

Teachers in the 'Hood: Hollywood's Middle-Class Fantasy

Robert C. Bulman

The urban-high-school genre film has become one of Hollywood's most trusted formulas. In these films a classroom filled with socially troubled and low-achieving students is dramatically transformed by the singular efforts of a teacher or principal, an outsider who is new to the school and often new to teaching entirely. All of this is accomplished to the consternation of the inept administrative staff and other teachers, who never believed that these students had such potential. Invariably, the outsider succeeds where veteran professional teachers and administrators have repeatedly failed. I argue that the urban-high-school genre of film reinforces the "culture of poverty" thesis and represents the fantasies that suburban middle-class America has about life in urban high schools and the ease with which the problems in urban high schools could be rectified—if only the right type of person (a middle-class outsider) would apply the right methods (an unconventional pedagogy with a curriculum of middle-class norms and values). The teacher- or principal-hero represents middle-class hopes that the students in urban schools can be rescued from their troubled lives not through significant social change or school reform, but by the individual application of common sense, good behavior, a positive outlook, and better choices.

KEY WORDS: high school; film; American culture; individualism; culture of poverty.

To the casual viewer, a film about high school may be nothing more than simple entertainment. When the films are viewed collectively, however, the high school film genre reveals patterns that transcend entertainment and teach deeper lessons about American culture. Motion pictures do not necessarily reflect the high school experience accurately. Hollywood routinely twists and shapes reality to maximize dramatic or comic effects. Films must also frame complicated social relationships within two hours and on a two-dimensional canvas. Nevertheless, high school films resonate strongly with a large segment of the American public. Even if they are not precise social documents of real high schools and real adolescents, these high school films are still culturally

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meaningful. That is, they have something to teach us about how Americans make sense of education and adolescence. As the movie critic David Denby (1999) has noted, genre films “wouldn’t survive if they didn’t provide emotional satisfaction to the people who make them and to the audiences who watch them” (p. 94). What does the high school film genre have to teach us about American culture and American education?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many analyses of high school films treat the genre monolithically, as if all high school films have similar characteristics. Reed (1989), for instance, narrowly defines the high school film genre as those films based in high school that are told from the point of view of the students, excluding the many important high school films told from the point of view of the teacher. Considine (1985), however, notes that there are important differences within the high school genre. Considine analyzed films that feature the teacher as the main character and argues that between 1935 and 1977 the image of the teacher in film grew progressively negative. While Considine argued that this change was a function of history, I suggest that he overlooked the important differences between films based in schools with poor or working-class students and those based in schools with middle- or upper-middle-class students. Contrary to Considine’s thesis, there has been a resurgence of films that feature the “teacher-hero” since 1977, and most of these films have been based in urban high schools with a poor or working-class student body.

Farber and Holm (1994a, 1994b) divide the high school films between those that focus on the student and those that focus on the teacher or principal. I agree with their argument that both the students and the “educator-heroes” act independently of the institution of the school. However, their analysis does not highlight the tendency of educator-centered films to be in urban high schools with poor students while student-centered films tend to be in suburban high schools with middle-class students. Therefore, they overlook important theoretical implications about social class, education, and American culture. Similarly, Dalton (1999) analyzes films that focus on teachers. While she recognizes differences between films that depict “good teachers” and films that depict “bad teachers,” her analysis does not exploit the tendency of “good teacher” films to be based in schools with poor and working-class students while the “bad teacher” films are most likely to feature middle-class students.

None of the above authors view elite private-school films as a subgenre distinct from the urban or suburban school films. In short, most of the existing analyses narrowly focus on the relationship between teacher and student regardless of social context. Many authors are concerned about what these high school films imply about the possibilities for a critical pedagogy and student

resistance to curriculum. However, by not analyzing the socioeconomic context in which these movie plots take place, and how the plots and characters differ accordingly, they fail to appreciate the significant lessons about social class and American culture that a sociological analysis reveals.

METHODS

To assemble a sample of high school films, I informally surveyed friends, colleagues, the students in my sociology classes, and an owner of a local video store about the high school films they had seen. I also collected a list of films about schools, teens, and/or teaching that have been analyzed by other scholars (Considine, 1985; Reed, 1989; Farber and Holm, 1994a, 1994b; Dalton, 1999; Trier, 2001). From this list I selected the films that use a high school as their primary setting or films whose plots orbit around the life of a high school. There are 57 films in the sample, 27 of which feature middle-class students in mostly suburban schools (the suburban school sample), 20 of which feature poor or working-class students in mostly urban schools (the urban school sample), and 10 of which feature mostly upper-class students in private schools (the private school sample).

I viewed each of these films and systematically took notes summarizing the major plot elements, the characterization, and the explicit and implicit lessons each film teaches. I took note of any variation in how urban, suburban, and private school films depict curriculum, pedagogy, the role of the teacher, the role of the administration, peer relations among students, extracurricular activities, the role of the family, the resources of the school, violence, drugs, and so on. While my argument is informed by a viewing of the urban, suburban, and private high school films, this paper focuses primarily on the urban school films in the sample.¹

FINDINGS

With a few notable exceptions, all of the high school films (suburban, urban, and private) express remarkably consistent themes. The theme that most of these movies have in common is an ethic of individualism. Adolescents in these films are expected to transcend the limitations of their communities, the narrow-mindedness of their families, the expectations of their parents, the conformity of their peers, the ineffectiveness of their schools, their poverty or wealth, and the insidious effects of racism in order to express themselves as individuals apart from social constraints. The source of their academic success and/or personal fulfillment is to be found within the heart and mind of each individual regardless of social context. There are dramatic differences, however, in the ways in which the theme of individualism plays itself out in the films based in

urban high schools, those based in suburban high schools, and those based in elite private high schools.

The urban-high-school genre film has become one of Hollywood's most trusted formulas. In these films a classroom filled with socially troubled and low-achieving students is dramatically transformed by the singular efforts of a new teacher or principal. All of this is accomplished to the consternation of the inept administrative staff and other teachers, who never believed that these students had such potential. This lone "teacher-hero" is always an outsider, one who has a troubled and mysterious past, little teaching experience, a good heart, and an unorthodox approach to teaching (Considine, 1985; Heilman, 1991; Burbach and Figgins, 1993; Thomsen, 1993; Ayers, 1996). Invariably, the outsider succeeds where veteran professional teachers and administrators have repeatedly failed. The outsider is able to defeat the culture of poverty that had previously inhibited academic achievement. In these films the poor and mostly non-white students must change their behavior and accept middle-class values and cultural capital in order to achieve academic success.

In the films based in suburban high schools, however, academic success is not a central focus of the plot. The suburban school films depict schools less as actual places of learning and more as social spaces where middle-class teenagers search for their identities and struggle with each other for the rewards of social status and popularity. In these suburban school films, schoolwork is secondary to the real drama of teen angst. Students must reject the conformity of their peers, the culture of popularity, and the constraints of adults in order to express their true selves. The hero is almost never an adult as in the urban school films, but always a student who is able to overcome the conformity of teen society or the authoritarianism of adult society.

