Sexualized Representations of Female High School Teachers: Reflecting on Popular Television Portrayals and Teachers' Lived Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Sexualized Representations of Female High School Teachers: Reflecting on Popular Television Portrayals and Teachers' Lived Experiences

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Popular representations of the teaching profession can affect the lives of real teachers. This qualitative study explores the implications of sexualized representations of female high school teachers. From the beginnings of the feminization of teaching at the start of the 19th century, female teachers have been consistently evaluated and defined by sexuality. As women are linked to the body in the mind/body split, female teacher bodies are surveilled in the classroom. Female teacher identities, such as the spinster teacher and seductress teacher, are linked to sexuality. In turn, popular representations of female high school teachers on television are often unrealistically sexualized; one common storyline is the teacher having a sexual relationship with a teenage male student. The first phase of this study, a text analysis, investigated the following: How is female teacher sexuality portrayed on television and how does this portrayal reinforce feminist backlash? Six television storylines depicting a sexual relationship between a female high school teacher and male student were analyzed through the lens of Susan Faludi's (1991/2020) feminist backlash. It was found that these storylines perpetuate backlash myths by reinforcing traditional gender roles for women, by diminishing the teacher while enhancing the male student, by subjecting the teacher to excessive violence, and by unnecessarily casting women as abusers. Using focus groups and individual interviews with 10 participants, the second phase of the study investigated: What are female high school teachers' lived experiences pertaining to the broader context of the sexualization of female teachers? The teachers responded to the six fictional representations and discussed the binaries concerning

female teacher sexuality in reference to their own experiences in school. The fictional representations present problematic teacher-student power dynamics, normalize the sexualization of female teachers, and show inadequate consequences of the relationship. In discussing the binaries concerning female teacher sexuality, it was found that managing the body in the classroom is a daily conflict, that female teachers feel restricted when defined by sexuality, and that fictional representations are unrelatable and flawed. Findings from both phases show that sexualizing the female teacher degrades her and ignores the complexities and importance of the profession.

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I would also like to thank my participants. As I write these acknowledgements, public sector teachers are in the midst of a strike, negotiating for better working conditions to better serve our students. In these difficult times, it is easy to feel discouraged and undervalued as a teacher; at the same time, I have never felt more solidarity with my colleagues. More than ever in this context, I feel it is important to acknowledge the work of teachers. I thank my participants, fellow teachers, for their time, their input, their enthusiasm, and their expertise. This project would have truly been impossible without them.

On a personal note, I would like to thank my family and close friends for their unwavering support. They always believed in me, even in moments where this project seemed

unattainable. I'd especially like to thank Pierre-Olivier for his love and support (and for never failing to answer all my computer-tech-related questions). Je t'aime.

Finally, I dedicate this work to my parents, both teachers, Anna and the late Tony Colannino. Thank you for instilling in me the importance of this profession.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Frank cannot keep his hands off of Alice and proclaims that everything in his life is better since she came along. Natalie whispers sweet nothings into Xander's ear. Pacey and Tamara meet at a secret, romantic spot by a lake to make love for the first time. While out one evening, Rachel and Dan sneak into a closet so they can ravish each other then and there. While staring at Geraldine across the room, Archie's mind immediately goes to their steamy tryst in the back seat of her car. In the middle of an evening out with a friend, Claire sneaks off to the bathroom to send a provocative picture to Eric.

All of the couples above are not real people, but characters from various television series. Romantic storylines are included in most television shows and following characters as they navigate the ups and downs of their relationship, and maybe comparing them to our own, is a typical part of the viewing experience. However, the relationships above are problematic. All of the women in these pairings are high school teachers. The men also share a common trait as they are not so much men, but teenage boys. Knowing this, the seemingly romantic scenarios described above take on a very different meaning.

