against the creation of such a homogeneous workforce, perhaps teacher influencers, as Carpenter et al. (2022) suggest, “could alternatively invest their time in graduate studies or engagement with professional associations of teacher unions” (p. 10).

### **Union Influences**

If enough teachers do in fact embrace this particular culture of consumerism, individualism, volunteerism, and domesticity within education, we could eventually start to see its effects amongst unions and union leaders. In a 2019 article, NSTU President Paul Wozney revealed that the average teacher spends at least \$700 of their own money on school supplies due to the fact that “We have one of the worst minimum wages in the country. We have the worst rate of child poverty in Canada and the problems [*sic*] is getting worse, not better” (Groff, 2019). In order to help with the costs, local teachers joined (and continue to do so to this day) a viral online campaign that encourages teachers to post their Amazon classroom wish lists alongside the hashtag #ClearTheList in the hopes of having the items purchased for them by some sort of donor. Although Wozney described healthy food and winter clothing as being the top priority, the lists that I managed to find (local and otherwise) through a basic Twitter search only include classroom-specific items such as books, games, art supplies, and teacher planners, as well as nonspecific items like lava lamps, decorative pillows, and an almost \$200 fake tree. While the popular sentiment is that education is underfunded, schools do in fact provide some books, games, art supplies, and even teacher planners—they just might not always be the ones that teachers *want*. Teachers must be careful to not conflate taste with necessity; and in the process, assume that real issues such as child hunger and poverty can somehow be solved through consumption of any kind.

In 2020, the NSTU created a handbook for early career and substitute teachers. While much of the advice is undoubtedly helpful, some of its ‘Hot Tips’ could also be viewed as condescending to a predominantly female workforce. A few examples include: “Hot Tip: Show appreciation to any staff who provide assistance”, “Be confident and show a desire to meet others but be cautious not to overdo it”, and “Do not be a critic or a whiner”—this last tip

striking me as the most bizarre considering that a union's job is to critique in order to achieve better working conditions (Nova Scotia Teachers Union, 2020, pp. 52-53). Indeed, Magnet et al. (2014) write that "emotions remain a central site of social control in education", and that women are often compelled to practice compassion while being forbidden from expressing anger (pp. 1-2); while Ahmed (2018) writes that "Complaint is feminist pedagogy [...] A complaint brings you up against the culture of an institution; and a complaint is often necessary because of the culture of the institution" (p. 17).

Another suggestion in the handbook is that substitute teachers should bring extra pencils, erasers, glue sticks, and post it notes wherever they go—a practice that would certainly add up over time for those with an unguaranteed income, and one that, if important enough, could certainly be provided by the school for the substitute in the form of a welcome package. Finally, the NSTU suggests "ariv[ing] as early as possible" and "remain[ing] in school at least 20 minutes after classes end" (Nova Scotia Teachers Union, 2020, p. 60). Contractually speaking, no teacher is required to stay longer than 20 minutes after students are dismissed at the end of the day; however, extending one's workday into unpaid time has become a common way to prove one's commitment to any future job. In my own early days of teaching, I was once told that I did not receive a job at a particular school because I had only been substituting there each day instead of volunteering—and that the school was more impressed with that level of commitment. These comments were yet another example of hegemony and disciplinary power in action as I was supposed to want to perform unpaid labour. Now, if we assume that this was not some benevolent little white lie told to save me from discovering my utter ineptitude, this indeed sets a frustrating standard that in order to get a job, you must first be able to work for free. It is one thing for an employer (although my interviewers were indeed part of my own union at the time)

to encourage unpaid labour (sadly, I believe that many of us have come to expect this at some point or another), but it is another thing entirely when some union members begin encouraging similar practices. We cannot allow ‘above and beyondism’ to be adopted by the very entities that seek to protect us from it.

### **A Collective Influence**

Ultimately, what do childhood teachers, literary figures, film and television characters, social media influencers, and even unions all have in common? They are only suggestions as to what a certain demographic of female teachers similar to my own may have been exposed to; thus, helping to inform their idea of how a good female teacher appears and behaves. When one thinks, “I want to be a teacher”, who and what are they picturing? Are they thinking of a female relative who perhaps entered teaching with few other options? A one-dimensional fictional character intended only for entertainment purposes? Or an online persona concerned more with products than pedagogy? To reiterate Greene’s warning (1978): we must remain aware of our biographical situations and personal realities because they determine what we bring into being as teachers. As Ahmed (2017) writes, “A crowd is directed. Once a crowd is directed, a crowd becomes directive. We are directed by what is in front of us; what is in front of us depends on the direction we have already taken” (p. 45).

