



Constructing the image of the teacher on *Reddit*: Best and worst teachers



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HIGHLIGHTS

- The influence of social media in constructing the public image of the teacher.
- Expanding reflective practices in teacher education.
- Addressing gender biases in teacher memory studies.

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ABSTRACT

In addressing the public image of the teacher, this study reports on the analysis of 600 discussion entries on Reddit, a social media platform, in which respondents described memories of their best and worst teachers. Results of inductive analyses suggest: (1) a model of teacher, student, and teacher-student relationship for characterizing and reflecting on teachers in teacher education programs; (2) the relevance of social media in contributing to the public image of the teacher in an information technology age, as well as its anonymous and, arguably, more authentic nature; and (3) the need to address gender in teacher memory studies.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Objectives

It is well-established that teacher quality is a significant factor in influencing students' learning and achievement (Goldhaber, 2016). Indeed, teacher education programs are continually under pressure to improve the quality of teaching in changing, global contexts (Husbands, 2016). Part of this pressure transpires from the public discourse of teachers, a discourse that feeds into our pre-conceptions and beliefs about teachers (Dalton, 2013; Weber & Mitchell, 1995), affecting students, parents, tax-paying citizens, teachers, and teacher educators. The public image of the teacher is influenced by various sources, including official systems, such as socio-economic bureaucracies that position the teacher's work

within a hierarchy of career occupations (Coffey & Perry, 2013; Hoyle, 2001), and faculties of education that determine the professional criteria for the teachers they prepare (Winch, Oancea, & Orehard, 2014). The image of the teacher is also affected by less formal sources, including cultural representations of teachers in media and literature (see Dalton, 2013) and citizens' understandings of a teacher's work based on personal experience as students (Lortie, 1975). This paper addresses these unofficial sources of cultural representations and personal experiences.

Through a cultural studies framework, we examined constructions of teachers in social media entries, specifically through the discussion platform of Reddit. We examined discussion threads between 2009 and 2015 that narrate memories of 'best' and 'worst' teachers. Given the current global immersion of information technology in everyday living, our purpose was to expand our "knowledge space" (Levy, 1997, p. 1) of teacher discourses and acknowledge the growing relevance of social media in influencing the image of the teacher in both society at large and in teacher

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education programs. As teachers with combined experiences in early childhood, elementary and secondary education, as well as researchers in the field of teacher education, we have observed how public assumptions around the teacher affect educators at every level of education. We believe that examining how the public image of teachers is perpetuated is of crucial importance.

1.2. Literature review

1.2.1. Popular constructions of the teacher

Representations of teachers have been addressed in popular narratives such film, television, and in literature (Brunner, 1991; Dalton, 2013). As such, recycled stereotypes of teachers turn up repeatedly in these popular narratives. Weber and Mitchell's (1995) work is based on the principle that teachers are "embedded in many of the books, games, dramatic play, movies, and television shows that form part of children's activities before and after school" (p. 2). Before children enter a classroom, the images of teachers that they are exposed to shape the concept that they have of a teacher. These images can be both positive and negative, and are nothing short of powerful and highly influential in determining our views on schooling and the expectations we have about teachers (Brunner, 1991; Dockett, Perry, & Whitton, 2010).

As summarized by Dalton (2013), "broad patterns have emerged of 'good' and 'bad' educators" (p. 78). Based on an analysis of movies about teachers, the good teacher is often defined as an outsider, one who relates to students on a personal level, and one who does not only teach, but learns. Moreover, these 'good' teachers usually disagree with administrative policies and find ways to personalize the curriculum to fit the needs of their students (Dalton, 1995). Gregory (2007) further elaborates that good teachers in books and films put their students above and beyond all else. They are the saints of teaching and are often represented as women who will do anything to help their students. Vandermeersche, Soetaert, and Rutten (2013) explored similar stereotypes with the "so-called myth of the superteacher" (p. 90). In addition, good teachers in popular narratives are portrayed as being potentially antagonistic at first, but then highly respected in the end; as the cool teacher who is not formally a teacher; and as the hero who helps students go against the system (Gregory, 2007). Many of these characteristics relate back to Dalton's classification of the good teacher as an outsider.

The bad teachers in books, on television, and in movies, for the most part, serve as contrasts to the good ones. Bad teachers are portrayed as untouchable, heartless authority figures, as oddballs, as a doofus, or as sleazy, malicious, and manipulative (Gregory, 2007). Bad teachers are also portrayed as boring figures who only teach to the test (Dalton, 2013; Vandermeersche et al., 2013). They are unfriendly, ugly, and have an eye in the back of their head (Weber & Mitchell, 1995). Moreover, bad teachers in movies often show allegiance to a corrupt administration; they are the teachers who enable the administration to control students (Dalton, 2013). The movie *Bad Teacher* deviates from the trend of using a bad teacher to contrast the good, as neither the good nor bad teachers are likeable. The bad teacher in this case uses her students to fulfill her own personal desires (Dalton, 2013). Popular images of bad teachers are significant as "people are watching and making...links between these media texts and their lived experiences" (Dalton, 2013, p. 81).