In the films based in elite private high schools, academics is once again featured as an element of the story. However, whereas in the urban school films academic achievement is valued as the answer to the culture of poverty plaguing the inner-city students, in the elite private school films the narrow focus on academic achievement is portrayed as an oppressive burden on students. The students in these films must conform to the wishes of their parents and the school in order to protect their social class status. The hero of these films is usually an outsider who challenges the culture of privilege that pervades the upper-class institution. This working- or middle-class hero works to expand the horizons of the upper-class students away from narrow academic achievement. The upper-class students are challenged to risk their taken-for-granted position in the class hierarchy by finding and expressing their true selves independent of the expectations that elite culture has of them.

These films are more than just entertainment. They are more than just an expression of the director's vision. The distinct differences between the urban, suburban, and private school genres are produced by the Hollywood system in

order to resonate with a mainstream American audience. They exist within and are affected by a relationship with the wider society and culture. As Thomas Schatz (1981) argued:

Movies are not produced in creative or cultural isolation, nor are they consumed that way. . . . [A genre approach] recognizes the cinema's close contact with its *audience*, whose response to individual films has affected the gradual development of story formulas and standard production practices. (pp. vii–viii; emphasis in the original)

Because these high school films are made by and largely consumed by members of the middle class, and because middle-class culture is the hegemonic culture in the United States, these high school films tend to reflect middle-class worldviews and assumptions. I argue that the suburban school films represent middle-class frustration with the conformity and status hierarchy of suburban middle-class life and express fantasies of self-expression and individual rebellion against such a system. The elite private school films, I suggest, reflect middle-class resentment of the rich and a fantasy that to be truly happy it is not necessary to be rich, but it is necessary to be true to oneself as an individual.

Presently, I argue that the urban-high-school film genre represents the fantasies that suburban middle-class Americans have about life in urban high schools and the ease with which the problems in urban high schools could be rectified—if only the right type of person (a middle-class outsider) would apply the right methods (an unconventional pedagogy with a curriculum of middle-class norms and values). This teacher-hero represents middle-class hopes that the students in urban schools can be rescued from their troubled lives not through significant social change, but by the individual application of common sense, good behavior, a positive outlook, and better choices.²

INDIVIDUALISM AND THE AMERICAN MIDDLE CLASS

As Bellah et al. (1985, p. 142) note, “Individualism lies at the very core of American culture,” and American culture is dominated by the middle class. I define the middle class broadly as the segment of the American population that has attended at least several years of college (and usually has a B.A. degree), work as white-collar managers and professionals, and earn most of their income from salary and wages. They are dependent primarily on their education and credentials (and not on their assets) to earn a living. They live mostly in the suburbs and very often own their homes (Marger, 2002). Middle-class values of educational and occupational achievement, calculating rationality, and individualism (rather than a commitment to community, tradition, and cooperation) have defined not just the professional lives of middle-class Americans but also how they govern their lives generally:

The middle-class is defined not merely by the desire for material benefit but by a conscious calculating effort to move up the ladder of success. . . . For middle class Americans, a calculating attitude toward educational and occupational choice has been essential and has often spilled over into determining criteria for the choice of spouse, friends, and voluntary associations. (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 148)

Furthermore, these middle-class values have become the hegemonic standard in American culture. The lower and upper social classes, too, have been affected by the middle-class ethic of individualism. These other social classes, however, are not as defined by individualism or as dependent on it as the middle class is. The lower and upper classes, by contrast, are oriented more toward community, history, tradition, and ethnicity than the individual achievement and calculating rationality of the middle class. The lower and upper classes find meaning not only in their individualism, but also in their social relationships. As Bellah et al. (1985, p. 152) write:

The point is not that lower- and upper-class Americans are not individualistic, but rather that their individualism is embedded in specific patterns of relationship and solidarity that mitigate the tendency toward an empty self and empty relationships in middle-class life.

Tension and ambiguity pervade middle-class individualism. Middle-class Americans feel lonely and empty without meaningful attachments to community, history, or tradition. The middle class longs for the sense of community and shared meanings that their ethic of individualism denies. The longing is real, but they lack the language to articulate it:

We deeply feel the emptiness of a life without sustaining social commitments. Yet we are hesitant to articulate our sense that we need one another as much as we need to stand alone, for fear that if we did we would lose our independence altogether. (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 151)

Hollywood has long articulated the middle-class ethic of individualism. As Bellah et al. note, the western and the hard-boiled-detective film genres have depended on on the heroic efforts of a lone outsider who has few social attachments and constraints:

The cowboy, like the detective, can be valuable to society only because he is a completely autonomous individual who stands outside it. To serve society, one must be able to stand alone, not needing others, not depending on their judgment, and not submitting to their wishes. Yet this individualism is not selfishness. Indeed, it is a kind of heroic selflessness. (p. 146)

The high school genre, too, depends on such lone heroes who stand outside society. There is very little use for history, community, or tradition in these high

school films. In the suburban school films the hero is nearly always a student (in 24 of the 27 suburban school films) who rejects conformity to the expectations of the school, their peers, or their family. In the case of the urban school films, however, the lone hero is almost always an adult (in 14 of the 20 urban school films) who encourages the students to conform to middle-class values: to be achievement-oriented, rational, and upwardly mobile. The adult heroes in the urban school films are selfless outsiders who offer salvation to students lost in a culture of poverty and despair.

A CINEMATIC CULTURE OF POVERTY

In most of the urban high school films the plot revolves almost exclusively around the activities of one particular classroom of rowdy students and their heroic teacher in a troubled and violent school. The students in this class are depicted homogeneously: They all have similar social class characteristics and similar problems. We are rarely offered a glimpse into the complexities of their individual characters, their histories, their identities, or their families, as is the case in many of the suburban high school films. The urban high school students, for the most part, are from lower- and working-class homes, are often nonwhite (but not exclusively so), come from broken families that do not understand or do not care much about their child's education, have low educational aspirations and expectations, behave poorly in the classroom, and express a great deal of frustration with the formal structure of the school.

The students in these films represent the working- and lower-class populations as they are stereotypically imagined by suburban middle-class Americans. These students represent what middle-class people fear most about the poor urban youth: They are out of control, loud, disobedient, violent, and addicted to drugs; have no family values; and reject the dominant social institutions. The rejection of the school is particularly offensive to members of the middle class since they depend on educational credentials and because schools have served them quite well (Eckert, 1989).

