

# A Review of Teachers and Teaching On Stage and On Screen Dramatic Depictions

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[See table of contents](#)

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## Article abstract

This piece is a review of *Teachers and Teaching on Stage and on Screen: Dramatic Depictions*, edited by Diane Conrad and Monica Prendergast (2019). Mortimer's personal poetic response opens the review to honour her artistic ways of knowing and responding to the content. The book's contributing authors, all educators, provide diverse cultural, social, and socio-economic perspectives and insights into how teachers and teaching are represented in film and on stage. Conrad and Prendergast's book invites a range of audiences (from pre-service teachers to academics) to reflect on dramatic depictions of teachers and to use them to deepen understandings of the complexities of teaching, schooling, and students—and, if readers are teachers themselves, to examine their own practice.

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## A REVIEW OF TEACHERS AND TEACHING ON STAGE AND ON SCREEN: DRAMATIC DEPICTIONS

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**Amy Mortimer** has worked across primary and tertiary education in Australia for over 15 years. Her doctorate employed arts-informed inquiry to explore the role of creative writing workshops in fostering creativity in primary school classrooms. Amy's university work encompasses contemporary pedagogical approaches and Arts curriculum.

**Abstract:** This piece is a review of *Teachers and Teaching on Stage and on Screen: Dramatic Depictions*, edited by Diane Conrad and Monica Prendergast (2019). Mortimer's personal poetic response opens the review to honour her artistic ways of knowing and responding to the content. The book's contributing authors, all educators, provide diverse cultural, social, and socio-economic perspectives and insights into how teachers and teaching are represented in film and on stage. Conrad and Prendergast's book invites a range of audiences (from pre-service teachers to academics) to reflect on dramatic depictions of teachers and to use them to deepen understandings of the complexities of teaching, schooling, and students—and, if readers are teachers themselves, to examine their own practice.

**Keywords:** pedagogues; identity; artistic representation

## Echoes From The Pages Call To Me

*Teachers,  
Who are we and what is our role?  
Creatives or conformists?  
Pedagogues or puppets?  
How are we represented and what is  
this 'power' we hold?  
I don't hear much about power. Rather the boxes, the chains and how we're sculpted to  
fit a certain mould.*

*Such are the themes that echo throughout . . .*

*Where does our identity lie and  
who gets to tell our story?  
What of our own lived experiences, our classroom narratives?  
Does the lens of teachers through film and theatre  
help or hinder with their comparatives?*

*These are the patterns that emerge from the pages turned . . .*

*Binary stereotypes,  
Societal perception,  
Cultural identity and  
Ethical consideration.  
Political influences, neo-liberalism,  
bureaucratic deception,  
and at times,  
utter misrepresentation.*

*These are the wonderings of the authors, the questions posed and answered . . .*

*Students' choice and voice!?*

*Teachers' agency, would first be welcome!*

*First, let's push against educational performativity, authority, and prohibitive hierarchical  
structures!*

*Then create space for more revolutionary cultures.*

*These are the threads that are woven, this is the hope that's created,  
the spark that's ignited . . .*

*Arts education as knowledge,  
 Arts as power,  
 tools to enact change and revolutionize our teaching stage?  
 Teachers and Teaching on Stage and on Screen is  
 A call to arms and a space to learn,  
 about history of pedagogy and cultural discern.  
 Prose to educate,  
 Theorists to ponder,  
 Judgements to make and  
 Questions to answer.*

*These are the echoes from the pages inside, the cries from the authors, the threads that  
 are tied.*

## Summary of the Book

As an educator trained in primary teaching, but with a background in the performing arts and experience teaching art education at a tertiary level, I was excited to read *Teachers and Teaching on Stage and on Screen, Dramatic Depictions* (Conrad & Prendergast, 2019), and learn about the many ways teachers and their craft are represented in film and theatre. The poem above, “Echoes From The Pages Call To Me,” is my personal response which summarises themes I identified throughout the publication.

This accessible book will interest academics, teacher educators, and pre-service teachers, as well as students and others interested in cultural studies and popular culture. Viewed through the lens of film and theatre, academic authors and practitioners in education engage in scholarly reflection using a range of theoretical perspectives to explore and critique representations and narratives of “good teachers”, teaching, student-teacher relationships, and school cultures.

