



The cinematic pedagogies of underprepared teachers

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Blogs of underprepared teachers follow cinematic story arcs, often of white saviour teacher films.
- Underprepared teachers' self-narratives correspond with characters from Hollywood white saviour films.
- Underprepared teachers' 'successful' classroom activities are not necessarily based in educational theory, but in cinematic drama.
- Underprepared teachers eventually reflect on their failure to inspire students in the mould of Hollywood.
- Blogs are a useful repository of perceptions and reflections of underprepared teachers.

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ABSTRACT

Based on 'netnographic' discourse analysis of 14 blogs penned by unlicensed American volunteer teachers in Namibia, this paper compares the narratives of Western underprepared teachers to the maverick teacher archetype in popular Hollywood (white savior) teacher films. The volunteers' narratives of their classroom activities and positionality within schools map onto the attributes of maverick teachers. I introduce the term cinematic pedagogies to conceptualize the dramatic but unresearched features of underprepared teachers' classroom practices and their self-identity as narrated along familiar cinematic story arcs. This research contributes to emerging scholarship on underprepared teachers as educational actors worthy of analysis.

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1. Introduction

Little is known about the educational philosophies which motivate the teaching strategies of underprepared teachers (Lefebvre & Thomas, 2017). While licenced teachers participate in teacher education, a multi-year disciplining social technology, underprepared teachers join the teaching force mere months after deciding to work in public schools (Labaree, 2010). Once in the classroom, *trained* teachers (presumably) draw on the educational theory and months of practicum they picked up in teacher education. In contrast, underprepared teachers must run their classrooms primarily on their intuitions about what "good teaching" looks like. I argue that such intuitions about how to be a "good teacher" are informed by pop culture characterizations of "maverick teachers,"

from Hollywood 'white savior teacher films' (Cann, 2015; Chennault, 2006; Dahlgren, 2017; Dalton, 2004). These films (e.g., *Dangerous Minds*, *Freedom Writers*, *Music of the Heart*) make the case that "those with the least classroom-teaching experience succeed in inspiring and capturing the attention of otherwise unruly and unmotivated ... youth of color" (Cann, 2015, p. 289). While these films are produced in the United States, they have global reach. Hughey determined that, "Hollywood films that succeed in U.S. markets tend to do well in foreign markets ... the last decade of white savior films have far outpaced other Hollywood films in global market performance" (2014, p. 162).

I reveal the similarities between the self-narratives of underprepared teachers and the plot points and character arcs so often rehearsed in popular American movies about heroic white outsider teachers. While previous work has explored these films' impact on the cultural milieu (Chennault, 2006), educational policy and practice (Dalton, 2006), teacher education curriculum (Beyerbach, 2005; Trier, 2001), and the discourse of teacher placement

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agencies like Teach for America (Cann, 2015), scholars have not yet compared underprepared teachers' discursive representations of themselves and their classrooms to the cinematic archetype (cf. Hughey, 2014).

This research is based on a netnographic discourse analysis of the publicly available, unprompted blogs of American international volunteers in the southern African country of Namibia. Netnographic methods prioritize "first-person online stories [and involve] ... the collection of emic interpretive data of the meanings lived" (Banyai & Glover, 2012, p. 274). These bloggers/teachers are especially underprepared—they are not licenced to teach in their home, the United States, and many of them only have a few months (or even weeks) of orientation before being dropped into a classroom with no co-teacher. Volunteers almost never teach in well-funded schools and they are typically sent to rural areas where students' English language skills are—on the whole—weaker than in Namibia's cities and access to basic instructional materials is limited. Additionally, local teachers in rural Namibian schools are unlikely to mentor the volunteer teacher due to both overwork and racist-colonial notions about the inherent competency of whiteness (Hughey, 2014). Not only are the volunteer teachers (who may stay at a school from 2 months-to-2 years) underprepared as teachers, they also likely have no experience in subsistence-reliant communities, or perhaps rural areas generally. This setting adds another layer of complexity to their cinema-based pedagogies which—even when "successful"—prepare students for decidedly waged and urban political economies.

The international volunteer teachers in Namibia are an extreme example of a larger trend in neoliberal schooling: the normalization of underprepared teachers, defined here as teachers who have not completed teacher education at post-secondary institutions. I suggest that the volunteers' experiences—in part, *because* they are so extreme—provide a valuable window into how this new and ever-growing class of educators makes pedagogical choices. While the volunteers' cinematic pedagogies are not inherently problematic, they are certainly not informed by educational philosophy nor a process of reflective praxis. These cinematic pedagogies may also naturalize—for the underprepared teachers and the wider public—the well-rehearsed narrative of the, "idealistic, lone wolf figure in the classroom against a supposedly crisis-ridden public education system" in need of dramatic and draconian reform (Dahlgren, 2017, p. 125).

