As they are portrayed: principals in film

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This paper reports on the analysis of the principalship as portrayed in a sample of 48 films. The analysis reveals that, unlike the timid, obsequious pastor in the Western and the bullying marine sergeant in a war movie, for example, there is little that is stereotypic about the role of the school principal and the types of leadership practised; there is no single model of the “successful” (or, for that matter, “unsuccessful”) principal. Success, however defined, has been achieved by some but it has eluded others. Admittedly, one can readily identify common themes associated with the principalship, for example, the vesting of authority, the exercise of power, relationships with teachers, students and community, and so on. And yet, against this common backdrop, countless scenes have been enacted in which the role of the principal has been one of great variation. Portrayals of roles are, of course, the outcome of the interaction of author, scriptwriter, actor, director — to name but some of those involved in the production of a film. Nevertheless, they provide at times quite extraordinary insights into others’ perceptions of both the role and the exercise of leadership in schools and school communities. For those involved in programs designed to prepare educationalists for the principalship, considerable satisfaction is to be found in the variety of representations of this office that are displayed per medium of film. Films provide a legitimate basis on which to analyse leadership behaviour and from which a greater sensitivity to the role may be developed.

Background to the study

The office of principal — the principalship — has always been a key component in the operation of a school. In recent years the effects of devolution of authority, responsibility, and accountability, have combined to put even greater emphasis on this role. The importance of the principalship cannot be overestimated: educational research consistently emphasises such be that research on teaching, learning, changing, planning, morale or climate, school culture, or community associations, the role of the principal and the nature of leadership will consistently emerge as factors closely related to each of these measures.

And yet, in spite of this continuation of findings, there is no single model of the “successful” (or, for that matter, the “unsuccessful”) principal. Principals come in all shapes and sizes, ages and abilities. One who succeeds in leading one school may not necessarily achieve similar feats elsewhere. And like their physical characteristics, principals also vary greatly in terms of their personalities. Again, and perhaps of surprise to many, there is no ideal personality, no profile that enables one to predict in advance the success and/or the achievements of a principal about to take up office.

Students of educational administration and, especially, those aspiring to the office of the principalship, customarily seek to understand the role through the study of “formal” documents such as text books and journal articles. One unavailing characteristic of these sources, regardless of their research bases and claims of “objectivity”, is that the authors’ perceptions of the principalship invariably influence the contents of their publications. Accordingly, in my M.Ed. Admin. course unit — The Principalship — I encourage my students in part of the program to confront the importance of perceptions, to desert the formality of the text book and the learned article, and to investigate the role of the principal as others may see it. Such portrayals of school principals are not uncommon. They are to be found, for example, in many novels such as The Cat Ate My Gymsuit, The Day They Came to Arrest the Book and The Wave and in novels that have become films or television series such as Goodbye Mr Chips, Picnic at Hanging Rock, and To Serve Them All My Days; in cartoons such as those I have analysed elsewhere (Thomas et al., 1994) taken from Kappan, the monthly journal of the US educational association, Phi Delta Kappa; in comic strips such as Peanuts and Archie in television soap operas such as Home and Away and Heartbreak High. Portrayals are also found in film, a medium in which I have long held an interest.

The genesis of my interest in the portrayal of the principal in film can readily be traced. As a one-time western movie enthusiast, I became at first aware of, and later amused by the metaphorical representation built into such cinematic masterpieces. Inevitably the “bad-die” wore black clothes, a black moustache and/or five o’clock shadow and, of course, usually rode a black horse. Seldom was he handsome. The villain’s nemesis was quite the reverse. White was the colour of his clothes and his mount. Visually the metaphor was obvious but so too did the behaviour of each reflect the role being played. Spoken and non-verbal communication ensured that audiences clearly understood the differences between the characters. Inevitably there was bloodshed in the western movie. Usually it was the man in black who was conveyed to Boot Hill, that delightful cemetery. At this stage in the story there regularly appeared a third character who, like those clearly designated good and bad, always played a stereotypic role, namely the pastor whose task it was to find some pleasant lies to say about the deceased. The pastor, almost invariably dressed in black, often cringing beneath a quaint hat and with the Good Book in hand, played the role of a harmless, frightened and, at times, obsequious individual whose presence was tolerated only because it was “right and proper” to provide all deceased with an appropriate farewell.

In retrospect, it was not all three of these almost immutable roles that led to my fascination with the role of principal; rather was it that of the pastor. Certainly the role played in the western movie bore no relationship to several pastors I have known, one of whom was my uncle. As I reflected on him and his
lifel I could find no resemblance whatsoever with his stereotypical counterpart on film.

And so the question arose: since the stereotypical pastor, as shown in film, may not be at all representative of pastors at large, could the same be said of school principals? In other words, does the medium of film represent a stereotypical school principal and, if so, what are the characteristics of that model?

**Approach**

In order to address the foregoing questions an analysis was conducted of films in which principals are portrayed. In my analysis I have been assisted by my M.Ed. Admin. students who, as part of a course unit entitled The Principalship, have, inter alia, been asked: “Using relevant sources other than prescribed texts, describe and analyse a representation of the school principal.”