This study extends the study of teacher images by focusing on the relevantly recent communication development of social media. In traditional popular culture texts, "the demands of drama override those of authenticity" (Harris, 2009, p. 17). Social media, however, intersects cultural representations in mass media with participants' personal contributions, in what has been termed a

participatory media culture, or a 'prosumer' culture (Jenkins, 2006). As such, these sites are novel in converging publically shared ideologies with participants' constructions of teachers based on their personal experiences, and therefore likely provide a different perspective on teachers (Holtz, Kronberger, & Wagner, 2012).

1.2.2. Reddit

Reddit is an online discussion platform created in 2005 by Alexis Ohanian and Steve Huffman (Vella, 2015). Its name is a phonetic play on the term "I read it on," and the website refers to itself as "The Front Page of the Internet" (Brudno, 2012). The social networking site is comprised of smaller, user-designed communities, called subreddits, each focusing on different areas of interest. Users, called Redditors, can post content in the form of text, pictures and videos, links to content, and comments to all content and links. One of the site's "most active communities...often filled with poignant responses" (Vella, 2015) is AskReddit which allows users to ask an open-ended question which fellow Redditors can answer. The demographics of Reddit users was reported in 2012 as 74 percent males under the age of 35 (Chemaly, 2015).

One of the key aspects of Reddit, as opposed to sites such as Facebook or Twitter, is that its users can be completely anonymous. Redditors do not need to sign up through an official e-mail address, and most users "opt for a moniker that reflects their personalities instead of using their real names" (Brudno, 2012, p. 26). Co-founder Ohanian argues that this anonymity is what allows Redditors to share opinions freely, arguing that "people are desperate for the authenticity that [Reddit] allows" (Vella, 2015, p. 49). The founders' goal is for Reddit to be, as much as possible "an unfiltered view of humanity" (p. 44) or what Holtz et al. (2012) describe as a greater openness to expressing one's opinions directly. The sharing practices of Reddit have a personal, firsthand characteristic to them, and anonymity protects its users from repercussions of oversharing or making inappropriate comments (Kennedy, Meese, & van der Nagel, 2016). Co-founder, Steve Huffman, says, "Reddit has been home to some of the most authentic conversations you can have online" (Goodman, 2015, p. 43) – with interactions described as featuring "elements of play and candor" (Massanari, 2015, p. 3).

All content, comments, and links can be voted either up or down. Higher voted content is moved up to more visible positions (Ovadia, 2015), and posters receive "karma" points calculated loosely on number of up votes minus downvotes (Massanari, 2015). While the premise of the voting system is that content with more votes will "rise to the top of the page, while less popular content will sink" (Kennedy et al., 2016, p. 151), the site's algorithms – or "platform vernacular" (Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen, & Carter, 2015, p. 256) – include factors beyond number of votes, including: how recent the post was entered and the particular subreddit's moderator.

The relatively spontaneous nature of material found on Internet forums more broadly was compared to "a kind of unmoderated virtual focus group" (Holtz et al., 2012, p. 56) where posters evoke more responses from others than would be produced individually. Ovadia (2015) argues that Reddit provides a useful representation of content and discussion for researchers that may not be accessible through more standard research channels. Reddit's anonymity does, however, have its downsides. For one, it is difficult to verify specific demographic information on individual posters, complicating one's ability to address how representative the forum is beyond general demographics. Anonymity and the site's laissez-faire approach to controlling content can also lead to what Massarini (2015) terms "toxic technocultures" (p. 3) or online harassment in the forms of misogyny and racism. As co-founder Ohanian puts it, "Reddit reflects the Internet, and the Internet reflects humanity. Unfortunately, humanity is always going to have jerks" (p. 48).

1.2.3. Apprenticeship of observation

Reddit also provides a unique forum for participants to share and discuss memories, again in anonymity. It is well-established in educational research that lay theories – personal beliefs about teaching, based on an ‘apprenticeship of observation’ or 13 or more years of prior experience observing one’s own teachers – are resilient and powerful (Lortie, 1975). The majority of adults have established a set of attitudes and preconceptions of what teaching and being a teacher mean, and these beliefs are “formed in the absence of understanding of educational theories or pedagogical principles” (Furlong, 2013, p. 79).

One method of accessing these lay theories about teaching is through researching individuals’ memories of their teachers. The research literature on teacher memories tends to focus on pre-service teachers’ memories, in order to evaluate how prior experiences impact a prospective teacher’s current beliefs about teaching (Arnon & Reichel, 2007; Chang-Kredl & Kingsley, 2014; Black & Howard-Jones, 2000; Breault, 2013; Furlong, 2013; Miller & Shifflet, 2016; Miller et al., 2012; Uitto, 2012; Van Hook, 2002). In other words, these are the communities that would *have* a vested interest in adopting favourite teacher styles and rejecting least favourite styles, encapsulating a type of cycle in education. While pre-service teachers were found to want to model themselves after their favourite teachers (Mitchell & Weber, 1999), Saban’s (2003) study of pre-service teachers in an elementary education program in Turkey found that the participants’ negative experiences “endured long in their memories with a lot of hatred of the teachers and his or her subject as the years passed by” (p. 840). These individuals expressed a desire to model themselves in opposition to the characteristics and practices of these former teachers. When prospective teachers in a Midwestern university in the United States were asked to describe a significant school experience from elementary years and to reflect on that experience, 65% of the students recounted negative memories of teachers, 25% recounted positive memories of teachers, and 10% recounted memories of interactions with peers (Van Hook, 2002). One important implication from these studies is that memories of teachers tend to be emotional, therefore either positive or negative but rarely neutral.