Sexuality has an inescapable presence within the walls of a high school (Johnson, 2004). Being a high school teacher myself and working with teenagers for the last 17 years, I agree with this statement. Whether referring to deliberate or indeliberate sexual innuendos, noticing students perk up or giggle any time something remotely sexual is referenced during a lesson, or the persistence of both students and staff that sex education needs to be given more time, of which it now has, the list is endless. Although some might find it discomforting to think of this presence as inescapable, it is not all that surprising. After all, the connection between the pursuit of knowledge and love, which is inextricably tied to sexuality and passion, goes as far back to the

writings of Plato (Jagodzinski, 2006). However, not too long ago I found myself questioning why the connection between education and love, when displayed on television, is repeatedly demonstrated through a sexual relationship between a teacher and a student. I remember distinctly when this happened: It was while watching the first episode of the show *Riverdale* (Berlanti et al., 2017-2023). The show is based on characters from the beloved Archie Comics series; however, on the show, the teacher character Geraldine Grundy is completely transformed. She is not the white-haired old lady who collects buttons as a hobby (Doyle, 1958). She is a young and beautiful music teacher who is engaged in a sexual affair with her 16-year-old student, Archie Andrews.

As a teacher, storylines detailing a sexual relationship between a teacher and student were always bothersome to me, yet I will admit that they were forgotten once the next story arc took over. But the *Riverdale* storyline affected me profoundly. Perhaps it was the complete reconfiguration of characters who were ingrained in my mind from childhood. Or perhaps it was the especially violent and dramatic fate that Miss Grundy meets at the end of her storyline. But I think, more than anything, it was the realization that similar television storylines involving a male teacher-female student dyad turned out very differently. I started to notice that male teacher characters were not treated the same way as female teachers, some even rewarded as opposed to punished. For example, on the show *Pretty Little Liars* (King et al., 2010-2017) Ezra Fitz ends up marrying Aria Montgomery, a former student he had a long-standing sexual relationship with. Contrarily, the fictional female teachers were blamed, mocked, shunned by their colleagues, forced to move away, imprisoned, or viciously murdered. I was introduced to the *Riverdale* storyline at the same time in which I was, out of personal interest and growth, questioning the unreasonable expectations I face as a woman and, more specifically, as a woman in the context

of my job as a high school teacher. I became more attuned to how gender-based double standards transfer into my job and began to get increasingly interested in how negative popular representations of female teachers potentially make matters worse.

This attunement led to this project. Through this study, I examine the complex, contradictory, and perhaps controversial topic of female teacher sexuality, more precisely, of female high school teachers. As the following literature review will demonstrate, female teachers have been consistently evaluated and defined by sexuality. This is then embellished and distorted in popular representations of female teachers. Crookston (2020) attests that "bloggers appear to be more likely than academics to discuss why shows depicting the problematic romantic relationship between student and teacher on television need to be evaluated" (p. 108). I believe it is time to break this pattern and discuss through an academic lens the implications of sexual relationships between female teachers and male students on screen. The trope of the sexy female teacher has become pervasive and, as a popular culture image, it perpetuates harmful and degrading stereotypes about female teachers and, by extension, the profession as a whole. When considering stereotypes about school, Mitchell and Weber (1999) explain that "we may be too easily tempted to regard them as humorous images that have nothing to do with us or with the reality of schooling" (p. 172). However, we cannot turn a blind eye to these depictions as "left unexamined, popular images can be dangerous" (p. 172). As such, the problematic image of the sexualized female high school teacher warrants exploration.

Chapter 2: Literature Review, Theoretical Framework, and Present Study

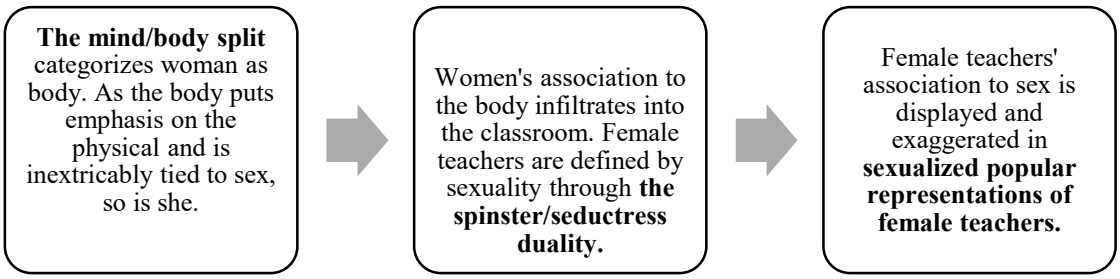
Literature Review

Several patterns emerge when examining the literature on female teacher sexuality. The female teacher as a spinster and the female teacher as a seductress appear to be the two broad and