The resulting representations have been drawn widely from novel, newspaper, cartoon, television and film but it is to those who analysed the last-mentioned medium that I am particularly indebted. (They are acknowledged appropriately at the end of this paper.) For details of similar or related studies see: Breschke (1993); Thomas et al. (1994); Walker (1992); Walter (1990); Williams and Willower (1963).

My students have thus provided me with interpretations of film that I have been able to compare with my own. They have also described films that I had not seen and which, in all but a few cases, I have had to view, either via a patronage of local video stores or by assiduously locating details and patiently waiting for screenings of such on television. My students have also provided me with analyses that have been insightful, humorous, challenging, critical and revealing. Thus, in presenting details below that are largely my own analyses, I find considerable reassurance from those of my students. There are, in other words, some grounds for claiming substantial “interviewer reliability”.

I can claim, however, to have analysed several films not yet identified by my students. Identification of films relevant to the principalship, details of their production, cast of actors, and scripts were aided by reference to AFI (1994); Giannetti (1990); Gifford (1973); Goldstein and Zornow (1980); Hall (1992); Lyon (1984); Marcus (1971); Nowlan (1994); Pike and Cooper (1980); Roll (1981); Sadoul (1965); Stewart (1984); Thomas (1990).

Over a four-year period I have preserved copies of the best 30 exercises received. The exercises present reviews of 123 films but these are, however, skewed in terms of particular titles, 65 of which are accounted for as follows:

- Dead Poets Society – 24
- Lean on Me – 16
- The Principal – 15
- Clockwise – 10

To many it may well come as a surprise that there are so many films in which the role of principal is portrayed. Numerically, principals can not match the profusion of good guys/bad guys/pastors of the western movie. Nevertheless, they are present in many (most of whose titles give no hint of such), as the listing of films for this paper indicates (see Table I). I make no claim that the list includes all relevant films – many portrayals of principals are “tucked away” in films and are readily forgotten by the viewer. It was probably only because of my specific interest that I recalled after viewing Forrest Gump the role of the principal therein – a principal who, having enjoyed the favours of Forrest’s mother, agreed to certify that his IQ was 75, thus permitting his schooling to take place in the “mainstream”. Nor does the following listing include series made for TV presentation (“teleseries”) such as Brides of Christ, Anne of Green Gables and To Serve Them All My Days. Similarly, soap operas such as Home and Away and Heartbreak High are excluded. Specifically, this paper considers only what are conventionally defined as “features” – features for film/cinema and telemovies whose duration is greater than 60 minutes.

Although there are many films that include a principal – and some, e.g. Mr Holland’s Opus, The Substitute, portray two or three – the relative importance of the role as measured, for example, by time on screen, displays great variation. The film entitled simply, The Principal, provides an example of principal as key role player. Similar films in this respect are Clockwise, Lean on Me, Principal of the Ghetto, and Crazy from the Heart. Most films provide limited footage of the principal although there are two variants of such. In the first case the role has relatively little bearing on the main theme and outcome of the story. Examples of such are to be found in Teachers, Sing, Grease, and Rebel High. In the second case, although limited in appearance, principals exert great influence on the outcome. Dead Poets Society, Picnic at Hanging Rock, and Mr Holland’s Opus provide obvious examples of such. In the following section I narrate briefly the story of a selection of films in each of these two broad categories.

Prior to an analysis of the portrayal of principals I present brief descriptions of a small sample of relevant films. The descriptions will come by way of “story lines” which, in part, will serve to highlight several of the factors identified during the wider analysis as well as reflecting the two broad categories referred to above.
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Table I

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<th>Feature films viewed</th>
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<tr>
<td>Breakfast Club, The (1985)</td>
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<td>Chocolate War, The (1988)</td>
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<td>Class Act (1992)</td>
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<td>Class of 1984 (1982)</td>
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<td>Class of 1999 (1989)</td>
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<td>Clockwise (1985) (UK)</td>
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<td>Conrack (1974)</td>
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<td>Crazy from the Heart (1991)</td>
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<td>Dangerous Minds (1995)</td>
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<td>Dead Poets Society (1989)</td>
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<td>December (1991)</td>
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<td>Father's Homecoming, A (1989)</td>
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<td>Ferris Bueller's Day Off (1986)</td>
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<td>Flirting (1990) (AUST)</td>
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<td>Forrest Gump (1994)</td>
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<td>14 Going on 30 (1987)</td>
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<td>Grange Hill (1983) (UK)</td>
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<td>Grease (1978)</td>
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<td>Hot Times at Montclair High (1989)</td>
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<td>In and Out (1997)</td>
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<td>Kindergarten Cop (1990)</td>
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<td>Lean on Me (1989)</td>
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<td>Listen to Me (1989)</td>
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<td>Lucas (1986)</td>
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<td>Mr Holland's Opus (1995)</td>
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<td>Permanent Record (1988)</td>
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<td>Picnic at Hanging Rock (1975) (Australia)</td>
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<td>Please Sir (1971) (UK)</td>
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<td>Power of One, The (1992)</td>
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<td>Principal, The (1987)</td>
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<td>Principal of the Ghetto (1986)</td>
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<td>Pump up the Volume (1990)</td>
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<td>Rebel High (1988)</td>
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<td>Rock‘N’Roll High School Forever (1990)</td>
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<td>Sam’s Son (1983)</td>
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<td>Scent of a Woman (1992)</td>
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<td>School Ties (1992)</td>
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<td>Sing (1989)</td>
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<td>Stand and Deliver (1988)</td>
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<td>Student Exchange (1988)</td>
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<td>Student Confidential (1987)</td>
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<td>Substitute, The (1993)</td>
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<td>Teachers (1984)</td>
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<td>Three Men and a Little Lady (1990)</td>
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<td>To Sir With Love (1967) (UK)</td>
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<td>Toy Soldiers (1991)</td>
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Story lines – principal as “star”