Many studies focus on memories of the effective teacher, with qualities that typically include: the teacher’s passion in their work, concern for the students, and content knowledge (Breault, 2013; Mowrer-Reynolds, 2008). Furlong (2013) describes four themes emerging from the narratives of ‘good teachers’: personal qualities (warm, approachable, inspirational, yet firm), a desire to make a lasting impression on students, a focus on non-didactic methods of teaching, and classroom management that concentrates on care and facilitation of learning. Miller et al. (2012) list five themes from participants’ descriptions of favourite teachers: respect for students, effective teaching strategies, inspiring, showing joy in teaching, and creating a positive learning environment. Other researchers have described the core characteristics of effective teachers through two main categories: personality characteristics and professional characteristics (Arnon & Reichel, 2007; Black & Howard-Jones, 2000). The qualities of teachers as constructed in social media platforms has yet to be addressed, and it is important to consider how the technological and public aspects of social media may affect the themes presented about teachers.

Another set of studies focus on juxtaposing ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ teacher memories (Van Hook, 2002; Saban, 2003; Rothenberg, 1994). At times, personality and professional qualities are contrasted. For example, ‘pedagogical characteristics’ are distinguished as available versus preoccupied, interesting versus boring, high expectations versus lax, open versus rigid, while ‘personal characteristics’ are described as respectful versus disrespectful, humble versus arrogant, caring versus indifferent, and composed versus

angry (Balli, 2014). In another study, favourite teachers are described as respectful and caring, effective in teaching style (content knowledge and interactive lessons), inspirational (and role models), showing joy in teaching, and providing a safe environment; least favourite teachers are characterized as: lacking in concern and care, being “unfair, strict, mean, and disrespectful” and using teaching methods that are boring and easy (Miller et al., 2012, p. 93). This established juxtaposition between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ teachers forms the basis of the discussion threads in our Reddit analysis.

1.2.4. Writing about teachers on Reddit

The present study aims to contribute to the study of the public discourse of teachers through exploring the types of themes about teachers that emerge in social media platforms. Although there is some overlap between the Reddit responses and preservice teacher memory studies, it should be clear that the pool of responses from Reddit are not directly comparable to these teacher memory studies which address a specific population with specific purposes of informing their development as teachers. Findings will be discussed in terms of implications for teachers and teacher education, and contributions to representations of teachers in popular culture.

1.3. The present study

In order to examine how a social media discussion forum may contribute to public perceptions of teachers, the present study was driven by the following two research questions:

1. How are teachers represented in Reddit?
2. How do these representations on a social networking forum contribute to public discourses of teachers, specifically in terms of best and worst teachers?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design

The study is designed as a qualitative text analysis (Creswell, 2012) of discussion comments from the social networking forum Reddit. In this project, the text analysis involves using data that is “ready-made” (Merriam, 2009, p. 139), that is, not created for research per se. Merriam (2009) justifies the use of mass communication data – popular culture or information texts – in qualitative text analysis because of its tendency to reveal distinct aspects of society. Specifically, we examined discussion threads (subreddits on AskReddit) that addressed memories of best and worst teachers. Although we used exact wording from posts throughout our analysis, measures were taken to protect Redditors’ identity. While the individual posts are public and anonymous, handles and nicknames were not used.

2.1.1. Sampling selection procedure

In order to address our research questions, we conducted searches on Reddit using key words of ‘best teacher’, ‘worst teacher’, ‘favourite teacher’, and ‘least favourite teacher’. The top discussion threads from 2009 to 2015 were identified and ordered in terms of highest number of responses, as the number of responses is directly related to the popularity of the thread. A total of eight discussion threads were selected: four for ‘best’ teachers and four for ‘worst’ teachers.

Each researcher took one set of data (‘best’ or ‘worst’) and read through the entries, highlighting the entries that addressed the poster’s personal memory of a teacher. Comments that veered from this focus were not included (for example, posts which identified

parents as teachers). We selected the comments that were moved up to these more visible positions as representative of the most popular comments (Massanari, 2015; Ovidia, 2015) resulting in a total of 300 comments for best teachers and 300 comments for worst teachers; since we were comparing best and worst teachers, we felt it necessary to include an equal number of entries for each. In order to provide a representative selection, approximately one half of the comments were selected per discussion thread, up to a maximum of 100 comments.

The size of a sample in online qualitative research is described by Merriam (2009) as adequate when no new information is being drawn out of the data, more specifically “when a point of saturation or redundancy is reached” (p. 80). Although it is always possible to address larger samples when using internet forums to gather data, at 600 comments, we decided that we had reached this saturation point. Although we did not verify handles to determine whether or not a given Redditor commented in more than one discussion thread, we did not come across the repetition of any posts as we read through and then coded our data.

2.1.2. Data coding and analysis

Using an inductive coding method, we examined the 600 posts individually, summarized the entries in terms of descriptions of teachers, and from there, 15 codes emerged that fit into four broader categories. The qualities of teachers as constructed on social media platforms have yet to be theorized therefore, as supported by Merriam (2009), an inductive process is an appropriate way to build toward theory. The data set entries were read repeatedly and discussed, during which time we took note of the content that emerged from each data set. In order to reduce the data for analysis of themes and content, each single posting was considered one unit of analysis, a method of internet research encouraged by Holtz et al. (2012). Each post was coded in terms of: the grade level that the teacher taught, the subject, the gender of the teacher, a summary of the post, and follow-up. Infrequently, the name and age of the teacher was noted, so these were also included in the coding tables.