## Conclusion

How to conclude when I feel that my exploration into the re-domestication of female teachers in the twenty-first century is just getting started? To begin with, my use of autotheory (Fournier, 2018) and fictional case study (Hare & Portelli, 1998) as methods for addressing my research questions have allowed me to describe, situate, and understand some of my own experiences as a female teacher within the broader literature. Much of what I initially thought was an isolated phenomenon was indeed reflected in larger historical, philosophical, and sociological trends within education, critical theory, and feminist studies. My ‘findings’ are as follows:

We cannot ignore the history itself of female teachers in Nova Scotia. How society viewed women and their roles within both the private and public spheres had a direct impact on how and when teaching came to be regarded as a legitimate profession (Guildford, 1992). From feminization (Prentice, 1977), to professionalization (Perry, 2003), to intensification (Hargreaves, 1991), teachers are confused perhaps now more than ever about their roles and responsibilities within an increasingly indefinable profession (Wiebe & MacDonald, 2014). In an ironic twist of events, now that teaching is indeed legitimized, some female teachers appear to accept the very attitude that hindered its professionalization in the first place: that teacher, female, care, sacrifice, and domesticity are all synonymous with one another. Brookfield’s (2005) analysis of Gramsci and Foucault allows us to see how hegemony—learning to love our servitude—is exercised through the disciplinary power of teachers embracing and imposing traditional feminine stereotypes onto both themselves and each other. This gender performativity that is reminiscent of Welter’s (1966) cult of domesticity might be considered a strategy of survival (Butler, 1988) within such an intensified system.

While the definition of the good teacher as outlined by various educational philosophers—as well as provincial and territorial governments—fails to include vague benevolence (Russell, 1979), benign child-minding (Peters, 1966), defining oneself by one’s role (Greene, 1978), or sacrificing oneself for the profession (Martin, 1991), it is when a predominantly female workforce attempts to make up for students’ and families’ social, emotional, mental, physical, and financial difficulties (Barber, 2002) that the boundaries between domesticity, the duty of care, and the bodies performing such acts become blurred. When care is not defined, it becomes limitless; and, in turn, can be weaponized against those to which care has been assigned historically. The romanticization of traditional female stereotypes such as care, sacrifice, and selflessness, may actually be regarded as a failure to care, as it can then be used to further justify gender binary, patriarchal order, virtues of subordinates, and cultures of oppression (Gilligan, 2014; Ruddick, 1980). We must indeed be *careful* to examine whether the generally accepted definition of care—as well as domesticity itself—within education is only based upon a Western bourgeois morally superior notion of what is considered the good life, as this does not apply to everyone (Engster, 2005; Magnet et al., 2014). For if one were to argue that domestic tasks are to be expected at least at some point when working with children, we would then ask whose version of domesticity this espouses.

Films, television shows, and the media can sometimes “frame teaching as a matter of having ‘what it takes’—a teacher being born, rather than made” (Braun, 2012, p. 236); which, in a predominantly female profession, highlights the tension between the idea of the born teacher and Beauvoir’s (1949/2011) belief that one becomes, rather than is born, a woman, and that ‘feminine’ traits are developed. However, the relatively new phenomenon of teacher influencers suggests that, when all else fails, good teaching can simply be bought instead (Pittard, 2017).



Indeed, some classrooms have already become hyper commercialized, stylized, and feminized. The fact that more and more teachers appear to be participating in such an increasingly consumer-oriented culture of education suggests that, just as there was always another desperate farmer's daughter available for hire, there will be another teacher willing to engage in such overtly competitive behaviour.

Or—perhaps there won't be.

The COVID-19 teacher shortage and subsequent reduction of requirements (Halifax Regional Centre for Education, 2021) may also reduce competition and provide these teachers with the time and space necessary to reevaluate their priorities within the classroom. For now, it is simply too early to tell. In the meantime, it is important that we continue to examine why some teachers “mold their individual selves to an existing, unequal corporate culture rather than collectively endeavoring to change that culture” (Zeisler, 2016, p. 75). As Ahmed (2017) writes:

We need to start with our own complicity [...] To be complicit should not become its own reproductive logic: that all we can do is to reproduce the logics of the institutions that employ us. In fact those who benefit from an unjust system need to work even harder to expose that injustice (p. 263).

Ahmed also writes of refusing the inheritance “at certain points [...] that are often experienced as breaking points” (2017, p. 187)—a feminist snap, as she calls it. She explains how “A snap can tell us when it is too much, after it is too much, which is how a snap can be feminist pedagogy” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 198). Teachers can snap and refuse the inheritance of how competition, consumer culture, and traditional feminine stereotypes have merged within our education system. Koa Beck (2021) writes about the history of consumer activism among working-class, immigrant, Jewish, and housewives of color: notably, the “moments where these women simply

stopped buying stuff to enact change [...] And where money determines literally everything in a capitalist framework, changing who gets your money has the capacity to be radical—as long as other people work with you” (p. 39). That last part is crucial. We must cooperate, not compete.

When I first selected the title of *A Classroom of One's Own?* for my thesis, it was in response to what I perceived as an attack by some about how I presented as a teacher; specifically, when it came to ‘caring’ and classroom decor (or lack thereof). But now I see it as more of a question of who we even have in mind if we choose to decorate these spaces. ‘Starbucks Days’, perfectly-decorated bulletin boards, and fake trees that cost more than some families earn in a week are not care—they are vanity projects. We must be careful to not let our own subjectivities replace the true purpose of education: to educate students. These classrooms are their spaces too, and it is important that we do not alienate them, nor our colleagues, with our own version of what we consider to be the good life (Engster, 2005). As Woolf (1929/2021) wrote in *A Room of One's Own*, “it is becoming evident that women, like men, have other interests besides the perennial interests of domesticity” (p. 124). Those of us who have classrooms of our ‘own’ must do more than just simply decorate them.

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