The Principal

Via a drunken, bar-room brawl and the demolition of his ex-wife’s lover’s Porsche with a baseball bat, Rick Latimer is introduced to the viewer. Latimer is a teacher at Willoughby High in a white, middle-class area of Los Angeles. Disturbing bars and Porsches in such a public manner is a matter unlikely to be kept secret and soon Latimer is called before the school board. His punishment is either dismissal or the principalship of Brandel High! He opts for the latter.

Latimer rides his Harley-Davidson to Brandel for his first visit, en route passing abundant evidence of an impoverished and degenerate community. The removal of his helmet enables the viewer to hear Latimer’s first impressions of Brandel: “Oh God!” Before him, surrounded by concrete paving and a three-metre high wire fence is an old, two-storied brick school, physically decaying, scarred with graffiti and decorated with litter. His arrival also coincides with that of a black gang in a car chasing white boys.

Within the school Latimer was to find anarchy among the students and extreme apathy among the teachers. Brandel was the last post for student drop-outs; beyond this school there was nowhere for expelled students to attend. It was the bottom of the line featuring all the vices including gang warfare.

In spite of his close inspection of the “Jobs Vacant” columns, Latimer stays and, in a memorable first assembly, spells out a simple philosophy: “No more!” No more drugs, prostitution and gang fights. The effect of his stand appears short-lived, however, as the assembly comes to an abrupt end when the local gang leader (an expelled student) walks in and instigates a riot. Latimer is told to go; the school is gang territory.

The film then deals with successive crises as Latimer demands effort from the teachers and acceptable behaviour from the students. Being beaten up himself and having his Harley-Davidson destroyed serve to stiffen his resolve. His emphasis on teaching and learning is manifest in numerous confrontations; he assists individual teachers and students in need; he is ubiquitous, seldom seen in his office for long.

The film progresses to reveal Latimer’s strength and integrity as he seeks improved opportunities for his students. He forms a friendship with the chief custodian who is close by during the final, violent showdown between Latimer and the gang leader. Latimer triumphs and so too do good over evil and pedagogy over pandemonium.

Lean on Me

In this film the main character also appears first as a teacher – a dynamic, innovative and unconventional teacher of history at Eastside High in Paterson, New Jersey, in 1967. The school was considered at this time to be one of the finest high schools in the USA. Joe Clark is also an outspoken member of the union, viewed as an agitator, and transferred out of the district.
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Twelve years later Clark is shown as the principal of a rural community school, disenchantment with education, merely going through the motions. In a reversal of the machinations that took him from Eastside, a political move to save the mayor’s electoral position and the school from being taken over by the State Department of Education, Clark is returned to his former school as principal: no one else wanted the job!

During Clark’s 20-years absence Eastside has changed: the grounds are now squalid; the walls are covered in graffiti; a 300-strong group of drug dealers, drug runners and trouble makers effectively runs the school; teachers are powerless and morale has collapsed; academic failure is the norm for students. Clark is given two tasks. The first is by the mayor who demands that the school’s basic test score of 38 per cent (the lowest in the state) be raised to 75 per cent in 12 months to avoid State takeover. Clark and the superintendent set the second: restore students’ pride in their school.

For Clark, appointment to Eastside spells rejuvenation. Relentlessly he pursues his objectives. At his first assembly he expels the 300 trouble makers. Teachers are summarily dismissed or suspended, for example, the choir teacher for teaching the predominantly black and Hispanic students to perform Mozart in the choral festival. A man of intense energy, Clark is seen everywhere about the school striving and driving, tolerating no contrary beliefs. The only relationships of any warmth are reserved for students who seek success.

Clark fights those outside school who oppose him. A conspiracy involving the mother whose son he expelled, the superintendent caught in a dilemma between principal and Board of Education, and the local mayor and the fire chief, sees Clark jailed for locking students in school – “to keep trouble-makers out and strivers in”. Pressure from the students for his release and the achievement of 75 per cent in the basic skills test score of 38 per cent (the lowest in the state) be raised to 75 per cent in 12 months to avoid State takeover. Clark and the superintendent set the second: restore students’ pride in their school.

The reputation of his school serves, in large measure, to attract the attention of the Headmasters’ Conference and leads it to offer the chairmanship to Stimpson – the first non private-school headmaster to be so honoured. Determinedly he sets out to impress those who are henceforth to be his peers:

“Today I will be chairing the Headmasters’ Conference… it is a conference for the fee-paying schools, the posh schools, the ones we all look down our noses at, the ones we would send our children to, if only we had the money.

And with those words so begins an incredible series of mishaps.