For the inductive coding, we went through many iterations of identifying emerging themes that characterized the teachers in order to agree on accurate descriptors for the data. Although some individual posts could be described by more than one theme, the most prominent theme, that is, the one that best illustrated the post, was coded for each post. The 600 comments were divided between the two researchers, so that each researcher coded 300 comments. In order to check for interrater reliability, each researcher also coded 20% of the other researcher's data (60 comments), and then these two coded sets were compared to ensure that codes matched.

The emergent categories of themes and descriptors of best and worst teachers were then analysed in order to understand how a social networking site, such as Reddit, contributes to constructing the public perceptions of teachers.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Inductive coding

The study sought to respond to two research questions: (i) How are teachers represented on Reddit? and (ii) How do these representations on a social networking forum contribute to public discourse of teachers?

3.1.1. Overall themes

Following many reviews and discussions on how to represent the data as authentically as possible, four overall themes emerged:

(i) teacher's professional qualities, (ii) teacher's personal qualities, (iii) relational qualities between teacher and student, and (iv) implications for students, meaning the impact of the teacher's approach on the student's learning, performance, and self-confidence. In addition to these four main themes, we noticed interesting patterns emerge as we coded, relating to the gender of the teacher, grade level, and subject area mentioned in the posts. These supplementary details made the posts more specific and enlightening. As such, these patterns will be briefly outlined following our main analysis of the four themes. They provide insight into areas of future research. Given the anonymity of the respondents, as well as the unique demographics of active Redditors, the purpose of this study was to contribute to research on teacher images and memories through an examination of Reddit as an online forum, rather than to generalize results or compare them prior teacher memory studies.

The respondents' ideations of their former teachers could be summarized schematically through the following figure:

This schema provides an organizational system for thinking about how best and worst teachers are constructed on Reddit, in terms of: I. the teacher's professional and personal qualities (the first two themes combined) on one end, II. the student's outcomes on the other end, and III. the relationship between the student and the teacher in the intersection. Each of these three factors is discussed. When coding, we felt it necessary to make a distinction between professional and personal qualities. Posts that were coded under professional were strictly about the teacher's teaching ability. Those coded under personal were posts that focused predominantly on a teacher's personal trait, making little to no connection as to how that trait transpired in the classroom (for example, there were posts that targeted teachers for being physically unappealing with no connection made to said teacher's capability as a teacher). Student outcomes were the posts in which the Redditor focused on the teacher's influence and lasting impact on them. Finally, those coded under relational qualities were posts that predominantly focused on the interaction between teacher and student. Naturally, as shown in Fig. 1, there is an overlap between all four themes. We coded based on the theme that was predominant (see Tables 1–5).

3.1.2. Teachers' professional and personal qualities

Teacher's professional qualities and personal qualities were the categories most used by Redditors (258 of 600 entries described professional qualities and 123 of 600 entries described personal qualities). These numbers make sense given that the comment prompts focused on the Redditor's best or worst teacher (e.g., “What made your favourite teacher your favourite teacher?” and “Who was the worst teacher you had, and why?”).

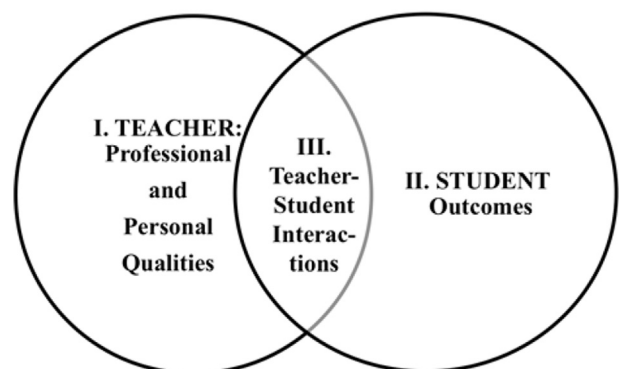


Fig. 1. Constructing teachers on Reddit.

In terms of professional teacher qualities – reflecting the description of teaching practices in prior studies (see Miller & Shifflet, 2016) – best teachers were described as admirable in terms of intelligence (“He knew his field”), engaging (“able to capture everyone’s attention”, “funny, made up story problems”, “loved to tell drawn out stories”), dedicated (“got in a car crash on the way to class once and still came in with dried blood and stitches on his head”), easy-going (“I never learned any sign language and still got an A”), and strict but fair (“Scared the living hell out of us but lessons from there on were the best”). Worst teachers were described as incompetent (“so overwhelmingly useless that I actually had my tuition for the class refunded”, “told us Kenya is the capital of Africa”, “asked us the same questions over and over again”), lacking in judgment (“My classmate hung himself and my teacher decided to have us play hangman”), lazy (“She never actually worked”, “I’m not even sure she spoke French. She usually just put on a movie, usually in French with English subtitles”), and unfair and biased (“graded based on how much she liked you”, “punished me for reading ahead”, “accused me wrongly of cheating”).

