<u>DRAFT</u>

Signature Pedagogies for Educators Using Films: An Example from Singapore

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Abstract

This article discusses the application of Shulman's (2005) 'signature pedagogies' through the utilisation of films for pre-service teachers and school leaders in Singapore. Using the films *Dead Poets Society* and *Ahead of the Class*, this article explains how these films facilitated the participants' engagement with the surface, deep and implicit structures of education. In the process, they applied critical thinking by arriving at criteria-based and context-appropriate judgements reflectively. The research findings reveal two broad themes. First, the educators were cognisant of the key issues, opportunities, constraints and obstacles in teaching and school leadership. Secondly, they appreciated the importance of adopting situated teaching and leadership approaches to cater to the needs of various educational stakeholders. This study highlights critical thinking as a socio-cultural practice where the educators (re)interpreted the films through their cultural lenses and drew upon local resources and logics to deal with the challenges in the school contexts.

Introduction

Although the utilisation of films as a teaching tool in educational institutions is not new (e.g. see Champoux, 2007; Donaghy, 2014; Koch & Dollarhide, 2000; Nugent & Shaunessy, 2003; Rice, 2013; Rorrer & Furr, 2009; Russell, 2009; Wolpert-Gawron, 2015), it is not widely used in teacher education and school leadership training. In Singapore, teaching using video clips is increasingly common in schools and universities (Choo, 2006; Hairon & Tan, 2006; Istanto, 2009; Liao, 2012; National Institute of Education, n.d.; Tan, 2007a; Teng, 2016,). Although teacher educators in Singapore are encouraged to and have gradually incorporated multi-media resources into their teaching (Chai, Koh, Tsai & Tan, 2011; Koh & Chai, 2015; Koh, Chai & Tsai, 2010), the use of popular films remains under-explored. A main challenge faced by teacher educators lies in selecting films that are not only relevant to the subject matter they are teaching but also appropriate to the local settings. It needs to be pointed out that almost all well-known movies on education are produced in Anglophone countries where the protagonists and storylines in the films are invariably situated in Western contexts. This raises the question of the value and significance of the issues presented in these films for educators in non-Western environments.

This article examines how pre-service teachers and school leaders in Singapore (re)interpreted films that were produced in the West and located the learning points within their historical, social and cultural realities. The research data were derived from the educators' reflective essays for two courses offered at a university in Singapore. The article is structured as follows: an introduction to the theoretical framework that underpins the pedagogy of using film, and a discussion of the research method, findings and implications.

Signature Pedagogies, Critical Thinking and Films

The teaching method of using films is situated within Shulman (2005)'s concept of *signature pedagogies*. Shulman defines these pedagogies as "the types of teaching that organise the fundamental ways in which future practitioners are educated for their new professions" (p. 52). Novices are often instructed in critical aspects of the three fundamental dimensions of professional work – to think, to perform, and to act with integrity. Shulman points out that a signature pedagogy comprises three dimensions: surface structure, deep structure, and implicit structure. Surface structure consists of concrete, operational acts of teaching and learning, of showing and demonstrating, of questioning and answering, of interacting and withholding, of approaching and withdrawing. Deep structure goes beyond surface structure by comprising a set of assumptions about how best to impart a certain body of knowledge and know-how. Finally, implicit structure underlines the moral dimension of teaching by focussing on a set of beliefs about professional attitudes, values, and dispositions. These three dimensions represent three important aspects of professional competence – intellectual, technical, and moral – that facilitate student learning of professionally valued understandings, skills, and dispositions.

Shulman contends that a sound professional pedagogy must seek a balance of all three dimensions of practice. In addition to imparting intellectual and technical knowledge, teachers have the moral responsibility to prepare students to participate fully in political, civic, and economic life in the contemporary society (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Signature pedagogies, according to Shulman, are effective in helping teacher training institutions to design and implement programmes that answer these two fundamental questions: "What are the ways of educating teachers that are the most profound and intentionally deep ways? What would we want to expect from the person/persons to whom we would entrust the responsibility for designing, enacting, and redesigning?" (Falk, 2006, p. 74).