2. The Maverick teacher archetype

A shift in the way teachers are represented in popular Hollywood films occurred at the end of the 20th century (Dahlgren, 2017, p. 109). While teacher characters from previous decades were often villainous, lazy, or boring, the 1980s and 90s brought a new kind of teacher character to the silver screen: the maverick, often a white savior (Hughey, 2014). The maverick is a newcomer to the community which he or she perceives to be holding students back and uses unconventional teaching methods to "reach" disadvantaged children, who are often Black but sometimes not (Cann, 2015). Dahlgren writes:

The key element to the Maverick's personality make-up is that he or she exists in a vacuum outside the social context of the school community, or, at times, in active resistance to it. This character never relents and refuses to accept the suggestion that he or she cannot succeed in motivating students to transcend their unfortunate situations ... the maverick is not merely another uncaring, out of touch white teacher allowing her students to fail while she collects her paycheck; she believes in

their potential and is willing to fight the school administration on their behalf. (Dahlgren, 2017, pp. 109, 120)

Dalton adds that audiences and authors:

Construct the good teacher as an outsider who is not liked by other teachers; as someone involved with students on a personal level; as someone who learns from students; as someone who personalizes the curriculum to meet everyday needs in students' lives; and as someone who does not get along well with administrators (Dalton, 2006, p. 30)

None of these characteristics or actions are inherently problematic on their own. Indeed, Cann sardonically jokes that, "perhaps all we need, indeed, are dedicated White female teachers willing to sacrifice their personal lives to be in the classroom" (2015, p. 306). However, maverick teachers in film are rarely progressive: they deploy a "combination of ... 'feel-good politics' with the promotion of various other elements: Reagan-era traditionalism, conservative educational prescriptions, individualism, unfettered free-market competition, and classist stereotypes" (Chennault, 2006, p. 46). Maverick teacher characters also, "foster a lack of trust in teachers, their training, and their professionalism" (Dalton, 2006, p. 30) since the maverick characters are only successful *after* they throw out the existing curriculum, philosophy, theory, and data to create a curriculum based on dramatic aesthetic. Dahlgren goes further, identifying the public pedagogical structural implications of the cinematic representation of schools: "the continual scenes in Hollywood films of teacher incompetence ... have reinforced in the minds of cinemagoers across the country that American public schools are in a state of crisis and are in desperate need of repair" (Dahlgren, 2017, p. 66).

3. The Maverick in/of a racist milieu

While not every maverick teacher in film is white, the vast majority of underprepared mavericks are. Interestingly, Joe Clark, the Black maverick principal in *Lean on Me*, is indeed unorthodox, but the character has a long and storied history in schools. This contrasts with the cinematic representation of LouAnne Johnson in *Dangerous Minds*, a white woman who had never before stepped foot in a classroom (Chennault, 2006). As Cann (2015, p. 292) notes, these films have a clear, explicitly racialized, stance on who is qualified (or not) to teach young, Black children. The films, "paint a simplistic picture of society where the incorrigibility of black and Latino youths is the problem to be solved, black adults are the main obstacle, and whites are the solution" (Chennault, 2006, p. 116). Sociologist Matthew Hughey notes that, "the very concept of Western *individualism*, itself, is racialized. And white savior films play on this social fact" (2014, p. 168). Mavericks' lessons relay that the only way students can be successful is to leave the deficit-filled, pathological communities they come from and become more like the ambitious, individualist—and overwhelmingly white—teacher protagonists.

These films do not just reflect society, but rather make possible certain social scripts. Familiar narrative and character arcs easily make the jump from the screen to reality: "the stories of the films we see ... help us create ourselves as characters and organize the plotlines of our daily lives" (Dalton, 2004, p. 2). Indeed, focus group research has revealed that white savior films are sometimes interpreted as "readily available and easy-to-follow blueprint[s] for how white people should live racially progressive and interracial cooperative lives" (Hughey, 2014, p. 156). The 'blueprint' of a maverick film is simple: young white audiences learn there are no

structural limitations which a bit of spunk, creativity, and a compelling character arc can't solve. The whole maverick endeavor, both internationally and domestically, is premised on the idea that students of color are available to the charismatic white underprepared teacher.

This discourse is readily used to market and legitimate institutions that place underprepared teachers in poor schools. Such institutions might be domestically-focused, like Teach for America, or internationally-focused, like Peace Corps and volunteer tourism sending organizations (Calkin, 2014; Cann, 2015; Sartori, 2018; Schein, 2015; Thomas & Lefebvre, 2017). While plenty of domestic volunteering, service learning, and also teacher education field preparations, have long made students of color available to underprepared white mavericks (Cann & McCloskey, 2017; Marx, 2006), my argument is focused on the international volunteer teaching iteration of the colonial helping impulse (e.g., Heron, 2007). International volunteering discourses and maverick teacher films feed into one another, reinforcing rugged white individualism and the interconnected geographies of "helping" as an imperative of whiteness (Matias, 2016, p. 230). In the context of Namibian schooling, longstanding development discourses which construct a 'Third World' full of crisis (see Escobar, 1995) and popular teacher films' critiques of (often majority-Black) educational institutions easily congeal into a ready-made narrative framing.