For personal qualities, cited as the primary factor that students use to evaluate their teachers (see Arnon & Reichel, 2007), particularly amongst younger students, best teachers were described as having unique personalities (“eccentric”, “freaky, weird, over-excited old buzzard”), being humorous (“he had a brilliant, sick sense of humor”, “good times and innocent fun”), down to earth (“human and almost like a friend”, “most down to earth person”) and physically attractive (“Because boobs”, “cuz dat ass!”, “10/10 body”). Worst teachers were also described as unique, but negatively so (“was led out screaming and never allowed to come back”, “would just stop teaching and sit silently at her desk for 10–15 min”, “clearly peaked in high school and was back to hang out with the cool kids”), bad-tempered (“yelled at me for being late when I was on crutches”, “yelled a lot”), condescending (“I asked a question and he’d say, ‘are you serious?’ or ‘oh, that’s easy’”), and physically unappealing (“so obese that he had to roll around class on a stool”, “she was evil, fat, short and wore giant rainbow sweaters”).

While the Redditors were describing either their best or worst teachers, the data show some interesting trends that contrast positive and negative teacher descriptions. Not only do these comparisons contribute to the public’s perceptions of teachers, they also reflect the values of the Redditors in terms of schooling and education. For best teachers, some teachers were valued for being dedicated (27), while a close number were valued for being easy-going (22). Tying into this, 28 of the worst teachers were cited for their lack of effort. Two points are relevant here. First, there is a noticeable comparison between dedicated and easy-going teachers. Those teachers coded as dedicated were passionate, energetic, and had genuine interest both in their profession and students. Those who were coded as easy-going were lenient, gave few tests, and high grades for little or no work. Essentially, teachers are being praised for opposing characteristics depending on the participant. Second, the data showed that best teachers who were easy-going (22) and worst teachers that put in no effort (28) were being praised or criticized for displaying almost identical behaviours. The students who admired easy-going teachers seemed to appreciate the provision of a relaxing environment (“We would spend 15 min learning something new and spend the rest of the period telling jokes and fooling around”) whereas those that criticized teachers for putting in no effort appeared to feel cheated (“I feel like I missed out on a really cool and interesting subject”). Again, this sheds light on the values that the Redditor holds toward school and education. Contrary to popular notions of the ‘one-size-fits-all’ ideal teacher, different students have different learning styles and, therefore,

require varied teaching styles for effectiveness (Stark & Freishtat, 2014).

The personal teacher qualities coded as “unique,” often signalling a form of eccentricity, were also construed in both positive and negative ways. Best teachers who were admired as unique (14) were noted for their creativity, innovation, and oddity. In addition to being a good teacher, there was something personal that made them quite memorable. There was one beloved teacher who was more memorable for being blind, without legs, and having a kidney transplant. Other eccentric teachers were remembered lovingly for making dramatic entrances into class, throwing erasers at students, and, in one case, eating crayons. Of note, despite the focus in these entries on the teachers’ odd behaviours, the Redditors made note that they still learned. For instance, the Redditor who described a teacher who threw erasers concluded his post by saying “people in my class who were straight F students earned A’s in that class – really earned them”. For worst teachers cited as unique, these teachers did not appear to have any effective practices to compensate for their odd behaviours. There was the story of one odd teacher who went around “smelling children’s bums to see who farted.” In this account, there were no positive memories to give this teacher’s odd quality a positive spin.

3.1.3. Attribution issues: implications on student

Teacher-focused qualities were found to be higher when describing worst teachers (140 comments for professional; 75 comments for personal) compared to best teachers (108 comments for professional; 48 comments for personal). This difference was balanced by the fact that there were far more comments on how best teachers’ approaches had implications on the students’ learning outcomes (69 comments) than worst teachers (9 comments). It seems that the Redditors valued their favourite teachers for the positive, lasting impact the teachers had on their lives, with focus being on the student’s success. Indeed, teacher effectiveness can be defined by the teacher’s impact on the student’s learning (Goldhaber, 2016). This is illustrated by the following entries: “he fostered in me an awe of science”, “owe all painting skills to him”, “shaped my youth and life”, “Now I love writing because of this teacher”, “Introduced me to web design which became my career”, “helped me discover my creative side”, “Inspired me to work hard”. Corroborating this finding, Van Hook’s (2002) study reported that students’ experiences with a particular teacher, in a sense, ‘made them who they are today’ and that the strong feelings they recall from their teacher memories carry a lasting impact. Least favourite teachers were not internalized as much by the Redditors, which may signal a form of self-protection on the students’ part. It may also reflect the larger male demographic of Redditors (74% male) (Chemaly, 2015), given that male students are known to attribute their successes to their abilities, thereby taking credit for their successful outcomes, whereas female students are more likely to attribute their success to external factors, including their teachers (Beyer, 1999). The corollary of this is that when a learning situation is negative, it must be due to the teacher’s poor professional abilities (e.g., “an idiot”, “boring”, “lazy”, “inconsistent”, “unintelligent”) or personal qualities (e.g., “nut case”, “bizarre”, “vile”, “arrogant”, haughty”) – and not the student.

3.1.4. Bidirectional nature of teacher-student interactions

The data for best and worst teachers in terms of relational qualities was fairly even with 72 posts for best and 76 for worst teachers. This suggests that the dynamic between student and teacher carries similar levels of relevance whether it is positive or negative. The highest relational quality described for best teachers was “supportive” (38 of the 72 posts or just over 50%). It was not uncommon to find entries that went beyond a short description of

Table 1
Inductive coding for best teachers.