Shulman's (2005) signature pedagogies implies that teacher education and leadership programmes should provide avenues for educators to think critically about the intellectual, technical, and moral aspects of professional competence before they start their teaching or school leadership careers. By 'thinking critically', this study follows Lipman (2007) in understanding critical thinking as a form of thinking that "facilitates judgement because it relies on criteria, is self-correcting and is sensitive to context" (p. 428). The 'judgement' is located within socio-cultural realities and is demonstrated through decisions, solutions to actual or theoretical problems, and evaluations of performances etc. (Lipman, 2007; Tan, 2017a, b). Lipman (2007) adds that the judgement, in order to be 'critical', needs to fulfil three conditions. First, critical thinking relies on criteria or standards such as shared values (e.g. ideals, purposes, goals, aims, objectives) and conventions (e.g. norms, regularities, uniformities, precedents, traditions). Secondly, critical thinking is self-correcting in the sense that the thinker constantly reflects or looks back on one's thought process to discover one's own weaknesses and rectify what is at fault in the process. Examples of associated behaviours of self-correction are clarifying vague expressions in discourses, demanding reasons and criteria, and not taking some matters for granted (Lipman, 2007). Thirdly, critical thinking is sensitive to the context where the thinker is able to differentiate among nuances of meaning stemming from different perspectives or cultural differences, and identify the discrepancies between present situation and seemingly similar past situations.

With reference to schooling, critical thinking is particularly essential for novices who have little or no experience in teaching or leadership. Pre-service teachers need to acquire the habit of reflecting and critiquing their personal beliefs, passions, values, images, and prejudices by asking questions about the students, curriculum, institutional setting, and the larger social role of schools (Liston & Zeichner, 1990). Likewise, first-time school leaders would benefit from clarifying and ascertaining their conceptions of a 'good principal' and their leadership approaches before they embark on their journey in managing a department or school (Ng, 2016).

An example of signature pedagogies is one that capitalises on popular films to direct the viewers' attention to their own practices, attitudes, values, assumptions and dispositions. Films can serve as a trigger for educators to think critically on an educational issue of concern, ponder on the meanings and implications for themselves, and change or modify their values, beliefs and actions (Brookfield, 1995; Calderhead 1993; Champoux, 2007; Donaghy, 2014; Koch & Dollarhide, 2000; Nugent & Shaunessy, 2003; Rice, 2013; Rorrer & Furr, 2009; Russell, 2009; Tan, 2006, 2007a, b; Thiel, 1999; Wolpert-Gawron, 2015). The mass appeal of movies means that they can effectively engage the audience and convey complex problems, key message, and ethical dilemmas in complete communicative situations (Guest, 1997; Lonergan, 1994; Porter, 2004). The use of film illustrates Shulman's (2005) signature pedagogy as it prompts the viewer to interrogate the surface, deep and implicit structures of education within the socio-cultural realities one resides. As a film is essentially a story that is presented through moving images, surface structure in the form of concrete, operational acts of teaching and learning is visibly and powerfully portrayed. Teachers can readily identify themselves with scenes of classroom teaching and interactions with students in films such as *Lean on Me* and *Music of the Heart*.

Beyond surface structure, films also bring to the fore considerations and presuppositions that are relevant to deep and implicit structures. For instance, the film *Freedom Writers* on the experiences of a high-achieving White teacher Erin Gruwell teaching impoverished and predominantly non-White students in the inner city of Los Angeles is effective in surfacing issues related to deep structure such as the teacher's own assumptions about the conception of a 'good' student, race relations, and prevailing educational inequalities. Likewise, a film such as *The Class* which is based on a semi-biographical novel by a French teacher Francois Begaudeau and showcases his care for and confrontation with students foregrounds the educator's personal values, attitudes, and dispositions. Also, alerting the viewers to deep and implicit structure is the tendency of some films to propagate, advertently or inadvertently, widely-held (mis)conceptions of teachers and school leaders (Dalton, 1995, 1999; de Vries, 2004; Long, 1996; Swetnam, 1992). An example is the 'great-teacher myth' or 'great-principal myth' in movies such as *Dangerous Minds*, *Stand and Deliver,* and *The Principal* – the notion that all the ideas and hopes a culture has about teachers/principals reside in one dynamic character (Farhi, 1999; Gunderson & Haas, 1987; Heilman, 1991). It is therefore salient for educators to reflect on and challenge the misconceptions and the underlying presuppositions concerning the role of teachers, teaching, and schooling through film-watching.