Yet, underprepared teachers are not total dupes. Indeed, many international volunteers are cognizant of the critiques surrounding their positionality and take steps to avoid some of the most obvious pitfalls (Schwarz, 2018; Schwarz & Richey, 2019). However, even if the real-life maverick teacher can articulate critiques against the maverick archetype or white savior tropes, they all too often fall back into individualism, believing, "that they can do it better, that their generation understands the failures and can solve them, and that their intentions are pure enough to overcome the cynics" (Mathers, 2012, p. 15). Undoubtedly, the fictional maverick characters would say the same.

4. Methods: blog-based research

This study deployed a static word netnography of publicly available travel blogs written by 14 volunteer teachers in Namibia. These blogs were sampled from an initial search of 36 potential blogs written by volunteers in Namibia. The unused blogs were discarded for various reasons (for example, the blog was still being actively updated or the volunteer was not a classroom teacher). The resulting sample for analysis totaled 307,143 words and was first coded using a "directed content analysis" method in which the researcher takes a special interest in a specific topic. The researcher first collected all the blogged narratives about teaching, schools, students, colleagues, classroom successes and failures, and the role of the teacher (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Once these school and teaching narratives were isolated from the other blogged narratives (of travel and village life, for instance), a more conventional grounded coding occurred (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

The blogs were located using keywords like "volunteer in Namibia" to search generally on the internet. The researcher also used the local search features on Blogger and Wordpress—the sites which host most of the blogs. The blogs serve as an outward-facing public pedagogy about volunteering in Namibia (Azariah, 2016). However, equally meaningful for the present study is the bloggers' acts of, "writing stories about their experiences [as] an important activity through which people act upon their experiences to connect them with the self. Individuals draw upon their memories to construct stories that they present to others" (Bosangit, Hibbert, & McCabe, 2015, p. 4). All the quotes are attributed using a

pseudonym.

Netnography is a popular method for studying the discourses and beliefs of international volunteer teachers (Stainton, 2018). The specific method of static word netnography does not engage with online users (as in forum netnography), but rather, "offers the researcher access to something different; i.e. how the [blogger] presents and posts him/herself [to a] more or less 'known' audience" (Blichfeldt & Marabese, 2014, p. 65). Static word netnography offers many advantages when compared to traditional semi-structured interviews. The method is especially effective for spatially diffuse populations (see Latham, 2003) and non-consecutive data collection, as the blogs serve as a digital archive. Additionally, the nature of blogging means that the text itself is 'naturally occurring,' not solicited in response to research questions (Bosangit et al., 2015).

This is not to claim that the blogs are somehow free from all reactivity. Indeed, bloggers engage in editorial control and shape a particular kind of self-presentation (in this case, a familiar cinematic arc). However, the blogs sampled here have a small, personalized readership and are not monetized. It is true that those blogging primarily for the benefit of friends and family, "may not be entirely truthful about their experiences as there may be some aspects that they do not want to share, for example, if they were to embark on new relationships, be reprimanded at work or indulge in illegal behavior" (Stainton, 2018, p. 1080). However, there is little reason to believe that the bloggers are obscuring their self-identity as a teacher, even in an explicitly racialized milieu (see Lewis, 2004).

The international volunteer teachers sampled here worked with development-oriented non-governmental sending organizations and the United States Peace Corps to teach in Namibian public schools for two-year, one-year, and two-month tenures. These volunteers spent considerable time lesson planning, marking, and instructing while in Namibia. They should not be confused with day-trippers on poverty tours who swoop into a school to deliver instruction while on safari (see for example Dobrovolsky, 2012, pp. 58–59). One volunteer, Olivia, provides us with an overview of a typical daily routine of these volunteers. She walks to school at 06:30 for classes which generally begin at 07:00. She teaches 2–3 classes in the morning, has a planning period, socializes with colleagues in the staff room, and then teaches three classes in the afternoon. Her day ends with after-school computer lessons for the school faculty. Teaching is integral to the volunteers' banal day-in-day-out routine. It is also how they measure their success and failure as development workers or 'helpers' in Namibia. It makes sense that teaching is a productive and prevalent theme throughout their personal blogs.

5. The cinematic pedagogies of international volunteer teachers

Cinematic pedagogies can manifest as actual classroom activities. However, here, I am more interested in cinematic pedagogy as the self-image of the underprepared teacher. The volunteer filters (and the blog reader is taught about) Namibian schooling through personal stories following familiar cinematic story arcs. Drawing on Mary Dalton's (2004, 2006) research into representations of teachers on the silver screen, the following sections review these all-too-familiar beats as they are written in the blogs. While Dalton's study is now more than a decade old, the films she analyzes such as *Dangerous Minds*, *Freedom Writers*, *Music of the Heart*, and *Dead Poets Society* remain stalwarts of the genre and continue to influence perceptions about teaching (Cann, 2015; Dahlgren, 2017; Hughey, 2014).