Sadly, Stimpson’s head is so full of the fine things to be said in his speech that he catches the wrong train, leaves his official speech behind, enlists the aid of a female student (who is truanting in reaction to an unhappy affair with one of his teachers) to drive him to the conference without advising her parents. The car is reported stolen and the girl kidnapped. Soon Stimpson is pursued by the police, the girl’s parents, his wife and several elderly ladies. Nevertheless, he reaches his destination but in thoroughly dishevelled state.

The film is, of course, typical Cleese. The viewer needs a vivid imagination indeed to accept that there is any reality remaining in the story as Stimpson addresses the conference as he would a school assembly. Nevertheless, to observe the headmasters in this moment of farce is perhaps to catch a glimpse of the real world of independent schooling – a room full of middle-aged, grey-suited men, shocked by the presence of women and whose discussions hither to have concerned the merits of solariums in their schools and boasts of having the same accountant as Mick Jagger.

Crazy from the Heart
This film is set in the small town of Tidewater, Texas. Principal of the high school is Charlotte Bain, in her late thirties, single but
in an apparently publicly acceptable relationship with a PE teacher on her staff. She has been the principal of the school for seven years – the same school that she herself attended as a girl. In the school and in the community there exists a simmering tension between the white majority and the Hispanics. Charlotte is advised that she is most likely to become the new assistant superintendent.

In a moving scene Charlotte is seen addressing the problem of pregnancy for a senior student. Erneste, Mexican born, newly arrived temporary janitor, compliments Charlotte on her sensitive handling of the situation. Turning her back on her long-time lover, she makes a date with Erneste. They cross the border into Mexico and, on the spur of the moment, marry. This is for Charlotte an adventure never experienced and the stereotypical bonds that are expected of her begin to break.

Next follows a period of mental turbulence – whether to live with Erneste on his small ranch or to accede to what the community and the school board would expect of her. In Ti dewater there are no secrets; gossip lubricates the day-by-day activities of the town. As Charlotte complains: “You can’t fart sideways in this town without the neighbours complaining about the noise.”

Accused by Erneste of bigotry, Charlotte agonises over her values and her relative independence. Advised by the chair of the board that her relationship with the janitor is unacceptable, Charlotte is advised to reconsider her position if she is to retain her role. No relationship with Erneste, legally married or otherwise, is acceptable to the board. Charlotte is advised to return to her white PE teacher.

But she stands firm, accuses the school board of bigotry and advises two of its members that in her private time they can contact her at Erneste’s ranch. In future they should also address her as Mrs Erneste De Verez, thus effectively challenging the board’s right to interfere with her private self.

Story lines – principal as cameo

Dead Poets Society

The setting for this film is the New England region of the USA in 1959. The school is Welton Academy for Boys, a long-established boarding school whose students are drawn from the upper socio-economic stratum of American society. Generations of families have attended Welton – a school steeped in tradition.

John Keating, an old boy of Welton, a graduate of Oxford with teaching experience in a prestigious English school, is appointed to teach English. Promptly he disassociates himself from the conservative teaching practices of the school and challenges the minds of his students. His love of English literature and poetry stimulates many of the boys but also readily agitates older staff members and the principal. Keating’s philosophy emerges in a discussion with older teachers. Accused by a colleague of running a “big risk encouraging them to become artists, for when they realise they are not Rembrants, Shakespeares or Mozarts they will hate you for it”, Keating responds: “We are not talking about artists but free thinkers”. The discussion ends with each using a quotation as evidence. The older teacher states, “Show me the heart unfettered by foolish dreams and I’ll show you a happy man”, to which Keating replies, “Only in their dreams can men be truly free, ‘twas alway thus and alway thus will be”.

But a crisis descends upon the school. Influenced by Keating, one of the senior boys decides that he will pursue acting as a career. Thwarted by his father’s insistence on a career in medicine and by the principal’s intransigence, the boy suicides. Keating is made scapegoat by the principal and dismissed.

The principal is Mr Nolan, middle-aged, portly and greying, the epitome of tradition, always besuited and at times dressed in academic gown. He makes relatively few appearances but all with great impact. In the school’s opening-of-term ceremony, in his challenge to Keating’s teaching methods and in his relationships with parents and boys, Nolan is seen as autocratic and manipulative, conservative and blinded by his perception of tradition. It is only when Nolan takes over Keating’s English class at the close of the film that the viewer is witness to the cracks in his armour and the challenge to his infallibility.

Teachers

The “star” of this film is also a teacher. Like John Keating, Alex Jurel is innovative, unconventional and exciting when in front of his class. Durrell is, however, a character who is given over to dissipation and whose weekend activities ensure that getting to school on Mondays is a particularly arduous undertaking.

His urban school is John F. Kennedy High which, like the president after which it was named, presents a persona of considerable standing but hides its other self through subterfuge, directed, in this case, by its deputy, Roger Ruble, and sustained by an acquiscent, incompetent principal, Mr Horn. The school’s philosophy is to teach to the majority of its clients – its middle range students – while leaving those at the extremes of the
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ability spectrum to their own devices, especially the underachievers: “Push as many kids through the pipeline as possible” is an openly-expressed sentiment; pass as many as possible without undue commitment; keep the statistics favourable to the school.

Jurel identifies Eddie as a student with potential, but performing badly below his level of ability, and whose life revolves around the activities of the gang he leads. Jurel’s plea for extra resources for Eddie is rebuffed by the deputy: “I’m not wasting what time and money I have on one kid”.