McCarthy et al. (1996) have argued that such stereotypical notions are the result of psychological projections—that the suburban middle class projects these images onto the residents of inner cities so as to relieve the burden of carrying such negative characteristics themselves. In other words, the identity of the middle-class suburban resident is formed in opposition to that of the inner-city resident, who is imagined to be impoverished both economically and morally. The growing social distance between suburban and urban America is reflected in the exaggerated representations of inner-city residents in the popular media:

As tax-based revenues, resources, and services followed America's fleeing middle classes out of the city, a great gulf opened up between the suburban dweller and

America's inner-city resident. Into this void contemporary television, film, and popular culture entered creating the most poignantly sordid fantasies of inner-city degeneracy and moral decrepitude. These representations of urban life would serve as markers of the distance the suburban dweller had traveled away from perdition. (McCarthy et al., 1996, p. 230)

In response to the anxiety the middle class feels about life as it imagines it in the inner city, McCarthy et al. argue that the suburban middle class seeks to impose its particular values and strategies for success on the residents of the inner city. What prevents inner-city residents from achieving educational and occupational attainment is believed by many in the middle class not to be a political or economic problem, but a moral one. Hollywood reinforces these middle-class fantasies about how best to address the problems of the inner city.

Hollywood's depiction of urban life and urban schools generally reflects the culture-of-poverty thesis. This view holds that residents of poor inner-city neighborhoods are poor not because they face racial and/or class discrimination or because they lack access to stable employment opportunities. Rather, it is argued that the urban poor are impoverished because they have the wrong values and the wrong attitudes about school, work, and family. It is assumed that inner-city residents share a culture

characterized by a widespread belief that individuals cannot control their environment, a related belief in fate or luck as determinants of a person's life, a low degree of control over aggressive impulses, a present rather than a future orientation, and low levels of aspiration for educational and occupational achievement. (Hurn, 1993, p. 151).

In contrast to what is considered the "normative" cultural values of the middle class (material goals, rational calculation, and a belief in the efficacy of individual effort), the culture-of-poverty thesis implies an impoverished culture—a culture that is lacking in the requisite values to achieve individual success. The urban poor remain poor due to their failure to adopt middle-class values and to fully integrate into the dominant culture of the United States (Banfield, 1968).

Much social science research, however, has discredited the idea that cultural values are responsible for either success or failure in life (see, for instance, Bourdieu, 1977; Swidler, 1986; Lareau, 1987; Willis, 1981; Gibson and Ogbu, 1991; MacLeod, 1995). This research has shown that while cultural values and attitudes do vary, they do so primarily as they adapt to larger historical, social, political, and economic conditions. As sociologists have studied the inner city, they have found that many of the social problems found there are less the result of cultural values and more the result of low levels of public investment in infrastructure, poor public housing, inadequate health care, poor schools, and a disappearing employment base (Wilson, 1996).

Nevertheless, the culture-of-poverty framework has found its way into the popular imagination, and it is difficult to dislodge. Rather than focusing on the social, political, and economic sources of the problems in the inner city, Americans prefer to place the blame on the moral failings and bad decision making of the residents of the inner city. A recent national survey found that a majority of white Americans believe that a lack of personal motivation is the primary reason African-Americans on average have lower socioeconomic status than white Americans (Schuman et al., 1998). It is generally assumed that a solution to the problems in the inner city must be applied individually rather than structurally. As President George W. Bush recently remarked, "Much of today's poverty has more to do with troubled lives than a troubled economy. And often when a life is broken, it can only be restored by another caring, concerned human being" (Hutcheson, 2001). Explaining poverty as the result of individual failure helps to relieve the suburban middle class of its share of responsibility for having politically and economically neglected the inner city. The frame that Hollywood uses to make sense of problems in urban high schools vividly reinforces the culture-of-poverty thesis and assists the middle class in its displacement of responsibility from troubled social structures to troubled lives.

WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE: THE URBAN SCHOOL IN HOLLYWOOD FILMS

Many of the urban school films analyzed in this research do acknowledge that inner-city students face the challenges of poverty, racial discrimination, and poor schools. However, the films portray the individual attitudes of the students as the *primary* obstacle to their academic achievement. These students don't have the right manners, the right behavior, or the right values to succeed in school. They have low aspirations and a low self-image, and they believe the odds are stacked against them. The schools, therefore, are unable to effectively educate these students. The reproduction of their low social status seems inevitable.

In the classic *Blackboard Jungle*, a class of working-class New York boys is depicted at first as nothing but a street gang who spend their days causing havoc in their vocational high school: A female teacher is nearly raped, a baseball is heaved at a teacher's head, a teacher's wife is harassed, and a newspaper truck is stolen. The metaphor in the film's title is all too literal: These students are seen as working-class animals. These are "beasts" that even music won't soothe; in one scene the students destroy a teacher's priceless collection of jazz records. In *The Principal*, one teacher compares the students to animals only to have another claim she would rather teach animals because at least animals do not carry knives. In *Teachers*, the song "In the Jungle" plays while police search student lockers for drugs. In *Lean on Me*, the high school is depicted

explicitly as an untamed jungle. In the opening moments, we see students selling drugs, assaulting teachers, harassing women, and generally running amok. All of this takes place as the movie soundtrack plays Guns and Roses' loud and angry "Welcome to the Jungle" in the background.³

The jungle metaphor conveniently summarizes the imagined difference between middle-class suburban Americans and the poor urban students portrayed in these films. These are not students as middle-class Americans expect students to act. Their depiction as "animals" suggests that the problems in these schools are rooted in student behavior and, furthermore, that their behavior is rooted in an inferior culture.

In the opening scenes of *Teachers*, a student is stabbed, a student bites a teacher, the school psychologist has a nervous breakdown, and we see a teacher pack a gun in her briefcase. The assistant principal of the school casually explains these events as typical problems for a Monday. In *The Principal*, Rick Latimer single-handedly breaks up a gang fight on his first day on the job as the principal of an inner-city school. In *The Substitute*, gang members have such firm control over an urban public high school that they attack a teacher with impunity. In *Dangerous Minds*, the white, middle-class, and somewhat naive Ms. Johnson walks into her class for the first time only to walk right back out after encountering nothing but abusive and hostile students, who first ignore and then ridicule her. These are the same students who, by the end of the movie, Ms. Johnson (and we the audience) will embrace warmly.

Or is it that by the end of the movie "they" (the at-risk, poor, and inner-city students) will have learned to embrace "us" (the educated, middle-class, and suburban audience as represented by Michelle Pfeifer's portrayal of Ms. Johnson)? This distinction is an important one. Will the audience learn that these students are not animals after all? Have the students simply been misunderstood? Will the audience be the ones who learn a lesson? Or will the students radically change their behavior as they come under the civilizing influence of the middle-class teacher who will socialize them in the culture of middle-class life? With few exceptions, it is the students who must learn and change, not the audience.

THE SCHOOL STAFF: INEPT BUREAUCRATS AND INCOMPETENT TEACHERS

If the students are portrayed in a negative light, the school administrators and teaching staff are not depicted much more generously. The teachers and staff are generally shown as uncaring, cynical, incompetent, and ineffective educators. In short, the administrative and teaching staffs in these movies represent the worst fears that suburban residents have of urban public schools. These characters represent what many Americans believe to be typical of the urban

public school “crisis”—a selfish, inept, wasteful, and uncaring bureaucracy. These are schools with no soul—just troubled students, failed educational methods, burned-out personnel, too many arcane rules, and too much paperwork. If the harshest critics of public education (such as Lieberman, 1993, and Chubb and Moe, 1990) were to make a movie about the public schools, their fictional schools would look much like the schools in these films.