Even with good intentions, the transient underprepared teacher

who unleashes cinematic pedagogies is not well-positioned to make the kinds of changes which could bring greater equity to schooling—whether in U.S. “urban cores” or in rural Namibia. The following sections compare volunteers’ blogged discourse about good and bad teaching to the codes and tropes often deployed in Hollywood films. I argue throughout that the concept of cinematic pedagogies (both the blogged narratives as a discursive teaching machine and as dramatic classroom activities) helps researchers to understand how underprepared teachers approach their classroom activities and their narratives of self as maverick. While [Dahlgren \(2017\)](#) believes that the maverick in film is a “highly unrealistic” portrayal of teaching which equates hard work with “cartoonish antics,” this data suggests that the symbolic world of film is increasingly creating a new material reality (a la [Hall, 1997](#)). As underprepared teachers account for a greater percentage of the teaching force, what was once a highly unrealistic cartoon may become a prefigurative documentary.

5.1. *Introducing setting and characters*

In maverick teacher films, the school which serves as the backdrop is often understood to be “underperforming” or otherwise backwards and apathetic. The culture of learning is often one in which teacher characters drone on about niche minutia. This results in blank stares from the students, or a classroom so out-of-control that the maverick teacher fears physical danger. The volunteers’ discourses easily slide into these well-known stories. The Namibian classroom is described as a space of disinterested teachers and blank-eyed learners. While the volunteers are careful not to write-off the learners entirely (thus negating any chance at fulfilling the goals of the maverick), they do describe their new pupils as quiet, shy, and conditioned to never openly challenge authority figures. For example, Natalie writes:

One of the more frustrating parts of teaching that I’ve experienced is that the learners have a very submissive nature, yet often this leads to complete confusion and chaos between them and me. Sometimes I’ll explain an activity and ask if they understand, which they respond with a chorus of “Yes Miss,” and then I look around and see everyone is still staring at me with no idea what to do.

However, the learners are also portrayed as hard-working. A blog reader gets the sense that with the right maverick intervention, these children could indeed “make it.” Sofie, for example, describes her learners as such:

I’m extremely impressed with the maturity of the children. They cook, they clean, they do so much that I’m wondering what their parents are even around for. Their independence and self-reliance is visible in the classroom as well. They may not understand many of the words I say (apparently my accent is hard to understand) but they’re trying their best and come to class each day with more passion to learn than I see from a majority of my peers at school.

As with much of the blogged discourse reviewed here, my critique is not against the veracity of the bloggers’ claims. While some Namibian teachers believe learners in this generation are more unruly than past groups ([Amukugo, 2017](#), p. 104), when compared to American students (especially students in cinema), rural Namibian learners often appear quiet, calm, and outwardly well-behaved. These descriptions only become problematic when they construct a room full of youth who, until now, have been

waiting for a maverick who can show them how to reach their potential.

The volunteers also easily find ‘evidence’ to support Hollywood’s droning-on teacher character among their new colleagues. Teacher films, when coding bad teaching, spend, “an inordinate amount of time ... on the mundane details of the teachers’ basic administrative duties such as student attendance, tardiness ... Any attention to actual student learning is secondary in these film portrayals” ([Dahlgren, 2017](#), p. 70). The blogs—when describing Namibian colleagues’ classrooms follow this pattern. For example, Dan, highlights the prevalence of boring, rote memorization:

It is typical for a teacher to write the next batch of information from the syllabus on the chalkboard, which is called a summary, and the day’s lesson will be simply requiring the learners to copy it into their notebooks a teacher might not attend class if the summary is already up ... If a teacher speaks it is usually to repeat the words aloud and to occasionally ask, “Are we together?” which is Namlish [Namibian English] that translates to “Do you understand?” Even primary school learners have already mastered the art of nodding and saying yes in unison so that the teacher will continue.

The blogs present the American reader with a familiar scene: “schools ... driven by adults who do not care about students on a personal level but instead care only about measurable outcomes [and] bad teachers ... killing [learners’] spirits” ([Dalton, 2004](#), p. 70). Another volunteer, Liam, describes the teaching at his school as such:

Education here is ‘old school’. By and large students copy down sentences from blackboards and are blinded by an overemphasis of memorization rather than conceptualization etc. Corporal punishment is often a norm, though it is not a key factor of life at my school (thankfully). To me it seems that students are afraid of teachers. [punctuation in the original]

Here, the trope of the “bad teacher” as someone who is, typically “bored by students, afraid of students, or eager to dominate students” ([Dalton, 2004](#), p. 25) is ascribed to Liam’s colleagues and perhaps to Namibian teachers as a whole. Again, Liam may be partially empirically correct—indeed, researchers have also noted that teacher-centered classrooms are the norm in Namibia ([Awe & Kasanda, 2016](#); [Dunn, 2003](#); [O’Sullivan, 2004](#)). A report by UNICEF, for instance, found that teachers employ “poor blackboard technique,” including examples of teachers who face the chalkboard for the entire lesson, avoiding interaction with learners ([Ninnes, 2011](#), p. 12). However, by framing the narrative in this way Liam—and other volunteers—signpost a story with familiar beats which readers (who know how these stories go) expect to culminate in a maverick break-through. The empirical difference in teaching and learning styles feeds into pre-existing narratives made popular by teacher films, setting the scene for a familiar plot and cast of characters.