It needs to be noted that Shulman's (2005) aim is to expound and theorise different pedagogic approaches in different disciplines, especially those relating to the education of professionals. According to him, the signature pedagogy for training lawyers, for example, is very different to that for medical practitioners. But his concept of signature pedagogy has the potential to be used as a tool for analysing a particular pedagogic strategy or innovation. In particular, the three dimensions of signature pedagogies – surface structure, deep structure, and implicit structure – serve as a useful guide for teacher trainers in promoting critical thinking in pre-service teachers and school leaders. In the case of Singapore, the signature pedagogies for training teachers and school leaders in Singapore are generally learner-centred with teaching approaches such as cooperative learning, analysis of case studies, essay-writing and blended learning. But what remains under-explored is the use of films. The use of films has the potential to complement the existing teaching methods for the advancement of critical thinking such as the case study approach where participants analyse the case study that is presented in a film. Hence this article attempts to expand the existing repertoire of signature pedagogies through films that provide greater opportunities for critical reflection.

Method

The study adopts a case study approach that seeks to analyse, in an in-depth manner, a limited number of subjects in a case in question (Stake, 1995). Two case studies in the form of two cohorts (a total of 55 students) taking two courses offered at a university in Singapore were chosen. A major learning outcome for both courses is the development of reflective practitioners through watching and reflecting on films. The focus on reflection in these courses supports the overall aim of teacher education and leadership training in Singapore to promote praxis where theory and application are integrated. Two criteria guided the selection of films for both courses: the films should spotlight on real-world concerns, moral dilemmas and/or perplexing problems faced by educators; and the issues raised in the films should be sufficiently open-ended, complex and controversial to allow for more than one interpretation, perspective and resolution. The criteria ensure that the films do not present a simplistic 'feel good' plot and perpetuate the 'great-teacher myth' or 'great-principal myth', highlighting instead the frailty, weakness, struggles and mistakes committed by the protagonist.

The two cohorts were selected on the basis that they were taught by the same tutor who aimed to advance critical thinking through film-watching, class sharing and individual essay writing. The first course (25 students) was taken by a group of pre-service teachers who were mostly fresh graduates from the university. The second course (30 students) was designed for a group of school leaders (comprising principals, vice-principals and Heads of Departments) from various schools in Singapore. For both courses, the participants watched a select score of films that covered varied educational issues. Thereafter, the participants engaged in class discussions, facilitated by the tutor, where they linked the core issues raised in the films to specific theories or concepts. The films and class discussions provided the necessary theoretical understanding and initial thoughts on the films for the participants to write their individual reflective essays. Two specific questions guided the educators in writing their reflective essays: (a) "What are some educational issues mentioned or alluded to in the film that concern you as an educator?" and (b) "How would you respond to the educational issues discussed in (a)?"

In terms of the data analysis process, the first stage involved coding the data sources from the reflective essays to identify initial patterns and themes. The codes generated at this stage served as preliminary codes that were refined and modified iteratively. The data were further coded for categories and themes as guided by the research focus on whether and how films facilitated the participants' critical engagement with the surface, deep and implicit structures of education and construction of criteria-based and context-appropriate judgements. Due to space constraint, this article shall only present the research findings related to two films: *Dead Poets Society* for the pre-service teachers and *Ahead of the Class* for the school leaders. These two films are representative of the type of films shown to the participants based on their respective profiles and needs: *Dead Poets Society* centers on the aspirations and struggles of an idealistic beginning teacher whereas *Ahead of the Class* narrates the changes made and obstacles faced by a school leader who was tasked to turn a failing school around. The next section elaborates on each film and the corresponding research findings.