As readers, we are engaged in conversations and questions about the role and purpose of the teacher, teacher identity, and behaviour, as well as the importance of context and diverse societal and cultural landscapes and their political influences. Readers are exposed to an extensive portrayal of teachers and teaching practices across film genres, television shows, and stage performances, and across cultures and generations.

Throughout the book, normative approaches to general teaching and teaching of the arts are poked and prodded, helping us to consider how our understandings of teachers and schooling are shaped— in often unchallenged ways—by these many

genres. While storytelling is an integral part of our personal, social, and cultural lives, and is the way we build and foster our identities (Leavy, 2015), this book encourages readers to not only recognise and examine the many ways teachers are portrayed on stage and on screen, but how these portrayals impact real teachers' experiences and sense of agency, and contribute to broader narratives about teacher education and the teaching profession.

The book encompasses 25 chapters, divided into five sections which speak to each other, offering many possibilities for what it means to teach. Creative approaches (such as monologues and conversational writing) are employed throughout the book, enabling readers to not only interrogate the roles, identities, and work of teachers, but also to invite a reimagining of how teaching could and should be. Conrad and Prendergast have crafted a text that informs, entertains, and invites reflection and self-reflection.

Part 1 is relatable and easy to digest as it explores characteristics and dispositions of learners and teachers alike. The array of teacher characteristics and dispositions portrayed in this section supports Kalantzis and Cope's (2012) belief that educators need to move away from reductive, behaviourist perspectives of teaching, learning instead to embrace modes of teaching that foster humanist, social constructivist, and social learning theories. The power of storying (Landrum et al., 2019) and the value of reflexive practice are spotlighted here. Readers are taken through examples of dialogic writing where multiple and varying voices share their stories. Beck (Chapter 1) uses monologues to question the status quo of education, praxis, and teacher agency as portrayed through the film *Freedom Writers* (LaGravenese, 2007). Dorothy Morrissey (Chapter 3) describes her own teaching as a performance, discussing this performance of teaching that requires more than the simple delivery of curriculum. The value of cultural diversity in schools is raised by Osorio (Chapter 4), who presents a migrant's perspective of the curriculum as foreign and the resulting impact on learning.

Leggo and Ahn (Chapter 5) employ *braided writing* to weave their way through discussion of teacher identity in the film *Election* (Berger & Payne, 1999). The rich discussion, presented through artistic modes, deepens the coexistence of researcher, artistic forms, and research. Springgay et al (2005) refer to this as *a/r/tography*—the connection between art, research, and teaching in partnership. *A/r/tography* is evident in the text and adds authenticity to the lived experiences in focus.

The contents of Parts 2, 3, 4, and 5 are informative and thought-provoking, deepening an understanding of teachers and teaching. Chapter 8 shares tales of pedagogues' identities, stereotypes, and power imbalances within the profession, as well as the consequences of their interplay. In Chapter 9, readers are reminded of the

work of Paulo Freire and the revolutionary possibilities, historical contexts, and political agendas that influence perceptions of educators.

Teachers of the arts are strongly represented in this book (see Part 3); however, the authors' discussions about the teaching profession and school structures will engage those interested in education beyond the arts. For example, cultural insights are evoked through the stories of educators in Africa (Chapter 8) and Nepal (Chapter 18). Gusul (Chapter 14) provides perspectives on rural and Indigenous pedagogical approaches in Canada, while Prendergast (Chapter 16) reflects on socio-economic and cultural differences between students and teachers, asking readers to "consider their own class and gender biases when working in classrooms" (p.168).

There are deep conversations about "Ethics and Desire in Teaching" in Part 4, including Brechtian educational philosophy (Chapter 19), the pedagogy of drug use (Chapter 21) and the portrayal of a female teacher as a seductress (Chapter 22) which may challenge and unsettle readers. The tone of the content in this section is not as celebratory as that which came before. As a reader deeply engaged by the chapters in Part 1, I felt a noticeable shift in my experience of the text.

Jacobs (Chapter 15) takes on the often dry content of student assessment, while in the penultimate chapter of the book (Chapter 24), Sinner and Zimmer employ a conversational mode of writing to display their reflection on how teachers are portrayed in film.

This book offers serious engagement with representations of teachers and the role of the teacher, the ways in which government policy interrupts teaching agendas, and how cultural beliefs and cultural capital influence the profession. It offers the reader an invitation to re/consider representations and perceptions of teachers and teaching, and considers the possibilities of what teaching is, and what it means to teach.

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