In *Blackboard Jungle*, the stern principal is offended by the suggestion that there are discipline problems in his school. He seems unaware of the disobedience that surrounds him. In *Dangerous Minds*, the soft-spoken principal is so narrowly focused on teaching the students to follow the most minor of rules that he is blind to their real life-and-death problems. Similarly, the administrators in *Up the Down Staircase* are more concerned that teachers follow the strict rules, obey the proper procedures, and fill out the right forms than they are with the welfare and education of their students. The principal in *Teachers* is blissfully ignorant of all the chaotic events in his school. Most of the administrative energy in the school is spent fighting a lawsuit filed by the family of a student who graduated without knowing how to read. The school authorities in *Stand and Deliver* have little faith in their students and do not believe that they could possibly do well in an advanced math class. In *Lean on Me*, the dramatic deterioration of the high school over the years is blamed on the actions of the selfish teachers' union and the corrupt politicians in City Hall. In *The Principal*, the teachers complain bitterly when the principal insists that the “thugs” of the school actually attend their classes. In *The Substitute*, the principal is actually one of the thugs. He has established an alliance with the dominant gang in the school to distribute drugs throughout the school district.

The vast majority of the teachers in these films have cynical attitudes about their jobs, and they seem to believe that most of the students are beyond hope. As one teacher from *Up the Down Staircase* summarizes her pedagogical philosophy, “You keep them off the streets and you give them a bit of fun and you’ve earned your keep.” These veteran teachers are burned out and have failed to do what was assumed to be their professional obligation—to reform these students into respectable, educated, and well-behaved citizens.

THE OUTSIDER AS THE TEACHER-HERO

While all of the students, all of the administrators, and most of the teachers are depicted as impediments to education, there is one bright light of hope in these films: the teacher-hero (or, in the case of *Lean On Me* and *The Principal*, the principal-hero). This lone figure is able to ignore the cynicism of veteran teachers, escape the iron cage of the school bureaucracy, and speak directly to the hearts and minds of these troubled youth who are, by the end of the film,

transformed from apathetic working-class and poor students into studious and sincere students with middle-class aspirations.

The heroes of these films do not need teacher training, smaller class sizes, a supportive staff, strong leadership, parental participation, technological tools, corporate partnership, school restructuring, a higher salary, a longer school day, vouchers, or more financial resources. All they need to bring to the classroom is discipline, tough love, high expectations, and a little good old-fashioned middle-class common sense about individual achievement and personal responsibility.

In each of these movies the hero is someone new to the school, and often new to teaching entirely. The teacher-hero is a mysterious figure who literally becomes the savior of these students (Ayers, 1996). All hope would be lost if not for the intervention of this unconventional new teacher who breaks from the failed methods of the school and effectively reaches the students with a unique approach. The teacher-hero represents a likely fantasy of the suburban middle-class audience: A character they can identify with goes into a troubled urban high school and single-handedly rectifies its problems. The teacher- or principal-hero can clearly see through the confusion that has bewildered many educators and policymakers for years. She or he can identify the faults in these students and the problems in these schools and knows just what it takes to correct them. The teacher-heroes teach the students to escape the depressing and limiting world of their parents, to appreciate art and poetry, to learn manners and cultural skills, to develop new study habits, to set high goals for themselves, to have an optimistic attitude, and to believe that hard work pays off. In short, the teachers show the students how to overcome their culture of poverty. It is through this figure of the heroic outsider that the audience feels some sense of control over an otherwise chaotic situation.

In *Blackboard Jungle*, Mr. Dadier, a white man with plenty of upper-middle-class cultural capital (he recites Shakespeare in his job interview with the principal), enters the "jungle" (the "garbage can of the educational system," as one teacher puts it) and attempts to reform unruly thugs who don't even seem to care about an education. Mr. Dadier's wife wishes he would retreat to a middle-class school with well-behaved students. Mr. Dadier, however, is determined to reach the students in his "jungle." He wants them to care about an education, to learn "to think for themselves," and to make something positive of their lives. He takes a special interest in Gregory Miller, the charismatic black leader of the class, and tells him that he should not settle for being an auto mechanic, that in 1955 racial discrimination and poverty are no longer excuses for blacks not to make something of their lives in the United States. Through his persistence and dedication Mr. Dadier is able to convince Miller to stay in school. They create a pact: Mr. Dadier will not quit his job if Miller doesn't drop out of school. In addition to Miller, Mr. Dadier eventually wins the respect and admiration of most of the other inhabitants of his classroom "jungle."

In *Dangerous Minds*, Ms. Johnson finds herself teaching some of the most difficult students in the school (“rejects from hell”). Her primary message to these students is that they can achieve anything they want, provided they put their minds to it. With only a superficial nod to their community, their poverty, their race, or their families, Ms. Johnson declares that their lives are defined by their individual choices, nothing more. As she tells her students, “If you want to pass, all you have to do is try.” In order to give them the confidence that they can achieve anything they choose, she breaks from the traditional curriculum and uses “college-level” poetry to teach her students. Her class engages in intellectual debate about the similarities between the poetry of Dylan Thomas and Bob Dylan. The upper-middle-class cultural capital she imparts to them is in stark contrast to the poor and working-class family lives they lead. The grandmother of two brothers in her class doesn’t see the point of all this book learning and withdraws the boys from Ms. Johnson’s class. Nevertheless, most of her students begin to care about schooling and begin to believe that education, including poetry, can make a difference in their lives. Ms. Johnson develops a particular interest in one student, Raul, and develops a pact with him: She loans him \$200 but will allow him to pay back the money only on the day he graduates from high school. Ms. Johnson’s love (and the candy bars she uses as bribery) inspires her students to believe in themselves and in the power of an education in spite of the hardships they face in the world outside the school.⁴

In *To Sir, with Love*, a British movie, Mr. Thackeray is an unemployed black engineer who reluctantly accepts a teaching position. His disgust with the working-class values and attitudes of his students causes him to break from the traditional curriculum and to teach them middle-class culture and values. They take field trips to the museum and learn how to dress properly, address each other politely, find a spouse, and look for work. As in *Blackboard Jungle*, the middle-class teacher is ultimately able to win over the admiration and respect of the working-class students, who finally begin to adjust their behavior to middle-class standards and to apply themselves academically.

In *Stand and Deliver*, Mr. Escalante leaves a lucrative engineering job in order to teach high school math to Latino students in an East Los Angeles high school. Mr. Escalante insists on teaching calculus to students who normally would take regular or remedial math. His unconventional methods and his high expectations succeed. He is able to get his students to believe in themselves in spite of the doubts that their parents and the school authorities continue to have of them. His students pass the advanced-placement exam in calculus, and he inspires many of them to aspire to college. They begin to believe, as he tells one student who is covered in grease from working on his car, that it is better to design automobiles than to fix them. The only thing preventing them from designing cars, apparently, is a belief in themselves and the application of their abilities.

