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Mary Dalton: Film gives teachers credit they're due

By Mary Dalton Guest columnist Feb 21, 2017

North Carolina, like the rest of the nation, is suffering from a teacher shortage. In our state, 15 percent of the teacher workforce left their jobs last year. The number studying to be teachers is decreasing.

“Teacher of the Year” is a new documentary that explores the demands of being a career educator. The film by Rob Phillips and Jay Korreck focuses on the reality of teaching and the toll it takes on Angie Scioli, a high-school teacher in Raleigh.

It is a thoughtful, complex film.

It is also a film unlikely to have the viewership of the approximately 10 million who watched Melissa McCarthy in “Mike and Molly” when she took a dive out of her elementary school classroom window after passing out a state-mandated standardized test. Or the more than 800,000 viewers who watched the second season premiere of TV Land’s “Teachers” as Ms. Snap is terrorized by the “worst group of kids” in the school and the art teacher is assigned a “mobile classroom” also known as a grocery shopping cart.

Disgruntled, burned out, coarse or childish teachers in television and film are the norm. They far outnumber positive representations of classroom learning. The media reinforces the idea that teaching is a dead-end job. Is it surprising that enthusiastic, talented individuals are reluctant to enter the field?

The educators we've seen on-screen shape our expectations of actual teachers. And there are more of these characters than real people who have taught us.

Most of us recognize the pervasiveness of media culture. But do we stop to consider that film and television are engines of cultural transmission? If so, the decline of good teachers on television and in the movies is troubling.

Television and movies established an impossible standard back when most teachers were heroes — think Mr. Kotter in “Welcome Back Kotter” or ex-marine Louanne Johnson in the film “Dangerous Minds.” The teacher as savior is too unrealistic to inspire meaningful change, but the steady stream of deplorable depictions we see today is far worse.

Both good and bad stories show us possibilities and limitations for teachers. This can be positive or damaging depending on how teachers are represented. It is never just a movie or a TV show.

Every film and series includes values, whether presented directly or indirectly. These values exist because of what the writer chooses to include or leave out of the story.

With an over-emphasis on standardized tests and policies like No Child Left Behind and Common Core that de-professionalize teaching, we need more Hollywood scripts and educational policies that celebrate learning, elevate teachers, and give students possibilities instead of limitations.

It is time to reclaim a complex and human incarnation of the good teacher in popular culture and to give real teachers in classrooms the resources and respect they need to prepare students to become responsible and engaged citizens.

See “Teacher of the Year.” No teachers jumped out of the window during production.

Mary Dalton is a professor of communication and media expert at Wake Forest University. “Teacher of the Year” plays at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, March 2, in Benson Center’s Pugh Auditorium at Wake Forest University. The screening is free.