The Film *Dead Poets Society*

Dead Poets Society is about English teacher John Keating who newly joined Welton Academy, an exclusive and traditional school for boys. Through his unconventional teaching methods, he inspired his students to break free from the imposition of societal logics and expectations. However, his liberating personal philosophy and novel pedagogies clashed with the conservative school management and parents who blamed him for contributing indirectly to the death of one of his students. The pre-service teachers were shown the defining segments of the film, including the scene where Mr Keating told the students to rip off their textbooks and appreciate poetry for its intrinsic value. This film is ideal in helping participants to understand the philosophical concepts of *romanticism* and

realism. Romanticiam posits education as the highest good where the individual's goals are self-discovery and self-realisation (Beiser, 1998). Such an education aspires to develop human powers through reason and emotion by nurtures individuality and the pursuit of one's vision. While romanticism emphasises individuality, originality, imagination, emotional expression, freedom and idealism, realism underscores reality, objectivity, detachment, accurate observation and rejection of the impractical and visionary (Baker & Kemper, 2004). Mr Keating exemplified the romantic who exhorted his students to be in charge of their own lives, realise their dreams and live life with no regrets (e.g., "carpe diem, seize the day boys, make your lives extraordinary"). He inspired his students and set an example for them (e.g., "You can call me Mr Keating. Or, …Oh Captain, My Captain"), and spurred them on to appreciate the arts and life (e.g., "We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race, and the human race is filled with passion").

A content analysis of the reflective essays reveals two broad themes: the pre-service teachers highlighted the opportunities and obstacles they may face when they started their teaching career; and the importance of integrating aspects of realism and romanticism in their teaching through context-appropriate instructional goals, methods and resources.

(1) *The opportunities and obstacles the pre-service teachers may face when they start their teaching career*

Many of the pre-service teachers shared that they were inspired by Mr Keating's passion to teach and his employment of innovative teaching methods. As noted by one participant:

> Rather than teaching students how to pass the next test or memorise a textbook full of information, we should facilitate their development as life-long learners and independent creative thinkers. … Instead of focussing only on the short-term development of our students, we should consider our duty to plant seeds of creativity in our students in order to aid them in their personal development.

However, the pre-service teachers faced a dilemma in aspiring to be a Mr Keating on the one hand, and being constrained by societal norms and pressures on the other. They felt a tension between achieving the romantic goal of promoting the arts and individual creativity on the one hand, and the realist goal of championing the sciences and utilitarian considerations on the other. One participant described it this way:

> I felt that this reflected the dilemma that we face in schools and our society in general today. We want creative thinkers and learners, we encourage the flourishing of arts, yet all this is towards accomplishing a pragmatic goal – keeping up with new demands of a knowledge-based economy. Sciences still remain a top priority…

Others lamented about how a romantic education would not work in their socio-cultural context due to the predominant realist approach towards education in Singapore. Below is an example:

> In the Singapore context… I feel that we demonstrate too little of a romantic education. Much of our teachings are still based on classical methods. Even though there is great talk about enhancing creativity through teaching, and using creative methods to teach, the truth remains that the education style remains traditional.

The pre-service teachers also commented on the obstacles they may face from the different stakeholders of education. Linking Welton Academy to the elite schools in Singapore, they noted that Mr Keating would face similar resistance in the local context. Factors highlighted by the participants included institutionalised thoughts and politics, and 'tried and tested' teaching methods and academ-

ic standing. Others also drew the parallel between Neil's strict, conservative, and ambitious father and the typical parent in Singapore:

> Just like Neil's father objected to his son's dream of becoming an actor, we will meet many parents who want their children to live their dreams of becoming a doctor, lawyer or accountant. As teachers, we need to handle such situations with tact.