This same message about the ethic of hard work is repeated in film after film. As Mr. Thackeray tells his students in *To Sir, with Love*, “You can do anything you want with hard work.” Similarly, in *Cooley High*, Mr. Mason tells a student whose future may be working on an assembly line, “What is it you want? With your brains you can have it. Knowledge will get it for you.” The simple power of knowledge to open up opportunities and to transform troubled lives is echoed by Ms. Johnson in *Dangerous Minds* as well: “The mind is like a muscle. If you want it to be really powerful you have to work it out. Each new fact gives you another choice.”

Designing cars is certainly a worthy aspiration for any student. However, the assumption (in these movies and too often in actual schools) that aspiring to fix cars or to work on an assembly line is a sign of personal failure serves to condemn those students who, for whatever reason, do not have college in their future. Furthermore, it is disingenuous to assume that the *only* obstacle standing in the way of middle-class occupational attainment for these students is their individual attitudes and their failure to exercise their brains. The implication in these films that the failure or success of these students is reducible to their values, rather than taking into consideration the deep social structural processes also at work, is a pedagogical fallacy.

THE TEACHER AS COWBOY

In some of the urban school films, the teacher- or principal-hero must not only save the students with middle-class values but also punish and exclude the most dangerous and unredeemable elements of the student population. In *Lean on Me*, for instance, Principal Clark’s first order of business as the new baseball-bat-wielding principal of a rundown urban high school is to expel 10% of the student body. He asks the teachers to compile a list of the students they believe to be involved with gangs and drugs. He gathers these students onstage at a school assembly and announces their immediate expulsion from school. After these most undesirable students are expelled, Principal Clark concentrates on rescuing the remaining students from their troubled, yet redeemable, lives. Principal Clark’s relatively peaceful purge, however, is contrasted with the similar, but more violent, methods of exclusion used by the teacher- and principal-heroes in a few of the other urban school films. Violence as pedagogy is used centrally as a method of saving the students in *The Principal*, *The Substitute*, *The Substitute 2*, *Only the Strong*, *Class of 1984*, and *187*.

What these more violent films suggest is that not all “at-risk” students in poor urban public schools are worth saving. Some students are so far beyond the norms of middle-class life that they must be removed from society before their flawed values and corrupt lifestyles infect others. While their methods are extreme, these violent educators ultimately send the same message to viewers

as the other teacher- and principal-heroes: The problems in urban public schools are caused primarily by the urban public school students themselves, not by larger social structural factors. The solutions, therefore, are located within the individual students (either in their moral conversion to the middle class or in their violent exclusion from civilized society).

In *The Principal*, Rick Latimer is a high school teacher who is arrested after lashing out violently against his ex-wife's boyfriend. Rather than firing him, the school board punishes him by making him principal of the most troubled school in the city. Rick Latimer is a man with a troubled past and no administrative experience. He is a loner, an alcoholic, and a violent man. He rules the school with an iron fist and emphatically declares that he will no longer tolerate drugs or gang activity. He directly challenges the gang leader for control of the school. "No more" becomes his mantra, and he frequently enforces his rules with his fists. In *The Substitute*, an out-of-work mercenary soldier becomes a substitute teacher at an urban high school in Miami. Using an alias, "Mr. Smith" learns that the principal and the dominant gang, the "Kings of Destruction," run a major drug operation out of the basement of the school. When he is not defending himself against attempts on his life by gang members, the substitute connects emotionally with many of the students in his class and encourages them to reject gangs and drugs. For the first time, the students actually begin to pay attention in class. In a bloody ending, the substitute teacher defeats the gang and the principal and makes the school safe for learning again.

In *Class of 1984* Andy Norris is a first-time teacher at a violent inner-city high school. A drug-dealing gang led by Pete Stegman has taken over Mr. Norris's music class. Mr. Norris expels the gang members from his class, but they continue to harass him at school and at home. After a "good" kid dies from the effect of the gang's tainted drugs, Mr. Norris becomes determined to bring the gang to justice. He is frustrated, however, that neither the school administration nor the police take any action against the gang.

Meanwhile, Mr. Norris has been able to "get through" to his music class. Without the distraction of the gang members, he is able to teach the students and get them to care about their education. On the night of his class's first school concert, however, Stegman's gang molests Mrs. Norris and holds her hostage. Using her as bait, the gang lures Mr. Norris through the empty hallways of the school and into the shop classrooms, where they wait to kill him. In self-defense, Mr. Norris kills one student with a buzz saw in wood shop, he burns another to death with gasoline and a blowtorch in auto shop, and he kills a third with a wrench.⁵ Mr. Norris and Stegman face off on the roof of the school for the climactic fight scene. In the midst of their violent altercation, Stegman falls through a glass sun roof, gets tangled in the stage ropes, and hangs to death above Mr. Norris's orchestra, in the middle of their brilliant concert performance.

Mr. Norris is the ultimate teacher-hero. He academically inspires his class of troubled youth (as much as Ms. Johnson in *Dangerous Minds*), and he also takes the law into his own hands as he ruthlessly rids the school permanently of its most threatening students. What Principal Joe Clark accomplishes in *Lean on Me* by summarily expelling the most troublesome 10% of the student population, Mr. Norris accomplishes with righteous violence.

In *187*, Mr. Garfield is a talented and dedicated science teacher who has been brutally stabbed by a student in an inner-city high school in New York City. The attack has shattered his confidence and his spirit. Fifteen months after the attack, he moves to Los Angeles and emerges as a long-term substitute in another gang-infested urban high school. Mr. Garfield still believes he has the power as a teacher to transform lives. The gang members in the school, however, get in the way of his teaching. After threatening one of the female teachers in the school, the gang leader mysteriously disappears. There are others, however, to take his place, including one of Mr. Garfield's students, Caesar.

While Mr. Garfield fails in his attempts to reach Caesar, he has more success with Rita Martinez, a poor Chicana who is wrapped up in gang life but shows academic promise. Mr. Garfield offers to tutor Rita and encourages her to work on her writing. She begins to study and to improve in her classes. Caesar, however, begins to harass Mr. Garfield and ruthlessly kills a dog Mr. Garfield has been caring for. Mr. Garfield decides to take matters into his own hands. He stalks Caesar, shoots him with a drug-tipped arrow, cuts off one of his fingers, and taunts him by sending his finger to him in an envelope. We soon learn that Mr. Garfield is also responsible for the murder of the gang member who earlier disappeared. "At some point," Mr. Garfield rationalizes, "people have to take responsibility for their own actions."