A parent sues the school district because her son, who graduated from John F. Kennedy High, is, in fact, illiterate. During the taking of depositions the deputy and school board combine with their lawyer to subvert the course of justice, making it virtually impossible for a proper enquiry to proceed. The principal, briefed by the Board, follows orders and provides a litany of ambiguous and vacuous answers.

Jurel and one other teacher refuse to lie and the board and the deputy principal attempt to discredit them. The case is resolved by out-of-court settlement.

It is appropriate that a film of this name should highlight some aspects of teaching. In addition to Jurel, the school also boasts an outstanding educator who captivates his class teaching American history. He masquerades as Lincoln presenting the Gettysburg address; he creates a rowing boat from chairs and brooms and enacts Washington’s crossing of the Delaware in 1776. But the man is an escapee from an asylum. Jurel and students, appreciative of excellent teaching, are saddened when he is returned to the institution and fare well him with respect and awe!

Picnic at Hanging Rock

The film is set in rural Victoria in 1900. The school, Appleyard College, is an “Educational establishment for Young Ladies”. Enrolment appears to be a little more than 20 girls. The school is exclusive, catering only for those whose families can afford the fees and who desire a “finishing” program for their daughters.

The main theme of the film relates to the school picnic held on St Valentine’s Day at nearby Hanging Rock. Four girls climb the rock; three disappear (one to be found several days later) and also a teacher who searches for them. In spite of widespread searches the disappearances remain a mystery.

The mystery, coupled with an abundance of rumours, has an adverse effect on the school. Girls are withdrawn and enrolments cancelled. As its income declines the school’s closure is assured. One of the girls, an orphan whose fees have not been paid and who must leave, suicides.

The second theme of the film is the disintegration of the ordered, rational world of the headmistress, Mrs Appleyard. Her qualifications as headmistress are probably best described in the novel (Lindsay, 1967) from which the film was made:

Whether the Headmistress of Appleyard College... had any previous experience in the educational field, was never divulged. It was unnecessary. With her high-piled grey pompadour and ample bosom, as rigidly controlled and disciplined as her private ambitions, the cameo portrait of her late husband flat on her respectable chest, the stately stranger looked precisely what the parents expected of an English Headmistress. And as looking the part is well known to be more than half the battle in any form of business enterprise... the College, from the very first day, was a success... (p. 9)

But such qualities are insufficient to prevent the tragic events at Hanging Rock, or to cope with the destructive effects of such an Appleyard College. Confronted by crises, the headmistress takes her own life by jumping from the rock.

Analysis

Analysis of data of the kind gathered in this project could be pursued in several ways. Ultimately, however, the pathway followed will be determined by the purpose of the study itself. This, the reader will recall, is to see if the principal is portrayed in stereotypical fashion in film. Thus, to satisfy this objective, it was conceded that much of the fine detail of analysis and reporting that could be directed at individual films must be forfeited in favour of more sweeping statements.

Accordingly, this section now analyses the film reviews, first in terms of the nature of the films, second, the school settings, and third, the principals themselves.

The films

In a way, one broad analysis of films that include principals has been completed above, namely, those in which the principal is the main character or focus, and those in which the principal appears as a lesser role with or without a discernible influence on the storyline. In the latter category the key characters may be students, teachers, assistant principals, or others such as parents. Of the films reviewed, occupancy of the main role is, in large measure, as follows:
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Classification could, of course, be derived from the catalogue at my local video store wherein films are listed under: action/adventure; children/family; comedy; drama/thriller; horror/science fiction; music and musicals; special interest; sports and recreation; western; war; and, at the end of the catalogue (contrary to its rightful alphabetical placement), adult audience. Films that include portrayals of principals are, fortunately, not listed under all these headings.

If one were to recommend the use of the films reviewed as useful in preparation programs for school administrators, undoubtedly the credibility of each would come under scrutiny. Whether or not the contents of a film are believable is probably a decision left to individual viewers. Although I do not seek to cast a damper on enjoyment of the fantasies of the far-fetched, I must warn that several of the films will challenge acceptance by even the most credulous of viewers. Clockwise, for example, although believable at the outset, spins into the zone of the caricature as John Cleese portrays headmaster Stimpson. In Rock ’N’ Roll High School Forever, notwithstanding improvements in students’ academic achievements, the school board is dissatisfied with student discipline. It conveys this message to the principal:

“You’re too soft for this job. You may know how to teach but you don’t know how to discipline. We’re going to find someone who does!”

The board appoints a female vice-principal, Dr Vader, who literally possesses an iron fist, wears a grey, Gestapo-like uniform and encases the school in an electrified fence. Coincidentally, this film continues a writer’s tradition of naming the high school in the practice of naming the high school after a former US president, in this case, Ronald Reagan High. The practice continues in Class of 1999 wherein the principal of the Lyndon B. Johnson High, a school racked with drugs, prostitution and gang warfare, hires a new form of disciplinarian teachers: “They have no mercy, they have no compassion, they are not human – they are deadly cyborgs, human robots programmed to kill at the slightest impulse”. Elsewhere, in Rebel High, the viewer is asked to appreciate the uniqueness of this particular institution – the only school with its own cemetery in which are interred students, teachers and most of the 69 principals it has suffered during the past two years. The first of the two principals portrayed in the film wears a hearing aid and a steel helmet, has blood pressure of 180/120, meets his new assistant-principal, Mr Norman Relic, and wonders why the school flag flies continuously at half-mast. These three films, and a handful of others that highlight the relentless defeat and demoralisation of principals by students, probably deserve a genre all of their own – execrable!