5.2. *The outsider*

Hollywood’s mavericks generally come from somewhere else. Drawing on a long history of the colonial impulse to save through teaching (e.g., [Heron, 2007](#)), the maverick narrative devalues already-existing practices within the host school. The outsider comes in to shake things up and bring new perspectives, but assumes that the school operates only with deficiency. The maverick sees “potential” within the underprivileged children, but has no

confidence that any of the local institutions or practices can help the students reach that potential. Only the outsider can do that!

International volunteer teachers are the ultimate outsider in a school. The volunteers legitimate this outsider positionality by suggesting they offer something different (and better?) than Namibian teachers. One volunteer, Chloe, ponders her strategy for success: "I believe that I have the enthusiasm and the creativity to bring new ideas and perspectives to the classroom and the ability to communicate with people of various cultures and ages." Cori Jakubiak (2016) has suggested that volunteer teachers often deploy a "pedagogy of enthusiasm" which is meant to remedy the supposedly stale learning environment described above. The pedagogy of enthusiasm is understood to be a social commodity that only the volunteer—an outsider not worn down by 'the system'—can provide. It is convenient that this commodity is both understood to be essential to student learning and also requires no training in classroom management.

Volunteers can also establish their outsider-credentials and reinforce the maverick end-goal of helping *their* students leave their communities by introducing learners to the world beyond the village. Chloe, at the end of her tenure, reflects on how she has successfully utilized her outsider pulpit:

one of my jobs would be to expose [learners] to the world to the best of my abilities through books, videos and images ... I showed them episodes of Planet Earth, the glossy photos of National Geographic and Google Maps of my home town. I could see the palpable excitement in their expressions when they saw the footage of Africa's Great Migration or images of the forests and mountains that surround my house. I wish I could have taken them outside their realities so that they could have seen these things with their own eyes. I wish I could have shown them what else is out there and that, if they work hard, they might even have the chance to discover it themselves.

Complete with a dash of neoliberal bootstraps-ethics and no small amount of narcissism to equate an American backyard to the Great Migration, the volunteers work hard to instil value to outsider-status. The dusty, rural villages which host the volunteers are positioned as quaint, but in desperate need of reform that most likely will not be driven from inside.

5.3. *Involved with learners on a personal level*

Maverick films code "good teaching" as necessarily deviant. The cinematic good teacher breaks away from the typical (disinterested) teacher-student relationship so prevalent in the lackluster school. They go the extra mile, break the norms, and are rewarded when they "reach" a particularly challenging student or class (Dalton, 2004, p. 31). The volunteers' blogs also describe this trope of deviance as the path to better teaching. Most often, this discourse takes the form of volunteers attempting to bring active or critical thinking to a desolate educational landscape.

One act of deviance is to break down classroom hierarchies. For example, Noah's first act in the classroom is to "re-arrang[e] the desks from the military-style rows they were in beforehand." Noah's strategy reveals one of the core contradictions of cinematic pedagogies: orderly desks are definitely a stalwart visual cue of "bad teaching" in Hollywood movies (Dalton, 2004, p. 66), but the fiction holds some truth as *trained* teachers are also moving away from row-desks (Dahlgren, 2017). Noah's new classroom design legitimately reflects standards in good teaching. However, if he does not properly scaffold this dramatic pedagogical change (which will be limited to his classroom only), it is likely to confuse and frustrate the majority of students who want to continue with

authoritarian, yet comfortable learning practices (Awe & Kasanda, 2016; Dunn, 2003; Gravett, 2004; but see also; O'Sullivan, 2006).

Befriending pupils is another deviant or abnormal strategy of maverick teachers. The volunteers write that they spend more informal time with learners than their Namibian colleagues do. Volunteers generally believe (probably correctly) that these one-on-one or small group hang outs and tutelage sessions are by far their most educationally impactful activity in Namibia. Volunteers describe non-instructional time spent with favourite learners:

One of the Grade 9 learners, Sam, comes over just about every night to watch the World Cup soccer games. (Olivia)

learners saw me with a camera and asked me to take pictures of them. Now they are always asking me to take pictures of them! I decided yesterday that I need to take more pictures. (Emma)

the kids at the neighboring primary school ... write me letters and linger around my house after school hoping that [I] will show up and give them a piece of candy. (Chloe)

The volunteers' personal involvement with learners, including inviting them into their homes and breaking social norms around teacher-learner social distance, was probably warmly received and genuinely appreciated on all sides. However, like cinematic maverick teachers, the volunteers' care should not be interpreted unproblematically; it operates within the structures of colonialism and racism, that mediate such interactions both in Africa and beyond (Matias & Zembylas, 2014). Conran (2011) argues that transnational care often culminates in the sentimental, without deeper interrogation of inequality. Within teaching in particular, teachers are "swayed by romanticized notions of 'good whites' ... and will become heroic liberal warriors who will save students of Color from failing" (Aronson, 2017, p. 37). Within these conditions of individualist compassion (see Berlant, 2004), "the relationship between whites and people of color cannot be divorced from colonial racism, the historically repeated servant/served correlation seen in the myriad of racial and patriarchal dynamics" (Matias, 2016, p. 227). However, the relationships between volunteers and individual students are rarely problematized in the blogs. Rather than learning about systemic inequality from the students they grow close to, the volunteers are more likely to individualize their teaching mission, giving up on the majority of students' success or structural change in order to help a few particularly charismatic individuals.