(2) The need to integrate elements of realism and romanticism in their teaching through context-appropriate instructional goals, methods and resources

The participants' realisation about the difficulties in subscribing to a romantic approach to teaching did not dampen their desire to foster creativity and self-fulfilment in students. Instead of embracing romanticism in total, the pre-service teachers expressed their desire to integrate elements of romanticism and realism. One participant wrote:

> I support the fundamental of having to develop human powers but I feel that education should not emphasise too much on developing one's individuality. … we may have to conform to societal demands at times. … we must think whether the action is beneficial to others and ourselves.

In terms of instructional methods, the pre-service teachers suggested using a variety of practical teaching strategies. These included inviting guest speakers to class, incorporating more history and background of the great thinkers behind the theorems and theories that were taught in school, providing more reflection time at the end of topics, planning more excursions outside school, and introducing more projects that allow students to express themselves. A number of the participants also mentioned the necessity to work closely with the other educational stakeholders and rely on resources such as the official teacher's guide to do what was best for the students. This point was in response to the suicide of Neil where Mr Keating was perceived to have failed to communicate effectively with Neil's family and the school management. They valued the importance of the teacher communicating with and managing the expectations of the stakeholders in the system confidently. A representative comment is as follows:

> Mr Keating should learn how to network with his fellow colleagues… . It is in the best interests that Mr Keating also learns parental counselling… check out the school's website on their missions and values, the culture and standing in the district. … . Look at the schoolteachers' guide and MOE [Ministry of Education] guidelines so that you know how to stretch the limits of your rights.

Overall, the pre-service teachers were cognisant of the opportunities to inspire their students through the utilization of creative teaching approaches. At the same time, they were aware of the potential pitfalls in trying to be a Mr Keating in the Singapore context where more conservative teaching philosophy and practices prevailed. Responding to the challenges they have identified, they suggested incorporating context-appropriate pedagogies into classroom teaching and maintaining good relationships with educational stakeholders.

The Film *Ahead of the Class*

Ahead of the Class is about the real-life story of Marie Stubbs who was the headmistress of a failing school (St George's School) in London in 2000. The film documented Stubbs' attempts to turn the school around by enacting a flurry of changes within a short time. Her personal philosophy

was summed up in her words: "Every child is valuable." But not all her strategies worked. Her business-like approach, high expectations for the teachers, and major reforms in the school placed immense stress on the over-worked and resentful teachers, leading to mass teacher resignation and even complaints to the national newspapers about her authoritarian leadership style. At one point when Stubbs was talking to the teachers, one teacher retorted: "Sorry, have you finished? Because we have many lesson plans to write." Aware of the resistance from the teachers, Stubbs told her vice-principal in despair: "I've rattled their cages a bit too hard? But we don't have the time!"

To ground the discussion and reflection in a specific educational theory, the class participants were introduced to the writings of Jürgen Habermas on school leadership (Hairon & Tan, 2008). Briefly, Habermas (1995) conceptualises society as constituted at two levels – the lifeworld and system. The lifeworld refers to preconscious and taken-for-granted presuppositions, understandings and perceptual filters that determine how people experience reality. The lifeworld, however, has become 'colonised' by the system where the system imperatives of money and power have invaded the lifeworld and dominated people's behaviour, morality and rationality. Such colonisation of the lifeworld leads to alienation and loss of meaning for the educators, thereby disrupting the successful functioning of the system. To preserve the lifeworld, Habermas calls for communicative action where human agents enter into rationally mutual understanding to reach consensual actions. This means that school leaders need to provide spaces where the voices of teachers are heard and negotiated agreements are reached.

A content analysis of the reflective essays reveals two broad themes: the participants identified with the efforts and struggles of the school leader who desires to improve a school; and stressed the need for the school leader to empathise and collaborate with the teachers.