#	Code	Examples	Total
Teaching/Professional Qualities			
1	Knowledgeable	Knew advanced material, intellectual, intelligent, no textbooks needed, smart, went beyond the test, brilliant, genius, relating to <i>content</i> .	13
2	Interesting	Engaging, storyteller, held interest, memorable, conversationalist, good lecturer, intellectually stimulating, captures attention.	25
3	Dedicated	Passionate, liked job, enthusiastic, genuine interest, energetic, cared about students' learning.	27
4	Easy-Going	High grades, lenient, cool, treats, bribes, chill, few tests, easy going, fun, easy grades	22
5	Intimidating, but fair	Scary, feared, tough, badass (intimidating), authoritative, strict, no bullshit	21
Personal Qualities			
6	Unique	Creative, odd, goofy, quirky, eccentric, innovative, brought variety to the classroom, retired magician, badass (cool), extraordinary	14
7	Funny	Told a lot of jokes, hilarious, pranks, sarcastic	17
8	Authentic	Teacher was real person, down to earth, could talk to, easy to talk to, didn't try to be cool	11
9	Attractive	Good looking, boobs	6
Implications for Students			
10	Got best out of student	Encouraging, fostered: hard work, thinking, success, excitement for subject. No busy work, pushed limits, challenging, earned grades; actually learned, critical thought, got me to think, learned a lot.	49
11	Lasting Impact	Changed the way I look at life, realized things, inspired career, still friends, stimulated love of subject, always remember, still see, still keep in touch, inspirational, life lessons, made me who I am	23
Relational Qualities			
12	Supportive	Nurturing, caring, took personal interest, believed in me, made time, extra mile, helpful, saved from embarrassment, motherly, safe space, life saver, good listener, felt safe, mentored, made me feel special, helpful	38
13	Treated student like a person/human/with respect	Open-minded, not condescending	19
14	Like a Friend	Smoked with kids, went for drinks, still friends now, hung out, still hang out, treated as a friend/adult, like one of us	11
15	Sexual Relationship with Student	Slept with student	4

Table 2
Inductive coding for worst teachers.

#	Code	Examples	Total
Teaching/Professional Qualities			
1	Unintelligent, dull, boring, incompetent, unqualified	Stupid, no knowledge, boring, monotone, close-minded, unintelligent, unqualified, can't teach, useless, unable to teach, incapable, incomprehensible, thick accent	38
2	Poor judgment	Wants to save the black and brown students, insensitive Holocaust games, easily manipulated	13
3	No effort	Lazy, didn't even try, no effort, negligent, neglectful, apathetic, no investment, watched movies, didn't give a shit, stopped showing up, should retire	28
4	Unfair expectations, inconsistent	Hard marker, expectations not appropriate, punitive, inflexible, inconsistent, accused student of cheating (wrongly), grades based on drawings,	35
5	Plays favourites, biased	Biased/racist/sexist, religious & indoctrinating, has favourites, close-minded	26
Personal Qualities			
6	Bizarre, odd, immature, mentally questionable, inappropriate	Nut case, erratic, moody, odd behaviours (non-sexual, e.g., smells farts), bizarre, went nuts, inappropriate comments, over-sharing, wants to be a teen again, no social skills, alcoholic	29
7	Bad-tempered, nasty temperament	Mean, angry, yells, strict, vile	22
8	Superior, condescending	Cruel, snobbish, egotistic, self-centered, arrogant, vile, smug, haughty, pompous, power-mongering, requires own textbook	17
9	Physically unappealing	Fat, obese	7
Implications for Students			
10	Didn't learn anything (focus on student outcome)	Learned nothing	5
11	No self-confidence (lasting negative impact)	Became self-deprecating, felt stupid for years, lost confidence	4
Relational Qualities			
12	Discouraging, doesn't care about or support students	Discouraging, wouldn't help, insensitive, hypocritical, dismissive, inconsiderate, thoughtless, won't let child pee, doesn't look out for child, negligent in case of emergency, ignores sick complaint	18
13	Verbally abusive	Malicious, wants to terrorize the children, scares children, bullies, encourages/allows children to bully other children, cruel, humiliating, tells children Santa isn't real, embarrasses student	22
14	Physically abusive	Hits, locks child in closet, puts child in fridge, duct tapes kid's mouth shut, held student against wall, kicked kid's ass, sells kids drugs	24
15	Sexual advances or suggestive	Pedophile, sexual, creep, porn to class	12

Table 3

Gender of teacher mentioned in post.

Data Set	Posts referring to gender	Posts with male teacher	Posts with female teacher	% Male	% Female
Best Teachers	275	180	95	65%	35%
Worst Teachers	268	108	160	40%	60%

Table 4

Age/grade of Redditor at time of memory.