Elsewhere, in films less grotesque in conception, viewers’ credulity will still be challenged by events portrayed. For example, could the ill discipline, the vulgarity and the range of anti-social behaviours, including violence, shown in The Principal really be representative of any school? Let the unbeliever beware – Lean on Me and Principal of the Ghetto are based on true stories! The theme of student violence reflected in such films can be traced to Blackboard Jungle (1955) and the startling revelation therein. The principal’s denial of the jungle – “There is no discipline problem in this school, Mr Dadier, as long as I’m principal” – stagers his newest English teacher who, elsewhere in the film, shouts his outrage at a former college professor:

“What’s the point of teaching if kids don’t care about education? You were my professor in college. You should have taught me how to deal with an IQ of 66. If I’m going to be a lion tamer, I should teach with a chair and a whip.

The films viewed were produced through the period 1967 (To Sir With Love) – 1997 (In and Out). Of these, however, 25 are productions of the 1980s. This may be a reflection by the film community of an increased interest in education and a concern for the quality of schools and for those who inhabit them. It is also a reflection on the accessibility of films of more recent origin on video tape. Several films relevant to this project that could not be procured are shown in Table II. Other films may be identified in Goldstein and Zornow (1980).

Table II

Feature films to be viewed

| Belles of St Trinian’s, The (1955) (UK) |
| Blackboard Jungle (1955) (USA) |
| Browning Version, The (1951) (UK) |
| Child’s Play (1972) (US) |
| Ernest Green Story, The (NA) (US) |
| Getting of Wisdom, The (1977) (Australia) |
| Happiest Days of Your Life, The (1950) (UK) |
| High School (1968) (US) |
| If (1968) (UK) |
| Melody (1971) (UK) |
| Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, The (1969) (UK) |
| Up the Down Staircase (1967) (US) |

[96]
Temporal settings for the films ranged from 1900 (Picnic at Hanging Rock) to 1999 (Class of 1999). Understandably, the majority of films represented events of the 1980s. Eight of the films portrayed true stories.

The schools

As most of the films viewed were produced in the US, so too were the schools located in that country. Exceptions were, for example, Clockwise, Grange Hill and To Sir With Love set in the UK and Picnic at Hanging Rock and Flirting set in Australia. With few exceptions (Conrack, Kindergarten Cop, which feature small, elementary schools) the schools were secondary, usually large with enrolments in the hundreds. Of these the great majority were public high schools in the USA. Accordingly, the viewer will see a pictorial uniformity in internal architecture and furnishings. A great deal of school life, including a significant number of principals’ interactions, is presented in the locker-lined corridors of US high schools. This, the corridor culture, provides an avenue for gossip, argument, romance, bullying, and ill-discipline, tightly compacted in between class periods and during times of maximum traffic. (It is, of course, a phenomenon transplanted into Australian television soap operas such as Home and Away and Heartbreak High). Most of these schools are located in urban or suburban settings but some exceptions are to be seen in Crazy from the Heart and Forrest Gump, located in rural townships. Private schools are universally located in rural or semi-rural settings: Picnic at Hanging Rock and Flirting are set respectively in the Victorian and NSW countryside; Dead Poets Society, Scent of a Woman, School Ties, Toy Soldiers and December in the countryside of the New England region of the USA.

Schools are placed also in a range of socio-economic settings which, in large measure, correlate with geographical locations. At the affluent end of the spectrum, usually in rural or semi-rural surroundings, are to be seen Welton Academy, Baird, St Albans and Cirencester Ladies College, Appleyard College, Green Mountain Academy (Dead Poets Society, Scent of a Woman, Flirting, Picnic at Hanging Rock and December respectively): in the middle class, urban/suburban range are located, for example, Thomas Tompion Comprehensive, John F Kennedy High, Greenleaf High and Trinity (Clockwise, Teachers, In and Out, The Chocolate War); and at the indigent end of the spectrum numerous institutions such as Brandel, Eastside, George Washington, and Greenslade (The Principal, Lean on Me, Principal of the Ghetto, Dangerous Minds, and To Sir With Love).

In considering the variety of locations and physical attributes of the schools portrayed, one can not help but feel the importance of such in preparing their respective students for futures that are largely pre-ordained. The affluent preparatory schools of New England in the USA are paving the way for the boys to move on to university and thence to business and the professions; the indigent, depressed schools of the inner urban areas are preparing many of their students for unskilled work at best and for lives of crime at worst.

The forgoing all contribute tangibly to the cultures of the schools represented. It may well be that the nature of film highlights culture more than any other aspect of school administration. The limitations of time, inter alia, demand that a film confine its story line or focus to approximately 90 minutes of presentation. It is thus inevitable that the development of a single theme concentrates the activities of the film and the attention of the audience. The viewer thus sees a highly compressed series of behaviour that brings to the fore the values of the inhabitants of the schools through the display of visible evidence such as the physical artifacts and the spoken evidence such as the myths, legends and sagas of the respective institutions.