(1) The efforts and struggles of a school leader who desires to improve the school

The participants were drawn to the charismatic Ms Stubbs and admired her wish to turn the failing school around. They resonated with Stubbs' leadership philosophy to do what was best for the students and her passion to effect positive changes in the school. Highlighting Stubbs' unwavering commitment to her students, one principal praised the actions of Stubbs:

> Reinforce good values that students can pursue. Like in the case of Marie Stubbs who invited some students to volunteer to replant the memorial garden so as to make it beautiful and worthy of being a centre piece of the school and to dignify the efforts and contribution of the former Principal who lost his life in trying to provide a better education for the students.

The school leaders also identified with the pressure felt by Stubbs to transform the school in the shortest time possible so as to meet the state standards. Ng (2016), in a study of school leaders in Singapore, observes that Singapore principals face the constant pressure of having to perform in a result-oriented, competitive and pragmatic environment. Like the schools in the UK, schools in Singapore have to undergo external valuation by the School Appraisal Branch (MOE, 2016). A school leader noted:

> In addition, I too felt that I was sent to the present school on a mission, to improve its standing, as Stubbs was sent to St George's school, to ensure that it was taken off Special Measures. … Interestingly, while Stubbs had to contend with the Ofsted inspection, I have to face a team of assessors from the School Appraisal Branch (SAB) in July this year.

The school leaders also shared that they were able to relate to Stubbs' experiences and stress in attempting to improve the school's standard. They wrote in their reflective essays about the challenges and frustrations they experienced that were vividly portrayed in the film. The participants were also forthright in noting that they faced similar resistance from some teachers and even committed the same mistakes as Ms Stubbs. Watching the film directed them to self-correction as they looked back on their own practices to discover one's own weaknesses and rectify what was at fault in the process. In particular, some realised that they, like Stubbs, had pushed for changes in their schools without sufficiently considering the teachers' feelings and obtaining buy-in from them. Applying Habermas' (1995) concept of 'lifeworld', a school leader noted:

> As I reflect, I can see that I too have by-passed my own teachers lifeworld and beliefs and have implemented a number of initiatives without sufficient dialogue of the right nature. Instead of considering the lifeworld of my teachers, I had appealed to the system via the appraisal instrument and the system of promotion and performance bonus to motivate the teachers towards improved performance. While this may lead to work being done, it is devoid of passion and commitment that can only come about when teachers have had a chance to engage in communication action and discourse in a mutually understanding context to reach consensual action.

(2) The need for the school leader to empathise and collaborate with the teachers

A number of participants stressed the importance of school leaders being sensitive and responsive to the needs of their staff and involve the latter in decision-making. An example is as follows:

> I can invite the teachers to freely choose (through dialogue, forum) to join me in moving in a freely chosen direction, policy or initiative. This will definitely be more favourable than having the system impose upon the teachers using power and money to incentivise teachers. By appealing to their professionalism and shared meaning, the teachers would not feel a loss of meaning and purpose; instead, they would act autonomously in a shared direction that was agreed upon.

Following Habermas (1995)'s recommendation for communicative action, the school leaders (re)conceptualise themselves and their staff as human agents entering into rationally mutual understanding to reach consensual actions. The participants commented on the primacy of the school leader creating spaces for democratic interaction and communication among stakeholders of educations. They acknowledged that teachers needed to their voices heard so that a negotiated agreement could be reached and that teachers could 'own' the policies and initiatives. But many participants stopped short of advocating distributed leadership where all the staff are empowered to make decisions for the school. Manifesting the Singapore culture of school leadership where a fairly hierarchical system was adopted (Hairon & Dimmock, 2012), a school principal opined that "a democratic process of getting consensus which is more common in Anglophone countries is not necessarily an efficient way of doing things". Instead, she proposed what she called a "modification of the democratic process" where initial ideas were formulated by the school management team:

> I would brainstorm my key personnel first, then present the problem and viable solutions to the staff as a whole. At such platforms, staff's viewpoints could then be heard, suggestions discussed and thrown out, if necessary, and finally the staff decides on the solutions to adopt through the vote of the majority. This process has served the management of the school quite effectively.