Data Set	Posts referring age/grade	Pre-K & K	Gr 1-6	Gr 7-12	College/University
Best Teachers	215	1 (0.5%)	42 (20%)	149 (69%)	23 (10.7%)
Worst Teachers	227	6 (2.6%)	81 (36%)	102 (45%)	38 (16.7%)

what made a teacher good; some were detailed and heart-warming stories of teachers going the extra mile. For example, many Redditors wrote about supportive teachers who nurtured them, made time for them, provided safe spaces, and made them feel special: one teacher took the time to write a recommendation letter while dying of cancer, one helped a student cope with depression when no one else would, and one made sure a pregnant student (who was kicked out) finished school with a tutor. The long descriptions support the fact that these teachers put in the extra effort to build a relationship with their students. Miller and Shifflet (2016) noted the importance that the students in their study placed on their former teachers' "humanistic qualities", such as warmth, nurturance and even maternal qualities (p. 24).

Redditors also cited teachers as favourites because they treated students like people (26%). One post in particular described a teacher that "treated me like a human...sadly, that didn't happen much growing up". This quote captures the overall tone of many of the posts describing teachers who treated students with respect, implying that this was a rarity for students ("first teacher that ever really took an interest in me", "We were real people, with real problems, and he treated us that way", "they treat our class like people, not like objects").

Participants also remembered the teachers who were more like friends (15%). Redditors that shared memories from elementary and high school wrote about teachers who were generally friendly whereas Redditors who shared memories from college or university wrote about teachers who they hung out with outside of school ("we would spend hours outside of class talking"), went out for drinks with ("we'd meet down at the local watering hole for drinks"), or smoked with ("I smoked a joint with [her]").

As a contrast to this, worst teachers were coded relationally as being discouraging, caring very little about students, offering no support to students (24%), and being either physically (32%) or

verbally (29%) abusive. Similar to Rothenberg's (1994) findings, these worst memory scenarios often narrated scenes of painful humiliation. For the discouraging teachers who showed little care or support, there were frequent stories of teachers who told students that they would not amount to anything ("She told me I'd never get into any college", "I was thirteen and he told me I should quit school and start a job"). Many of the teachers described also enforced rigid bathroom rules that resulted in embarrassment ("he peed everywhere and was so traumatized that he switched schools", "She couldn't hold it in any longer and peed herself. Then instead of calling the janitor, the teacher shamed her by making [her] clean up the puddle herself"). Comparatively, one of the best teachers was coded as treating students like a person because she "didn't give two shits about the school's stupid bathroom rules". Unfortunately, there were too many stories of teachers who were either verbally (22) or physically (24) abusive. Redditors recounted stories of being called stupid, being told coldly that Santa Claus does not exist, and being humiliated for being poor. Moreover, there were accounts of students being beaten with sticks, held up against walls, spanked, and locked in closets. Initially, we had one category for abusive, but, upon closer examination, the data for this category was so extensive that it needed to be split into verbal and physical. It is important to emphasize that these memory narratives inform us not only of the teachers described, but also about the interactional needs and perspectives of the students themselves. Clearly, the student-teacher relationship is a critical factor in public perceptions of the teacher's work (Van Manen & Li, 2002).

3.1.5. Gender and sexuality of teacher

As noted earlier, trends emerged pertaining to the gender of the teacher, grade level, and subject area mentioned in the posts. These patterns are summarized below and provide direction for future research.

In terms of the breakdown of best and worst teachers across gender of the teacher, there were more male teachers identified as best (65% male to 35% female) and more female teachers designated as worst (60% female to 40% male). There is growing support of a bias toward male college and university instructors in student evaluations (MacNeill, Driscoll, & Hunt, 2014; Stark & Freishtat, 2014), Breault (2013) found in his small sample finding that male teachers in secondary schools were described more frequently as the favourite/effective teacher (21 male to 11 female).

Sexuality was referred to as a relational quality for both best and worst teachers. For best teachers, four Redditors identified their best teacher as being the one they had a sexual relationship with (three of the four teachers described as female). As Holtz et al. (2012) explain, the anonymity of Internet forms results in limited means by which to verify what is posted. As such, whether or not these posts reflect truth or fiction remains uncertain. The apparent clichés included in the posts (using terms like "extra credit" and

Table 5

Subject matter taught by teacher in post.

Subject Matter	Best Teachers	Worst Teachers	Total
Social Sciences	53	37	90
English Language Arts	41	37	78
Math	29	44	73
Physical Sciences	39	20	59
Languages (other than English)	15	18	33
Computers/IT	10	16	26
Fine Arts (Music, Visual, Theatre)	14	5	19
Religion/Moral	4	6	10
Phys Ed	1	5	6
Business	2	3	5
Shop	3	1	4
General, all subject teachers	3	0	3
Media	1	0	1
Other	9	10	19

making reference to Van Halen's "Hot for Teacher") and the lack of detail (the longest of the four posts was only 3 sentences) lean towards the posts being fabricated for attention – or by Reddit standards, to get the most up votes (Massanari, 2015). On the whole, it remains reassuring that these types of posts were kept to a minimum.

When looking at worst teachers, there were 12 posts about teachers who made inappropriate sexual advances. These posts ranged from teachers who dated and/or openly flirted with students, molested students, watched pornography (either openly in class or on class trips), and who later turned out to be pedophiles. In contrast to the favourite teachers who were mostly women in this category, in this case they were mostly male (9 of 12 posts). Linked to these findings are the Redditors' physical descriptions of their favourite teachers ("10/10 body" "boobs") versus least favourite teachers, in which all seven entries referred to the teachers' obesity. Certainly, these physical characteristics and sexuality of teachers are referred to in popular culture (Ms. Cross in *Rushmore*, Van Halen's "Hot for Teacher").