Reference was made previously to the corridor culture of US high schools. Through reference to a corridor of another kind one may see a remarkably different culture. In the opening scene of Scent of a Woman the viewer looks straight down a wide, lengthy corridor only this has no lockers. It does, however, have much polished wood (on floors and walls), trophy cabinets, honour boards and knight’s armour. Simultaneously, as a lesson ends, classroom doors open and uniformed boys stream in orderly fashion into the corridor. This is a different place, a different corridor, a different culture!

The principals

With relatively few exceptions, the principals portrayed are white, Anglo-Saxon, and aged 40 years or more. (Black principals are seen in Conrack, Lean on Me and Toy Soldiers.) Of the films viewed only eight had female principals (for example, Grease, Crazy from the Heart, Conrack, Pump up the Volume, Student Exchange). Male principals tend to be endomorphically inclined, balding, bespectacled and besuited. Implicit in the descriptions of their usually large schools, principals are seldom shown teaching: administration is, for virtually all, a full-time occupation.
Analysis of the activities of the principals, however, reveals a most diverse range of undertakings, responsibilities and accomplishments. Such an analysis exposes a multiplicity of roles that tends strongly to refute any notion of a stereotypical model of principal in film. (Herein, in fact, lies much excitement for this writer since so many of these activities may be linked with the formal, academic study of educational administration.) Listed below is evidence of the diversity of themes relevant to the role of the principal.

The principal: a favourable report?
In the simplest (and potentially most misleading) analysis of their roles in film, principals could be considered in terms of the “good” and the “bad” or, perhaps more fairly, the favourable and the unfavourable vis-à-vis their various behaviours. Unfavourable representations of principals have elicited frequent complaint from my students since, on balance, principals seem to be painted as the “enemy”. This may not be surprising to some since 60-70 per cent of films are probably directed at a juvenile-teenage audience. Admittedly, a handful of films presents the principal as a knight in shining armour, leading the triumph of good over evil or, more accurately, educational good over educational evil. (The Principal, Lean on Me, and Principal of the Ghetto are examples.) A further rationale exits for the preponderance of roles played in this manner: as I was reminded by my erstwhile colleague, the late Dr David Phillips, “Evil characters are usually more colourful than the virtuous. Think of Satan in Paradise Lost”.

The principal as competent
There is a prevalent theme of incompetence that runs through a majority of the films viewed. (If, however, one were to delete from the sample of films the more obvious examples of student one-upmanship (e.g. Rebel High, Pump up the Volume, Student Confidential, Class of 1984); it would be difficult to support this generalisation.) In several films in which the principal is seen for very brief periods, competence cannot readily be assessed although it may be inferred from activities among students and/or teachers. In only one film is competence the subject for discussion: Charlotte Bain in Crazy from the Heart confidently defends her achievements (and her presaged promotion supports such). Stimpson in Clockwise, crowned chairman of the heads conference presumably because of his competence as headmaster of Thomas Tompion Comprehensive, rapidly disproves this quality the longer the film runs. Incompetent principals are clearly exemplified in Teachers, Grease, Please Sir and Stand and Deliver.

The principal as conservative
In most films in which change of one kind or another is an issue, the principal is portrayed as conservative and change resistant. His/her role is generally one of reaction to provocation, irritation or challenge. Above all, principals are portrayed as guardians of the status quo. There are exceptions, of course, in which principals contest this role and with varying degrees of success. The Principal, Lean on Me and Principal of the Ghetto provide examples of principals fighting against the depressed expectations of their schools; in Sing the principal fights against the closure of his school. More often, however, they are portrayed as opposed to change in its various forms, for example, in teaching (Dead Poets Society, Stand and Deliver, Conrack, Teachers), and in student suggestions and expectations (sometimes labelled “rebelliousness”), for example, Grease, The Chocolate War, Rebel High.

Accepting changing social mores is difficult for some, as so clearly demonstrated in In and Out by the homophobic principal, Mr Halliwell (played with some humour by Bob Newhart).

The principal as problem solver
Responsibility for the solution of problems is an almost universal expectation of the principals. Problems span an extensive range of complexity – from on-time submission of a student’s exercise to the very survival of a school. Many problems are of deep social concern. Suicide, for example, is a theme in five of the films (Dead Poets Society, Picnic at Hanging Rock (both, incidentally, directed by Peter Weir), Permanent Record, Listen to Me, and Pump up the Volume). There is a similar range in the means of solving problems. Authoritative management ostensibly solves the problems of Eastside High in Lean on Me; principals and teacher collaboration at least alleviates the problem of school closure in Sing; eschewing the difficulty convinces the principal in Teachers that the problem is overcome; recourse to scapegoatism enables principals to solve problems in The Chocolate War, Scent of a Woman, Teachers, and Dead Poets Society. Arguably, the most pervasive problems from the principal’s perspective are those associated with student discipline and/or the inadequacy of the teaching-learning process as in Stand and Deliver and A Father’s Homecoming. Frequently, however, the viewer will remain uncertain (or unconvinced) that a problem has been solved. Bewilderment is a common emotion.
The principal and the exercise of authority

The exercise of authority by the principal is an anticipated act in virtually all of the films viewed. Basis for most of the films intended to humour their respective audiences, is the inability of the principal to exercise such authority. This prescribed humour is, in turn, extended by the widespread portrayal of principals as autocratic, authoritarian executive officers. The frustration of their ability to solve problems, to make decisions, and to provide guidelines for their schools’ operations is, clearly, a key weapon in the script writer’s armoury. Ferris Bueller’s Day Off and Clockwise provide two excellent yet divergent examples of such.