5.4. *Tension with 'the system'*

Mavericks in film often reinforce their solidarity with students and commitment to their unorthodox curriculum by quarrelling with a rigid and petty administrator or head teacher character. The maverick is a loose cannon who may go so far as to lose their job after feuding with a supervisor. Dan demonstrates how volunteers stage narrative tension in their blogs when describing his bold, unsanctioned sex education lesson involving condom demonstrations: "I was more than a little nervous about putting on these demonstrations ... uncertain [of] how the other teachers would react if they got word of my presentations."

Dan delivers his lessons, and even though a Namibian teacher who shares his classroom seemed to approve, Dan still continues to frame the lesson as a potential example of rogue transgression, writing:

We'll see during Wednesday's staff meeting if I get chastised for transgressing some rules of propriety, but I seriously doubt it. And even if I do, as it stands now close to 250 young Namibian

adults know, for certain, a skill that could save their lives. If it's not in the syllabus it should be.

This transgression is perhaps undercut since the Namibian Life Skills syllabus does require teachers to, “discuss different contraceptives to prevent pregnancy as well as STIs [and] explain correct condom and femdom use” (NIED, 2015, p. 10) and discussion of HIV prevention is a cross-curricular topic. However, Dan's self-imposed ignorance is required if he is to narrate the excitement of implementing a maverick curriculum.

Another example, which actually results in tension, comes from Hailey. With her learners at an away sporting tournament, Hailey witnesses a male teacher from another school beating her learners for misbehaving. Corporal punishment in schools is illegal in Namibia, but still practiced in some regions (see Payet & Franchi, 2008 for a nuanced discussion of corporal punishment in southern Africa). Hailey approaches the offending teacher, narrating the account as follows:

I told him that he was wrong and that he had no right to beat on a child, especially for something so little as unintentionally disturbing an informal athletics meet. Within 30 seconds of voicing my opinions more than 4 men descended on me like rabid dogs shouting that he was within his rights to do what he did; that our learners were misbehaving since the morning and showing disrespect ... that it was my fault this happened since I did nothing to control my “out of control learners” ... Also among their flawlessly sound arguments was the fact that this is not my culture so I have no say and if I don't like it I should just go home, and that I am a woman so should sit down and shut up.

Here, Hailey clearly sees herself as a maverick, standing up against an antiquated form of discipline. While Hailey is legally correct, she is told that she is culturally wrong and that she does not understand how things are done in this space. In addition to positioning herself as an outsider and caring white teacher, she establishes her willingness to advocate—perhaps even risk bodily harm—for her learners. While Hailey is “furious” with the main antagonist, she describes being even angrier at, “the teachers who nodded every time I said something and who gave me encouraging smiles but didn't have the stones to stand with me. Not causing a stir is the name of the game here ... and the stir I was whipping up no one wanted a hand in. Let the little white girl tough it out; better her than me.” The maverick must always “cause a stir” while supposedly apathetic Black educators stand by.

Indeed, it is essential for teachers to advocate for students within structures that oppress them. As in the movies, the maverick's “willingness to challenge the system to protect his students could be seen as an admirable quality of a leader ... [but also] could have provided leadership ... through negotiation” (Chennault, 2006, p. 60). The maverick effectively “eliminate[s] the possibility of dialogue between [themselves] and the representatives of educational bureaucracy” (Dalton, 2004, p. 40). The volunteer tends to become isolated, misaligned with the culture of schooling practiced in a particular location, reducing their ability to generate any long term change (Stainton, 2017).

5.5. Personalized curriculum

While not exactly students of “culturally relevant pedagogy” (a lá Ladson-Billings, 1995), maverick teachers in film set out to revise what they understand to be an outdated curriculum. This is sometimes portrayed with a quintessential dumping of textbooks into trash cans and eliminating hierarchical classroom structures.

While such actions might indeed refresh outdated and disengaged pedagogies, the maverick character becomes the sole arbiter of what counts as useful lessons and is rarely shown scaffolding new classroom relationships which might come as a shock to students used to rote education (as in the desk example above).

Dramatic “movie moment” curricular activities are peppered throughout the blogs. Without rigorous assessment of these activities (and more tightly defined activity objectives), it is impossible to declare that they are always “ineffective.” However, it seems reasonable to suggest that such activities are likely more cinematic than effective, as they emerge from the teacher's (Hollywood-informed) imagination rather than careful study of learner needs. Given the standardized test scores of the volunteers' pupils (see below), one could easily conclude that these cinematic pedagogies are definitely ineffective at preparing the learners to succeed in the national exams, the primary enabler of educational mobility in Namibia.

One seemingly fail-safe tactic of Hollywood teachers is bribery. Rowdy or apathetic students in film are bribed with everything from candy to field trips (Cann, 2015, p. 297). Olivia—and many other volunteers—describe how this strategy also works in their Namibian classrooms:

The last way I have found success is candy! Some things do not change, no matter where you are. Kids love sweets. I bought a few bags of candy and gave them out to learners who volunteers [sic.] to give answers to some activities we worked on. This exponentially increased the number of volunteers for answers ... shocking! [ellipsis in the original, indicating sarcasm].