In summary, the participants could relate to Ms Stubbs' ideals and aspirations to act in the best interests of the students. The myriad of internal and external resistance and difficulties experienced by Ms

Stubbs also struck a chord with the participants. Applying Habermas' theory to the context of school leadership, the participants acknowledged the need to empathise with teachers who, as portrayed in the movie, were overworked, stressed and overwhelmed by changes enacted by the principal. In addition, the participants articulated their conviction to involve teachers in some decision-making so as to create spaces for interaction and communication.

Discussion and Implications

The research findings show that both the pre-service teachers and school leaders were conscious of the central issues, opportunities, constraints and obstacles in teaching and school leadership. They are also appreciative of the necessity to adopt context-appropriate teaching and leadership approaches to cater to the needs of various educational stakeholders. Through watching and reflecting on films, the pre-service teachers and school leaders experienced the benefits of a signature pedagogy: they interrogated the surface, deep and implicit structures of education within the socio-cultural realities they were in (Shulman, 2005). Reflections on issues relating to surface structure (the concrete and operational acts of school leadership, teaching and learning) were seen in the educators explaining how they wished to learn from Mr Keating to teach creatively or followed Ms Stubbs' footsteps to inculcate moral values in the students. The educators also discussed issues relating to the deep structure; for example, they questioned the merits of excessive romanticism and critiqued the colonisation of the lifeworld in schools.

Finally, they engaged in issues relating to the implicit structure when they articulated their personal educational philosophy that synthesised romanticism and realism, and their goal of involving the staff in decision-making while maintaining control. It is apparent that the enactment of a signature pedagogy through films has enhanced the educators' learning of professionally valued understandings, skills, and dispositions. Encouraging educators to explore their own beliefs is essential as an educator' assumptions of leadership, teaching and learning play an important role in the students' beliefs about themselves (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2005). As Artz and Armour-Thomas (2001) point out, how a teacher teaches and relates to one's students have a direct impact on the formation and development of students' beliefs, as well as their intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, academic self-concept, causal attributions, and student learning. The same logic applies to school leadership: the personal philosophy, style and approach of a school leader have a direct bearing on the staff's beliefs, their relationship with the school leader, and their sense of mission and commitment.

The study also highlights the application of critical thinking through the educators' reflections of issues raised in the films. Data from the reflective essays reveal that the educators had arrived at their judgements by relying on criteria while demonstrating self-correction and sensitivity to the local context. The criteria used included shared values in Singapore such as pragmatism and exam-driven culture, and local conventions such as maintaining the school leader's authority in a hierarchical system. Self-correction was visible in the educators' clarification and application of concepts, particularly the notions of romanticism and lifeworld. A case in point is a school leader's admission, upon reflection, that he has by-passed his teachers lifeworld and beliefs and implemented initiatives without sufficient dialogue. The educators also demonstrated their sensitivity to context by comparing and contrasting the situations and dilemmas faced by Mr. Keating/Ms. Stubbs with those in the Singapore context.

It is significant that a contextualised notion of critical thinking is assumed by the participants in the study as they linked the topics and problem-situations in the films to their personal experiences and circumstances. On the one hand, the educators readily identify themselves with the universal themes presented in the films such as caring for students and managing conflicts with parents and teachers. On the other hand, the educators (re)interpreted these films through their own socio-cultural

lenses and drew upon local resources to deal with the challenges in teaching and school management. For instance, the pre-service teachers projected the typical competitive Asian parent onto Neil's father in *Dead Poet Society* who pushed his son to excel academically at the expense of the latter's holistic development. The teachers also associated the elitist Welton Academy with the prestigious schools in Singapore that were distinguished by academic excellence and middle-class dispositions. Responding to the challenges presented in the films, the educators turned to local resources to cope with these obstacles and generate possible strategies. An example was the suggestion from the pre-service teachers to refer to existing MOE guidelines to avoid the mistakes made by Mr Keating. Also offering a contextually sensitive approach were the school leaders who, while appreciating the value of respecting the teachers' views, did not embrace distributed leadership wholesale. Instead, they advocated a 'middle path' that is more aligned with Asian cultures where staff deliberated on options that were already proposed by the key personnel in the school. They exemplify what one of us has elsewhere called 'correlative thinking' where differences are harmonised rather than dichotomised (Tan, 2017b).