opposing categories that define female teacher sexuality. The broader dichotomy of the mind/body split, which links women to the body, is likely responsible for the unrelenting focus on sexuality when it comes to discussing female teachers. The implications of attaching women to the body, and thus restricting the female teacher to being either a spinster or a seductress, have transferred to popular representations of female teachers. Figure 1 outlines the progression of ideas in the literature review and shows how its main components link together.

Figure 1

Literature Review Progression and Components



The Female Teacher and the Mind/Body Split

Although most commonly associated to Rene Descartes and the Renaissance, the mind/body split, which puts the mind in a superior position over the body, goes as far back to Ancient Greece. Although the split was acknowledged well before Descartes' time, it was during the Renaissance that the body was sexualized and that all the negative connotations pertaining to that sexualization took hold (Estola & Elbaz-Luwisch, 2003). The body has always been undervalued compared to the mind and this poses a particular problem for women as they are associated to the body; men, on the other hand, are connected to the more prestigious mind. In being linked to the body, women are subsequently attached to everything that is perceived to be

negative about the body, such as violence, giving into sexual desire, and death (Fisanick, 2007). The body is portrayed as a barrier to intellect and reason; thus, explaining why throughout history women have been seen as "dangerous creature[s] who seduced men away from their spiritual and intellectual pursuits" (Jagodzinski, 2006).

The historical burden of association to the body is carried into the classroom and affects female teachers. According to Fisanick (2007), students notice bodies and are likely to comment on a female teacher's body directly, but not on a male teacher's body. This is especially probable in situations where a female teacher is asserting her authority over a male student; he is likely to retaliate and regain power with a comment about her body. Lahelma et al. (2000) present a similar finding claiming that the sexualization of the female teacher, through commenting on some aspect of her physical appearance, is a weapon wielded by male students. They assert that all teacher bodies are on display daily; however, it is female teachers who must consistently monitor and control their bodies.

Female teachers are in a very conflicting situation for they are inextricably linked to the body in the mind/body split, but are at the same time expected to suppress and control their bodies. This goes back to the early 1900s when teacher bodies were controlled through clothing which was meant to conceal the body "for purposes of modeling morality and 'proper' femininity" (Atkinson, 2008, p. 107). It is the common belief even today that "women teachers' bodies must be controlled so that the performance of virtuous and moral but heterosexual femininity may be displayed in appropriate pedagogical settings" (Atkinson, 2008, p. 108). Many female teachers today control their bodies by making it a point to look plain so as not to draw attention to themselves and to hopefully avoid being sexualized (Atkinson, 2008). Johnson

(2005) concurs claiming that it is ingrained in female teachers that they must hide the body. Essentially and ironically, they have to hide what they are defined by.

Research shows that male teachers do not face such complications with their bodies and with clothing. In an exploration of the teacher's body, Mitchell and Weber (1999) acknowledge that "when a teacher enters a classroom for the first time, it is not necessarily her ideas that first attract students' attention. It is the body and how it is adorned and clothed" (p. 124). Although men may face some criticism and assumptions about their clothing (they discuss a young male pre-service teacher who was targeted for wearing pink), their instructions for how to appropriately dress in the classroom are relatively simple. They are usually instructed to maintain a neat appearance. It is the "female pre-service teachers who are singled out and admonished to avoid jewelry, make-up, short skirts, low necklines, jeans, and so on" (p. 146). These guidelines about clothing are meant to control a female teacher's sexuality, something that is not necessarily seen as an issue for male teachers.