Dan uses a reverse-bribery method by sponsoring an extracurricular club called “Voice of Change” which fines members when they are caught speaking in Oshiwambo, their mother-tongue (and not English), during school. This particular cinematic pedagogy is reminiscent of Hollywood films such as *The Substitute* in which former military personnel implement harsh rules to motivate students (Cann, 2015). It is also—perhaps unsurprisingly—a tactic right out of the colonial education playbook (Thiong'o, 1994, p. 111).

Another component of the personalized curriculum is what Dahlgren calls “cartoonish antics.” In the movies, when all seems lost, the maverick teacher deploys an unconventional pedagogy like karate or sing-offs to connect with and inspire the students. Such scenes feature in the rising action of teacher films (sometimes in montage), portraying teaching and learning as a cartooned snapshot rather than a craft requiring years of honing and rehearsal. Volunteers begin to deploy these “cartoonish antics” almost immediately in an effort to distinguish themselves from the normal operations of the school.

For example, Emma describes her learners' reaction to a puzzle:

The scene of [the learners] wanting to learn and put the puzzle together really made all the worry and stress and pain I was feeling just melt away. I knew then that what I am doing here is going to make a difference. Even if it is as small as teaching these children how to put together a puzzle. I have taught them something they have never learned before and will use for the rest of their lives

There's nothing wrong with puzzles. However, Emma's twin premises—that the students would never have encountered a puzzle and that it is useful for their lives—seem questionable. When Emma mentions the puzzle earlier in her blog, she describes it as an incentiviser. However, once she sees how it grips some of her learners, the puzzle is imbued with pedagogical magic, though

the educational rationale underpinning this life-changing puzzle is never fully elaborated.

Even more cartoonish is volunteers' use of American pop music. While virtually all the volunteers played music aloud in class, hoping that it would improve English language acquisition, some volunteers also performed their own originals. Lauren, for example, made a verb rap:

My action verb rap (to the tune of "Ice Ice, Baby" ... classic) was a big hit in my English class this week. They begged me to do it at the end of every lesson, and I had to ask them to stop singing the chorus in class because they WOULDNT STOP.

Natalie also created a "little chant/song about adverbs." During this lesson,

I asked the learners to give me some examples of similes and one of the boys said "beautiful like diamonds in the sky." If you aren't up on pop culture, that is the main lyric of Rihanna's hit song Diamonds. I was very pleased with this example so I quickly sang that line of the song. The kids erupted with laughter and started begging me to sing and dance for them. I finally had to quiet them down and tell them that this was not a circus but this week we are starting a unit on music, so I doubt I'm going to be able to get through it without giving them a little bit of entertainment.

We can never know whether these were effective language learning techniques, but it is important to remember that many Namibian learners struggle with American accents, especially when the speaker is speaking quickly, like in a rap. As the volunteer Liam reminds us, language barriers limit even the most basic communications: "It's clear that most of the people in my village usually understand about 70–80% of what I say (at best) and even if they clearly have no idea what I am saying they won't ask me to repeat or clarify ... the same goes for my students, which poses an even greater challenge." More anecdotally, during recent fieldwork in Northern Namibia, my primary research assistant confessed that he could not understand the American pop music I played while driving to research sites. We might call into question the seriousness of these musical activities. However, the motif of a maverick teacher using (contemporary) music to reach and teach is well-worn territory in teacher films, and thus a staple for cinematic pedagogies (Dalton, 2004, Chapter 3).

6. There aren't always happy endings in real life

In maverick teacher films, the teacher always wins. Their methods prove successful and the naysaying principals and colleagues are put in their place. A cinematic justice is served—one group of underprivileged students is able to rise above their circumstance thanks to intervention by the (often white) savior. Structural barriers and rigged exam structures (Katz, 2004), prove no match for the sheer determination and genuine passion of the underprepared maverick.

In reality—of course—things don't always turn out like the movies. Many volunteers wrote about their frustrations in the classroom, and many of these narrative arcs were never resolved. Like most underprepared teachers, Noah realizes quickly that the problems of an under-resourced school cannot be overcome by creativity alone:

Teaching is a lot harder than expected, and it's especially tricky to take arts lessons with no coloured pencils or PE lessons with no balls. Our imagination has certainly been put to the test, and

long hours have been spent at the dining table trying to think up ideas for lessons. It is getting easier with more practice however, but it's a steep learning curve.

Other volunteers write about failed lessons.

Frustration is an ugly thing. It sneaks up on you, you don't know when you'll get it or exactly why, but when it occurs, it's not pretty ... The projector didn't work when I wanted to display my PowerPoint. The students failed to understand anything I said. Even though I was speaking two words per minute, drawing pictures and using charades, they failed to understand. Did I mention there were 51 students? 15 functioning computers? With all of this occurring in a space capable of handling about 25 students maximum. (Sofie)

This scenario would even be challenging for experienced teachers who could easily communicate with their students. The Oshiwambo-deficient underprepared volunteer faces an even greater challenge. While in teacher films, these issues would be remedied in subsequent scenes, the blogs provide readers with less narrative closure. The problems prove to be beyond the maverick teacher's capabilities.