There are two major implications arising from our study. The first is a recommendation to use films as a signature pedagogy to champion critical thinking in the training of pre-service teachers and school leaders. Educators are empowered to become critical thinkers who aim at actions that foster self-understanding, self-transformation, and the ethical dimension of teaching through film-watching. By using films as a signature pedagogy, teacher educators encourage their students to connect apposite contents of the films to their practice, taking into consideration local situations, configurations, constraints and transformation. Take for instance the film *Mona Lisa Smile* on how a teacher, among other things, prompted her female students to question gender roles imposed by society. Approaching critical thinking as a socio-cultural practice means inviting the educators to reflect on their knowledge and presuppositions of gender issues against a backdrop of their own experiences and the prevailing social, cultural, and religious norms. Other recommended films include *Freedom Writers* that portrays how a teacher succeeded in motivating her students to read and write at the expense of her work-life balance and marriage; and *I am a Promise* which is a true story of a school leader's trials and tribulations to turn an inner-city neighbourhood school around. These films are appropriate as they, like the two films discussed in this paper, eschew the 'great teacher/school principal myth' by foregrounding the complex situations, predicaments and difficulties experienced by teachers and school leaders in real-world settings.

The second implication is the utilisation of film to advance critical thinking as a *socio-cultural practice* in pre-service teachers and school leaders. By making sense and appropriating elements of the films within the confines of local conditions and their lived experiences, the educators in this study demonstrated that "learning and thinking are always situated in a cultural setting and always dependent upon the utilisation of cultural resources (Bruner, 1996, p. 4, cited in Peters, 2007, p. 360). Describing critical thinking as a "cultural thinking" (p. 89), Atkinson (1997) asserts that critical thinking is evident in "the kind of behaviour in which an individual is automatically immersed by virtue of being raised in a particular cultural milieu" (p. 73). Bailin, Case, Coombs and Daniels (1999) concur that standards and principles of critical thinking are "cultural artifacts", i.e., they are "not 'made up' to do a particular job; rather they are discovered by analysis of our critical practices" (p. 292). Our critical practices are underpinned by what Newman (1890) calls "antecedent assumptions" – the taken-for-granted systems of thought, concepts, attitudes and language in which they are expressed. The study casts a spotlight on a critical thinker as one who applies generalised knowledge, norms, and procedures to personalised and unpredictable situations insightfully and flexibly. This interpretation of critical thinking shifts our focus from abstract and universal canons of argumentation to concrete social-cultural practices that unite knowledge and action (Tan, 2017a).

Conclusion

This article has proposed that the use of films is an example of signature pedagogies that empower educators to reflect on issues concerning school leadership, teaching, and learning. In the process of reflecting on the concerns and challenges raised in the films, the educators engaged in critical thinking by arriving at criteria-based and context-appropriate judgements in a self-correcting manner. This study highlighted critical thinking as a socio-cultural practice where the educators situated the films in their own socio-cultural milieu. The case of Singapore also illustrates how educators leveraged on localised resources and logics to address the tensions and problems in teaching and school management. A limitation of this study is the small sample size (only one cohort for each course). Another limitation is a lack of follow-up on the participants after they had completed the course; it is unclear whether and the extent to which they have applied the lessons learnt from the film and essay-writing. Hence further research can be conducted on more cohorts on the effectiveness of using films to promote critical thinking and signature pedagogies. Longitudinal studies on the teaching experiences, reflections and beliefs of educators before and after they attend the course could also be carried out. Additional research on the use of films in cross-cultural contexts is also recommended to further explore the potential of using films as a pedagogical tool for teacher education and leadership training.

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