In an examination of the professional identities of young female teachers in the southeastern United States, Atkinson (2008) found three female teacher identities, all of which link to clothing and how the body is displayed: the "apple jumper", the "teacher babe", and the "bland uniformer" (p. 100). The female teacher participants in the study all saw the bland uniformer as the teacher identity to uphold. Teacher babes are stylish and wear more form-fitting clothes, therefore flaunting their bodies and "putting at risk their professional reputations" (p. 112). As such, the young female teachers sampled in Atkinson's study avoided this identity. The apple jumper teacher demonstrates her teacher identity through clothing such as cardigans with apples and school supplies stitched onto them; or through seasonal, cheesy clothing such as Jack-o-Lantern earrings and holiday sweaters. These clothing items, also referred to as "teacher gear"

were seen as “reductive of [the] image of what a teacher should be” (p. 99). Although not sexualized like the teacher babe, this identity was not appealing to the young teachers. The bland uniformer is neutralized through casual and less form-fitting clothes which mask the body. The participants viewed this as more professional; the female teacher body is desexualized and defeminized through bland clothing, making it is less of a target for unwanted attention. The underlying idea is that if the female teacher body is controlled (controlled meaning hidden) then the problem of the sexualized body is solved.

Kestere and Kalke’s (2018) research extends the idea of controlling the female teacher body further by explaining that this control can go as far as being governmentally mandated. In their study on the ideal teacher body in Soviet Latvia from the mid 1950s to the mid 1980s, they explain that a teacher’s physical appearance became a public matter. Teachers were required to be both internally and externally perfect and those that did not uphold certain standards faced harsh punishment, including public humiliation. The researchers examined teacher photographs from public documents (such as state issued pamphlets and textbooks) as well as archival photographs of real teachers. Their findings show that the ideal teacher was female, young, and “never lacked a feminine aspect” (p. 191) meaning she was always depicted in a skirt or dress, although modest and not revealing. Those rare few who were accused of resisting this physical ideal, through violations such as wearing denim, earrings, or nail polish, were publicly reprimanded by having their names in the press.

Embracing the body’s place in education is advocated by some researchers (hooks, 1993; Johnson, 2004 & 2006; McWilliam, 1996). Johnson (2006) explores the experiences of two female pre-service teachers and found them to be resistant of the notion that sexuality does not belong in the classroom. Bodily knowledge was noted as being an important component of

teacher training, along with standard pedagogical and content knowledge. However, open discussion of the body and sexualization in the classroom is still considered an "[act] of rebellion" (Johnson, 2006, p. 260). The literature highlights the irreconcilable situation of being defined by the body, but at the same time also having to repress the body. As women are connected to the body and the body is sexualized, it is not surprising, although it is unfortunate, that perceptions of female teachers are commonly linked to sexuality. This is demonstrated through the persistent categorization of female teachers as either spinsters or seductresses.

The Spinster: At First Revered, Then Feared

The Reverence. The phenomenon known as the feminization of teaching began at the beginning of the 19th century, paralleling the economic shift from farming to industry. As men went to work in factories, married women stayed home and took care of childrearing. Schools became ideal places for unmarried and widowed women to occupy themselves (Grumet, 1988) for by working in schools, which were considered extensions of home and church, unmarried women could "fulfill their divinely designated roles" (Delony & Delony, 2013, p. 16) in child-rearing. As they had no children of their own, this fulfillment could be attained through being a teacher. It was not long before the unmarried teacher was held in high esteem. Writing from a Canadian context, Cavanagh (2005) explains that before the 1950s, single female teachers were considered the moral pillars of society. Their life-long commitment to a celibate life was indicative of their un-paralleled commitment to education, thus granting them a high social position. With this esteemed position in society, female teachers had to abide by strict dress codes, were restricted in their activities outside the classroom, and faced marriage bars. The bars were common in most Canadian and American schools during the first half of the 20th century. Female teachers were not allowed to marry as it was believed that "a career in education

was…incompatible with marriage and motherhood and so marriage bans were imposed to ensure that female teachers remained single" (Cavanagh, 2006, p. 427). The single teacher was the preferred candidate to fill a teaching position as, without a husband, it was understood that her unwavering loyalty and obedience would be to the school (Atkinson, 2008).