Nowhere are the limits of underprepared teachers more evident than the national exams which quantitatively rank each learner and teacher. Importantly, the volunteers (and underprepared teachers generally) are never held to account for their learners' exam scores. There are no negative repercussions if the majority of their class fails. That being said, the volunteers do genuinely want their learners to succeed. After some test preparation activities, Chloe worries about the impending disaster:

As I was marking papers, I could not help but feel frustration that all the hours of lesson planning, tutoring students after school and engaging them in English conversations were pointless. Over the course of two terms, their writing has hardly improved and they are still far from gaining fluency in English. I began to face the unsettling reality that some learners would fail their exams and that, next year, they would have to repeat grade eight all over again. I felt completely disheartened and I prepared myself for the worst, expecting that the lessons I had done with my students had fluttered into one ear and out the other.

Chloe is later heartbroken to learn that her favourite student fails the national exams. Her mentorship may have been valuable in some respects, but she admits it was not enough to help disadvantaged rural students pass the notoriously difficult Cambridge exams. The exam results also force Natalie into self-reflection:

I felt confident that I would be able to see significant improvements in my learners [*sic*] English ... I wouldn't say that they are not improving but it's much less obvious than I had hoped. I just finished marking my term 2 exams and some have improved, some have stayed the same, and some did worse, pretty much the same as most classes worldwide. But the longer you are here, the more you see that the issues and limitations facing these children are deep rooted, structural problems that no one volunteer can change in a year.

Here, Natalie astutely captures the problems with cinematic pedagogies. The maverick teacher swoops in with confidence but the realization that no single individual can—outside of fiction—reverse the structural assault proves overwhelming and expectations must be re-adjusted. However, once the self-image as

maverick disintegrates, the underprepared teacher has little to cling to. Once Grace loses her maverick self-identity, she begins to become critical of underprepared teaching in the neoliberal era:

Part of [the] deal with the Ministry [of Education] is that a volunteer should not be taking a position away from another teacher, we are supposed to be placed in schools where there is a position that cannot be filled. With five teachers having to be transferred [from my school] ... that means that one teacher that should be staying here will not be, because of me. A teacher who can't reach her students. So again I ask, why am I here?

This is a poignant critique which reminds us that underprepared teachers—even if they draw on cinematic pedagogies—are not always living in a fantasy world. Former participants of volunteer-based educational development (Heron, 2007; Schwarz, 2018), the Peace Corps (Schein, 2015, p. 1130), and Teach for America (Cann, 2015, p. 311) have become some of these organizations' fiercest critics.

7. Conclusion

It reminds me of some of the inspirational teacher movies that are out there ... Dangerous Minds, Freedom Writers, the one with Mr. Vincente in which his AP class in an inner-city school beats all of the odds to get a top score. And I want to be that teacher. Teaching demands that you look beyond the surface and the everyday. It isn't easy when you are faced with disrespect, classroom management issues, etc. But it is our job to look beyond this. (Naomi)

Naomi was one of the most theoretically-informed volunteers. She was conversant in Freirean concepts and her blog posts included references to anti-racist and critical educators and authors. However, as the epigraph demonstrates, *even her* self-image was influenced by the teacher movies which have been so-critiqued in the academic, and increasingly, popular literature. The ubiquity of cinematic pedagogies should not be underestimated.

This paper contributes to a burgeoning scholarship on underprepared teachers by exploring this narrative parallel between Hollywood teachers and international volunteers. I argue that underprepared teachers draw upon pop-culture maverick teacher movies in lieu of any teacher education. The all-too-rehearsed roles of the white savior maverick (though the volunteers would bristle at this classification) and the poor Black (African) student easily lead underprepared teachers toward familiar Hollywood-influenced discursive frameworks which, as Dalton puts it, restrict structural change and also advocate for questionable learning practices.

The implications of my argument potentially reach far beyond Namibia and international volunteering. Most underprepared teachers do not travel halfway around the world to work in a foreign school system. Yet, the general pattern of deploying short-term contracts, working in under-resourced schools, and increasing the liminality of teaching as a profession seems to align across space. Underprepared teachers are already the backbone of some school districts in the United States, and neoliberal trends only exacerbate the old myth that poor students do not require qualified educators. Generally, these underprepared teachers are less effective in the classroom than trained teachers (Heilig, Cole, & Springel, 2011), leading some commentators to understand their presence as educational violence (Lapayese, Aldana, & Lara, 2014; Lefebvre & Thomas, 2017). Underprepared teachers are notoriously difficult to access for research—by definition, they are not in teacher

education and domestic teacher placement corps may not welcome researchers (Thomas & Lefebvre, 2017). The use of blogs and other social media could provide a much-needed window into underprepared teachers' understandings and intuitions. Future scholarship should continue to study the factors which motivate these underprepared teachers' classroom practices and self-identities in order to better conceptualize, critique, and maybe even learn from (see Labaree, 2010) their cinematic pedagogies as they become an ever-increasing presence in global education.

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