3.1.6. Grade level and subject matter

The breakdown of age or grade levels included prekindergarten to kindergarten, elementary school, high school, and higher education. Interestingly, 69% of best teachers were described as high school teachers. The split is somewhat more even in worst teachers, with 36% of teachers noted being in elementary school and 45% of teachers at the high school level. This prompts the question of why positive memories of teachers favour high school experiences whereas negative memories are divided more evenly between high school and elementary school. This may reflect the age level of the average Redditor (74% under the age of 35) (Chemaly, 2015), making the high school memories more recent. Perhaps having only one main teacher per elementary grade would make the emotional connection between elementary level teacher and student more intense (Breault, 2013). As well, younger students are more vulnerable to certain forms of traumatic experiences by teachers. For example, one teacher duct-taped a student's mouth shut (grade 1), one had students play Holocaust games (grade 5), and other teachers locked students in a refrigerator (Kindergarten) or closet (grade 5). Given the larger number of teachers that a student is exposed to in high school, compared to elementary school, high schools offer students the chance to connect with more teachers. In any case, this aspect of school level of best and worst teachers warrants further examination.

The subject matters focused on were primarily the core subjects of math, physical sciences, social sciences and language arts (English). There was a trend for best teachers being in the more qualitative subjects of social sciences and perhaps fine arts, and worst teachers being in the more empirically-driven subjects of math and, to a lesser extent, computers/IT. Breault (2013) also found that social studies was the subject area that "appeared to produce the best-loved and most effective teachers" (16 out of 60 teachers), although other studies have shown that social studies is often the least favourite subject in both elementary and high school. This finding may be an interesting one for prospective teachers choosing subject areas to teach.

4. Limitations

Three limitations in the study can be noted. First, the anonymity and privacy of *Reddit* participants precludes the collection of specific demographic information (Holtz et al., 2012). Second, slight variations in the wording of prompts across the different discussion threads, and over six years, may have affected the responses differently. Third, verifying user data and the accuracy of their posts

is almost impossible. Moreover, it can be argued that the information, which only represents those social groups with access to the Internet, is not and never was intended for scientific research. At the same time, however, the question of accuracy is an issue with all retrospective and interview data.

5. Future research

This study referred to only one social media platform, *Reddit*, and future research could address newer platforms that continue to appear and evolve. This study suggests that gender, in terms of both the student and the teacher, is important to continue examining. As well, grade level of teachers related to positive and negative memories need further study.

6. Conclusion

Public discourses about teachers are powerful in informing citizens' opinions about the work of teachers, and *Reddit* contributes to the perceptual filters that influence how teachers in society are valued (Van Hook, 2002). As a broad summary of the study's findings, on *Reddit*, best teachers were found to know their subject and how to present it, had personal qualities that were admired, showed care in their relationships with the students, and had a lasting impact on the student's life. Worst teachers were found to be unqualified, unfair or incompetent in their teaching skills, had unpleasant personality traits, were uncaring or abusive in their relationships with students, and had no lasting impact on the students.

What the vast majority of citizens know about the teaching profession, they learned intuitively (Lortie, 1975). It is imperative that teacher educators guide preservice teachers to bring their intuitive understandings of teaching to a level of awareness. This study suggests the use of an organizational system made up of two circles in a Venn diagram, with the teacher qualities (professional and personal) representing one circle, and the student's experience representing the other circle, with their relationship overlapping. Preservice teachers can appreciate that when imagining the "ideal" teacher, individual students have individual learning styles and personalities and, therefore, respond to different teacher styles and personalities. In other words, the ideal is not separable from the individual student's values, needs, and beliefs about schooling. Indeed, some students adore the teacher who challenges them, whereas other students find this style unbearable.

The public image of the teacher exists at an intersection of various official and unofficial sources: bureaucratic hierarchies, teacher education programs, popular culture representations, and individuals' memories of their own teachers. By expanding the study of teacher memories to include social media sites, we can learn more about how the image of the good and bad teacher is constructed and sustained. *Reddit* can help to fill in some of what is lacking from cinematic and literary images in popular culture. In traditional popular culture texts, "the demands of drama override those of authenticity" (Harris, 2009, p. 17), whereas the anonymity of the participants in social media forums such as *Reddit* can provide a more authentic view of why one values a teacher (Holtz et al., 2012). Indeed, some of the *Reddit* discussion threads were assumedly initiated by real teachers who were looking for real stories about teaching so that they could learn from them. Regarding memory studies, a respondent may feel uncomfortable or face judgement from teachers or peers if he or she openly admires the easy-going nature of a teacher. If these less-widely acknowledged, and perhaps uncomfortable, topics can be identified through social media forums, they can be added to reflective practices in teacher education programs. Some topics identified in

this study include students' open responses to their teachers' idiosyncracies. With this information, student teachers may be encouraged to reflect on the sorts of personal qualities and eccentricities they may communicate unknowingly. How might they respond to being judged by students over their physical appearance or their sense of humor? How can prospective teachers keep their biases and favoritism in check?

Given the importance of "teachers' own understandings of how the broader culture interprets and perceives their work" (Dockett et al., 2010, p. 40), this study contributes to the content and process of reflective practice by expanding the examination of teacher images to include social media platforms.

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