Caesar's gang seeks revenge and plots to kill Mr. Garfield. They go to his home and force him to play a solo "game" of Russian roulette. After surviving several rounds, Mr. Garfield questions Caesar's violent and macho ethic. After having his pride challenged, Caesar is compelled to participate in the "game" as well. Soon, both Mr. Garfield and Caesar are dead by their own hand. Even in death, however, Mr. Garfield is the teacher-hero. Mr. Garfield has inspired Rita to pursue her interest in writing, and she delivers the graduation speech to pay homage to her mentor. In spite of his violent actions, Rita's success redeems Mr. Garfield: "I'm up here today because of him. He was there when no one else was." In the graduation audience we see the shamed faces of the surviving gang members, who, after so much senseless destruction, have finally learned a lesson from Mr. Garfield.

These cowboys of the classroom bring order to the chaos of the public schools. As newcomers to their schools, they are asked to deal with problems

that are not of their own making. Frustrated by the ineffectiveness of the traditional methods available to them, they take matters into their own hands. They use violence to impose righteousness and to clear a path for other (troubled, yet morally redeemable) students to achieve their full academic potential.

NEOCONSERVATIVE RETREAT OR COMPASSIONATELY CONSERVATIVE REFORM?

What messages do these urban high school movies send to audiences about urban education? Do these films implicitly endorse any particular policy solutions to the problems in urban schools? In each of these movies the answer to the students' problems is revealed to be primarily an individual one: to reform the individual student, not the educational system or the wider society. In a few of these films the implied solution to the crisis in urban education is to first rid the school of gangs and drugs. Second, and more important, the teacher-hero in all of these films must teach students the right values and manners, to convince them they have the power to improve their lives, and to insist they make better choices and take responsibility for those choices. As Principal Joe Clark in *Lean On Me* tells the students in his high school, "If you fail I want you to blame yourself. The responsibility is yours."

While there is certainly nothing wrong with encouraging personal responsibility among students, these movies dramatize only a portion of the story when they portray a lack of individual effort as the only reason the future of poor students is often limited. The serious business of school reform or revitalization of the inner-city economy takes a distant back seat to the individual reformation of these poor and working-class students. Success is a *choice* that each individual student must make. In the absence of a portrayal of the social, political, or economic context in which these individual choices are made, I argue that there is an implicit (and sometimes explicit) conservative political message conveyed in each of these films.

Near the end of each movie the teacher- or principal-hero faces a crisis that almost causes her or him to give up the mission. In each case, however, the crisis is heroically dealt with, and the teacher or principal stays on the job, having found her or his true calling in life. I argue that the dilemma facing the hero in the climax of each of these movies tells a significant political story about urban policy choices in late-20th-century America. Should the state play an active role in the structural reform of urban schools and urban economies? Or should the state retreat and let market forces work the magic of the invisible hand? Or is there a "compassionately conservative" third way, in which public policy addresses inequality, but only at the level of the individual?

In *Stand and Deliver*, Mr. Escalante's students are accused by the testing

authorities of having cheated on their advanced-placement calculus exams. Mr. Escalante begins to doubt himself and wonders if he placed excessively high expectations on his students. In the end, however, the students retake the test, and they all pass. The students are redeemed. Even more important, however, Mr. Escalante is redeemed. In the face of bureaucratic resistance, he, as a newcomer to the profession of teaching, is able to apply new pedagogical methods and his students are able to succeed beyond any level the school has experienced before.

Several crises face Ms. Johnson in *Dangerous Minds*. One of her students, the charismatic leader of the class, is shot and killed by a crack addict. Another of her students gets pregnant and is pressured by the school administration to attend an alternative school. Still other students drop out of school altogether. Ms. Johnson begins to lose hope and announces she will not return to teach the following year. Her students, however, protest vigorously. They feel angry and, ironically, victimized by Ms. Johnson's apparent betrayal. Callie, the promising student who is encouraged by the administration to leave the school when she becomes pregnant, returns to school on Ms. Johnson's last day to ask her to stay. Callie refers to one of the poems they have studied in class to make her point:

I thought you'd always be here for me. . . . I decided, we decided, we aren't going to let you leave like that. . . . you have to rage against the dying of the light. . . . we see you as being our light. You are our teacher. You got what we need.

Moved by her students' testimonies, Ms. Johnson decides to continue teaching at the school.

In *Up the Down Staircase*, Sylvia Barrett, a new teacher in a rough New York City high school, decides to resign after less than one semester on the job. Frustrated and angry with the school bureaucracy, saddened by a student's attempted suicide, and disheartened because several of her students plan to drop out of school, Ms. Barrett decides she is not up to the challenge of teaching at a "problem-area school." "A teacher should be able to get through to her students, even here," she complains. Near the end of the term José, a quiet, shy, and apparently depressed student, comes out of his shell and presides as the judge in a mock trial Ms. Barrett has organized for her English class. "I'm sorry you are leaving us," says Jose. "English was the greatest course I ever took." Thrilled that she has "gotten through" to José, Ms. Barrett changes her mind about quitting.

In *Blackboard Jungle*, several of Mr. Dadier's students assault him and harass his wife. Mr. Dadier loses the hope he had for all of his students and nearly takes a teaching job at an elite high school. In a fit of frustration toward the end of the film, Mr. Dadier asks, "What's the point of teaching if kids don't care

about an education? And make no mistake about it. They don't!" However, Mr. Dadier soon regains faith in his students when they team up to defeat the most incorrigible troublemakers in class after they threaten Mr. Dadier with a knife. In *To Sir, with Love*, Mr. Thackeray nearly quits teaching in order to accept an engineering job and to escape the lazy and uncouth students he must deal with every day. Yet, at the end of the school year, the students reveal their devotion to him by singing him a song and giving him a gift. He is so touched, and so pleased by his success in reforming these working-class hoodlums into respectable young adults, that he agrees to stay on at the school in order to reform next year's class of working-class students.

In *Lean on Me*, the corrupt fire chief and mayor arrest Principal Clark for putting chains on the high school doors (in order to keep the drug dealers out). The students, however, rally to his defense. They surround the jail and demand his release with testimonials to how much he has helped them. The news that 75% of the students have received a passing grade on the state's minimum skills test redeems him. He is released from jail and returns to lead his flock. In *Teachers*, Mr. Jerrell is pressured to resign after helping a student to obtain an abortion (she was impregnated by another teacher). His class of formerly apathetic students rallies to his defense and successfully convinces him to fight the corrupt administration and not to resign. In *The Principal*, Principal Latimer is devastated when one of the few students he is able to reach is nearly killed by the gang leader of the school. Principal Latimer momentarily loses his confidence and almost quits: "I don't know why I thought I could change things here. I can't. I just can't." Of course, he does not give up. After defending himself against an attack by the dominant gang in the school, Principal Latimer mercilessly beats the gang leader. After the gang leader is taken to jail, Principal Latimer, quite pleased with himself, declares that he will "be back tomorrow." After all, he is "the principal" and the school needs him.