Elsewhere, the exercise of authority may serve to generate strong feelings towards the principal portrayed. The films referred to above in which suicide is a theme give evidence of such. So too do three of the films in which the probity of the principal is challenged – Pump up the Volume, Top Kid and The Chocolate War.

The principal and relationships

Authority undoubtedly underpins the administrative behaviour of each principal and, by definition, the multitude of relationships in which he or she engages. The films viewed exemplify this extraordinary range of interactions. All but a few films place the principal as superordinate role player in the story line. Accordingly, all other players are cast as subordinates. The subordiant role of teachers is never more obvious than in Lean on Me – which is played in a public high school – and Dead Poets Society and The Browning Version – which are set in affluent, tradition-bound private schools. Similarly, deputy (or assistant) principals normally play a somewhat subservient role. Teachers and Rebel High provide variations on this theme, however, wherein the respective principals abrogate their responsibilities.

The role of parent and community member is also most often represented as subordinate to the principal. Forrest Gump provides an example. So too do Dead Poets Society and Scent of a Woman in which parents are seen as acquiescing to the principals’ authority in obsequious fashion. Exceptions are to be seen, however, in Listen to Me, Sing and Sam’s Son.

Principals play, at least temporarily, subordinate roles in several films in which higher-level administrators such as superintendents, board members, state department officials and commissioners are cast. Films displaying these relationships include Teachers, Conrack, Pump up the Volume, Crazy from the Heart, Rock’N’Roll High School Forever, Rebel High, The Chocolate War, Grange Hill and The Ryan White Story and Permanent Record. Each film provides evidence of the principal’s awareness of and sensitivity to those in higher authority. Many instances are replete of political manipulation and persuasion.

The principal as isolate

Notwithstanding the preceding sections, a powerful impression that emerges from all of the films viewed is that the principalship is an isolated, lonely position. Isolation, it may thus be argued, is the only common factor of the various portrayals of this educational role, the only touchpoint from which any suggestion of a stereotypical principal-in-film may be discerned. A gain it should be conceded that the nature of film is such that much must be compacted within a relatively brief time. Little if any provision may be made for scenes removed from the main focus or story line. Thus, principals’ personal and/or family relationships are all but ignored (unlike, for example, the development of such in television soap operas such as Home and Away).

“On the job” is little different. Although the films provide ample evidence of multiple professional relationships, such are substantially superficial and, often, ephemeral. Regardless of the principal’s portrayal – be it autocrat, bully, politician, advocate, victim of practical jokes, and so on – this aspect of the role is omnipresent. This viewer feels both empathy and sympathy for each of the principals portrayed. The tentative efforts of Latimer (The Principal) to establish a friendship with Jake, the head custodian at Brandel High; Mr. Appleyard’s (Picnic at Hanging Rock) stiffly formalised attempts to relate to Mademoiselle de Portiers at the distant other end of the dinner table; Stimpson’s (Clockwise) attempt to locate acceptance and support in his new-found peers at the headmasters’ conference; Brother Leon’s (The Chocolate War) search for support from Charlie, an unscrupulous senior student; and Marowitz’s (Sing) appeal for support from the parents among whom he moves openly during a concert, all add emphasis, colour, understanding and paths to these portrayals.

Conclusion

Were one to sample films selectively it may be possible to argue that principals are stereotyped in their portrayals in this particular form of entertainment. The school-horror movies, for example, present a model of...
principals in film

As they are portrayed:
A. Ross Thomas

Educational Management

Although the role of principal is often played as a conservative authority figure whose primary task is to solve problems, loneliness or isolation is, perhaps, the only factor common to all films. At times remote, solitary, often besieged literally and figuratively, stressed, the principal in film seems unwilling or unable to share and delegate. Assistance is seldom offered and less seldom accepted. Warm, supportive relationships are not portrayed; interactions are generally brief, a factor compounded by the ubiquitousness of the principal who is seldom office bound (contrary to the representation in cartoon as in Phi Delta Kappan, for example). It is perhaps salutory to recall here the words of the janitor of the school in Please Sir: “You are not talking to a human being here. Oh, no. You are talking to a headmaster!”

Several of my students have argued that there is much about the principalship that is not portrayed in film. Again, I must respond in terms of the sample size: in the 48 films reviewed herein the range of administrative activities and undertakings is most extensive. Albeit often briefly, often superficially, there is little a principal does that is not, at least somewhere, represented in film.

It will not surprise, therefore, that I recommend the use of a wide sample of films in programs of educational administration and, especially, in those undertaken by aspirants to the principalship. As stated at the outset, such will provide an insight into the varied perceptions of the principalship held by others. It will also provide a splendid challenge to the student of educational administration to identify and analyse principals’ behaviours in terms of the “formal” knowledge generated by the scholars in our field.

Acknowledgements


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