In each of these moments of crisis, the teachers are at the end of their rope. They are disappointed that they have failed as teachers, angry that the students have not responded to their lessons, and frustrated that the administration has tied their hands. This moment epitomizes the anxiety and frustration with urban schools expressed by politicians and many middle-class suburbanites. I understand this pivotal moment to be a representation of the neoconservative impulse to retreat from state efforts to solve social problems. It is as if the teacher-hero says, "Well, I've done my best to help these people but it failed. Let's cut school funding, eliminate affirmative action, end welfare, and insist on personal accountability. Their failure is no longer my responsibility."

Hollywood, however, does not let the story end with such a *laissez-faire* message. In Hollywood, the well-intentioned middle-class reformer ultimately succeeds just when failure seems imminent. Success, however, is measured not by any institutional or social changes, but by the adoration of the students for

the teacher-hero. With such admiration from the students, the “compassionately conservative” teacher-hero continues to work with the students. This is the moment of truth in these movies—proof to the teacher-hero that the students have been successfully reformed. They have progressed from lower-class animals to respectable middle-class students who finally understand and appreciate the efforts of their middle-class hero. Their troubled lives have been compassionately transformed by a caring and concerned human being.

However, in spite of an emphasis on the value of individual transformation and self-reliance, the students in these films continue to express a need for a relationship with their teacher. This is a need that the teacher-hero, in all good conscience, can't ignore. Who else will save these students? In *Blackboard Jungle*, Miller agrees to stay in school provided that Mr. Dadier does not quit. In *Dangerous Minds*, Raul agrees to graduate only if Ms. Johnson does not leave the school. In *Up the Down Staircase*, José's transformation as a student is due entirely to the efforts of Ms. Barrett (who decides not to quit because of Jose's transformation). In *Teachers*, Pilikian's decision to care about school is implicitly predicated on Mr. Jerrell's decision to care about teaching. In *Lean on Me*, the crowd of students who gather to demand that Principal Clark be released from jail proclaim, “We don't want a good principal. We want Mr. Clark!”

There is an implicit assumption in most of these movies that if the teacher-or principal-hero does not agree to remain at the school, the students would quickly jettison the lessons they have learned and return to their apathetic underperformance and violent behavior. There is no other teacher (and certainly no school reform) that can reach these students. There is a *dependence* on the middle-class teacher by these lower-class students which points to an inherent contradiction in these movies—a contradiction that stems from the ambiguities of American individualism itself.

The teachers encourage their students to transcend their dysfunctional families, their rotten peers, their lousy schools, and their culture of poverty. The teachers encourage their students to use their power as individuals to compete successfully and to attain a higher social status. Yet, to reach this goal, the students are necessarily placed in a position of dependence on the teacher- or principal-hero. For all of the rhetoric about independence and individual achievement, we never see the students in these urban high school films fully express their autonomy. Rather, their individualism is embedded in their relationship with the teacher hero. Bellah et al. (1985, p. 144) make exactly this point when they discuss the ironies of American individualism. In short, to sustain individualism, we need community:

This ambivalence shows up particularly clearly at the level of myth in our literature and our popular culture. There we find the fear that society may overwhelm the

individual and destroy any chance of autonomy unless he stands against it, but also recognition that it is only in relation to society that the individual can fulfill himself and that if the break with society is too radical, life has no meaning at all.

Similarly, the lessons that these urban school films teach about autonomy, competition, and individual achievement ironically require a relationship of interdependence, cooperation, and shared goals. However, the lesson about interdependence, cooperation, and shared goals is left implicit. Independence and achievement, on the other hand, are heralded explicitly. They are heralded, however, without an awareness of the social connections and social institutions required to sustain them. This reflects the American culture's unwillingness to acknowledge our reliance on community. It also contributes to the sense of emptiness and loneliness that Bellah et al. argue are part of the dark side of middle-class American life.

CHALLENGING THE GENRE

While nearly all of the urban school films in this sample have remarkably similar plots and messages, there are a couple of exceptions that deserve attention. *Cheaters* and *Light It Up* are noteworthy as anomalies in this sample of urban school films because they directly challenge the central features of the genre.

Cheaters is based on a true story of working-class white ethnic students in an underfunded and gritty Chicago public high school who cheat in order to win the Illinois State Academic Decathlon contest. What is remarkable about this film is that while it is similar in form to all the other urban school films (a classroom of troubled poor students poised to be "saved" by a middle-class loner), its moral message is radically different. Rather than inspiring the students to work hard and achieve their full potential honestly, the teacher-"hero" actually encourages the students to cheat, facilitates their cheating, and helps them to conceal their cheating from the authorities.

The teacher-"hero," Mr. Pelicki, recruits the brightest students at the school to be part of the Academic Decathlon team. He has a hard time finding enough students to participate. The students are not willing to put in the time it would take to be successful. Nevertheless, he is able to organize a team, and they begin to compete. They do moderately well at first, placing fifth in the citywide competition. They qualify for the state championship, but few students are interested in continuing, knowing that they stand little chance of success. As one student remarks, "I love the dream you gave to us, but at a certain point you have to realize it's just a fucking dream." Their attitude soon changes, however, after one of the students finds the test book for the state competition. They all agree, with Mr. Pelicki's support, to cheat.

The cheating is framed as an act of civil disobedience—as a collective effort to strip away the built-in advantages of social class and social connections enjoyed by the upper-middle-class students at a very prestigious and well-funded public magnet school across town, Whitney Young. Whitney Young has abundant resources and has dominated the State Academic Decathlon championships for years. Mr. Pelicki wishes to level the playing field for his working-class students not for learning's sake, but for the sake of winning.

Mr. Pelicki cannot in good conscience spout platitudes to his students about playing by the rules and working hard. He knows through bitter personal experience that the achievement ideology and meritocracy are myths. His working-class immigrant father played by the rules and worked hard his entire life only to be cruelly laid off by his lifelong employer when he contracted cancer late in his career. Mr. Pelicki has learned that in the United States it is winning that ultimately counts, not integrity. He feels unrewarded as a dedicated and talented schoolteacher while less worthy peers have prospered. Mr. Pelicki encourages his students to work cooperatively in order to challenge the system—to rebel against a structure that further benefits the advantaged and impedes the upward mobility of the disadvantaged.

The students are eventually caught and Mr. Pelicki loses his job. Yet there are no regrets. As Jolie, a bright student who actively participated in the scheme and serves as the narrator of the story, remarks at the end of the film, “I learned more about the way the world really works from my nine months on the decathlon team than most people will learn in a lifetime.” By consciously not conforming to the common formula of the urban school film genre, *Cheaters* is almost refreshing in its cynicism. One need not condone the cheating to respect the film for its unidealized portrayal of an urban school and for its attempt to portray the elements of the wider social structure within which the students must act.

Light It Up is also an exceptional film in the urban high school genre. The heroes of this film are the students themselves, not middle-class adults. A group of six poor, troubled, angry, and intelligent students take over their urban high school by force. They hold a police officer hostage and make demands that the school rehire a favorite teacher, buy more textbooks, fix the broken windows and leaks in the school, establish a career day, and routinely test all the teachers in the school. This film does not present student attitudes, middle-class values, or individual achievement as the solution to the problems in inner-city schools. Rather, this film tackles head-on the structural and social problems that these students are faced with every day.

These students are consciously struggling against racism, poverty, an underfunded school, and the stereotype that they are violent thugs who don't care about (and therefore don't deserve) an education. These students have been victimized by the system and misunderstood by society (including, as this film

explicitly portrays, by the news media). While there is one sympathetic teacher the students admire, he is merely a secondary character. These students do not need to be rescued by a teacher hero. Instead, they look to themselves for answers and take action (as flawed as it may be). They do not eventually adopt new values and attitudes. Instead, the audience begins to learn more about who these students are as individuals and sympathetically understands why they took such drastic actions.

These are both relatively recent movies and it is too soon to know if they represent a new trend in the genre. It is doubtful that these two films represent a major change in the cultural understanding of urban high schools. They are also unique in that they are among the least commercially successful films in the sample. *Light It Up* played in 1,252 theaters and grossed only \$5,871,603.⁶ By comparison, *Dangerous Minds* played in 1,783 theaters and grossed \$84,842,001. *Cheaters* was produced by and shown only on HBO. These two films clearly break the mold of the urban-high-school film genre and offer the viewer something new to consider about urban high schools. Nevertheless, they do not seem to have resonated with a wider audience as the other films in the sample have.

CONCLUSION: THE URBAN SCHOOL FRONTIER

With the exception of *Cheaters* and *Light It Up*, these urban high school films are a celebration of the middle-class values of rational calculation and individual achievement. There is no suggestion that a longer-term solution to the problems in urban public high schools must address employment in the inner city, equitable school funding, sensitivity to racial and class differences, or the restructuring of urban schools. In true Hollywood fashion, these teachers and principals have saved the day as solitary heroes. These educators—mysterious, troubled, well-intentioned, alone, selfless, and heroic—are the cowboys of the dangerous and untamed urban-high-school frontier. They represent the essence of American individualism—they stand outside society in order to save it. The students, meanwhile, are explicitly grateful for their salvation. However, the salvation the teacher-heroes offer is inevitably tangled up with the contradictions of American individualism: The independence they demand of students requires a relationship of dependence to achieve.

Certainly, a high score on a test, an emotional tribute to a beloved teacher, and happy and optimistic students make for a good dramatic conclusion. But what do these endings imply for the public's image of urban schools? The audience is left feeling triumphant and optimistic about the potential for improvement in urban public schools. However, by simplifying the many problems of urban public education and turning inner-city students and public-school teachers into caricatures of their respective social classes, Hollywood is doing nothing but reflecting middle-class anxiety about the problems of inner-

city schools and the naive hope that such problems need not a sustained political commitment from all members of society, but merely the individual moral conversion of poor students.

NOTES

1. The films in the entire sample are, in chronological order, *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), *To Sir, with Love* (1967), *Up the Down Staircase* (1967), *If* (1969), *Conrack* (1974), *Cooley High* (1975), *Carrie* (1976), *Grease* (1978), *Rock and Roll High School* (1979), *Fame* (1980), *Class of 1984* (1982), *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), *Teachers* (1984), *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *Making The Grade* (1984), *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Heaven Help Us* (1985), *Pretty in Pink* (1986), *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), *Hoosiers* (1986), *Class of Nuke 'Em High* (1986), *Stand and Deliver* (1987), *Three O'Clock High* (1987), *The Principal* (1987), *Summer School* (1987), *Lean on Me* (1989), *Heathers* (1989), *Dead Poets Society* (1989), *Pump Up the Volume* (1990), *School Ties* (1992), *Class Act* (1992), *Only the Strong* (1993), *Sister Act 2* (1993), *Dazed and Confused* (1993), *Clueless* (1995), *Dangerous Minds* (1995), *Mr. Holland's Opus* (1995), *The Substitute* (1996), *187* (1997), *Can't Hardly Wait* (1998), *The Substitute 2* (1998), *The Faculty* (1998), *Disturbing Behavior* (1998), *Election* (1999), *Varsity Blues* (1999), *Rushmore* (1999), *Ten Things I Hate About You* (1999), *Teaching Mrs. Tingle* (1999), *Light It Up* (1999), *She's All That* (1999), *Outside Providence* (1999), *Rage: Carrie 2* (1999), *Finding Forester* (2000), *Cheaters* (2000), *Get over It* (2000), *Bring It On* (2001), and *O* (2001).

The 20 films in the urban school sample are *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), *To Sir, with Love* (1967), *Up the Down Staircase* (1967), *Cooley High* (1975), *Conrack* (1974), *Fame* (1980), *Class of 1984* (1982), *Teachers* (1984), *Stand and Deliver* (1987), *The Principal* (1987), *Summer School* (1987), *Lean on Me* (1989), *Class Act* (1992), *Only the Strong* (1993), *Dangerous Minds* (1995), *The Substitute* (1996), *187* (1997), *The Substitute 2* (1998), *Light It Up* (1999), and *Cheaters* (2000). *Conrack* is not an urban school film. However, it is the only film that depicts education in a poor black rural community. As in the urban school films, a middle-class outsider serves as the teacher-hero in his efforts to "save" the students with Western cultural literacy.

2. While the students in these urban school films are very often African-American and Latino, the social class differences between the students and their teacher-heroes are more significant than the racial differences between them. The middle-class protagonists of *To Sir, with Love*, *Lean on Me*, *187*, *Only the Strong*, and *Stand and Deliver* are all African-American or Latino. Also, there are white working-class students in need of salvation from a middle-class hero in *Blackboard Jungle*, *To Sir, with Love*, *Class of 1984*, *Teachers*, *Summer School*, and *Cheaters*.
3. In contrast to the songs that refer to the urban high school students as jungle animals, several of the suburban school film soundtracks feature Pink Floyd's anthem of adolescent resistance, "Another Brick in the Wall," with the lyrics "Teachers, leave those kids alone!"
4. In his critique of *Dangerous Minds*, Henry Giroux (1996, p. 46) argues that the movie represents "whiteness" as the "archetype of rationality, authority, and cultural standards." While I agree generally with Giroux's critique of *Dangerous Minds*, I believe that these urban school films as a whole represent middle-class values, not whiteness, as the archetype of rationality, authority, and cultural standards. Americans generally lack the cultural language to make sense of social class. To the extent that they recognize social class, they often name it in racial terms. Similarly, racial differences in these films are very often conflated with and often stand in for social class differences. I agree with Barbara Ehrenreich (1989, p. 94), when she notes in her review of *The Wild One*, *Rebel Without a Cause*, and *Blackboard Jungle*, that these films deliver "impeccable middle-class messages: Crime doesn't pay; authority figures are usually right; you can get ahead by studying."

5. Note how the working-class tools favored by these violent and rebellious students are used against them as the middle-class outsider, Mr. Norris, enacts his revenge.
6. It should be noted that *187* grossed about the same amount. Figures are from www.box-officeguru.com.

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