The restrictions above were not as limiting as they appear. Although professional advancement, such as attaining tenure, was conditional on a female teacher remaining single, for many women it was well worth it. The single teacher was a "new woman" (Whitehead, 2007, p. 5). The profession gave single women what their married counterparts had trouble finding in the home: self-worth, a steady income, and strong friendships with other women. The single woman was, in many ways, able to break free from patriarchal restrictions through teaching. As a result, marriage became a choice; since these women were making their own money, they did not need to marry for security. They could marry a person they actually liked. However, many chose to not marry at all (Grumet, 1988; Tamboukou, 2000; Whitehead, 2007).

The Fear. The term spinster, derived from the activity of spinning wool, was originally just a legal term for any unmarried woman. Over time, however, the spinster became a controversial female figure, one regarded with fear and suspicion. Eventually the spinster became associated specifically to the single female teacher and with this association came the same fear and suspicion. The reason for this fear is that the spinster teacher was now seen as a threat to the heterosexual norm (Whitehead, 2007).

Cavanagh (2005) explains that before the 1950s married teachers were considered the pariahs of the profession; it was assumed that they were not as passionate about their work or as qualified since they had responsibilities to their families. However, once the negative image of the spinster took hold, the married female teacher came to be seen as the most well-adjusted,

both emotionally and sexually. She was the heterosexual ideal, while the celibate teacher was considered sex-deprived and bitter. By the 1960s, maintaining the image of the heterosexual ideal and possessing typical traits of female desirability were top criteria for teaching. Administrators were more inclined to hire a young, married teacher than a single one. Even if she only provided about five years of service before leaving the profession for motherhood, she was still viewed as better than the celibate "sexual deviants" (p. 263) who were now being actively pushed out of the profession. If you were a spinster, you were ostracized (Cavanagh, 2005).

Whitehead (2007) echoes these points explaining that once marriage bars were lifted in Australia in the 1950s, spinster teachers were seen as threats to the gender order. There were fears that the spinster would transfer her assumed inferiority complexes onto her impressionable young students. The married teacher was preferred as, since it was assumed she was headed for motherhood, she was believed to be better equipped to develop healthy emotional bonds with children. The growing popularity of fields such as psychology and sexology did nothing to improve the image of the spinster. Her identity as "the nightmare alternative to hegemonic femininity" (Whitehead, 2007, p. 13) was confirmed even more so. These fields also created unfounded links between spinsterhood and lesbianism which increased the public's fear and scrutiny of female teacher friendships. The public feared that if the spinster teacher was a lesbian, both her male and female students would suffer. The boys' manliness would weaken and the girls would stray off the path of marriage and motherhood (Atkinson, 2008).

In her work on female teachers' sexuality, Cavanagh (2006) outlines four archetypes of the single female teacher which are based on Freudian psychoanalysis. These four profiles perpetuate the fear of the single female teacher because she appears to transgress gender roles. She was seen as abnormal, susceptible to nervous disorders, and immature. The first archetype is

the teacher who suffers from a masculinity complex. The personality profile of the masculinity complex is based on the body. Stemming from penis envy, it was believed that the single, female teacher in the early 20th century overcompensated for her bodily inferiority through her work. The emphasis on a teacher's physical appearance is the key aspect of this profile and many equated a teacher's lack of physical beauty with mental and emotional instability. The moral masochist, the second archetype, is seen as managing "wounded female narcissism in the face of the unique societal prohibitions on female sexuality" (Cavanagh, 2006, p. 430). She is feminine to the extreme. This is the female teacher who finds satisfaction in her suffering. She is self-denying and has an unconscious need for punishment. As her pleasure comes from prohibition, her prohibition becomes excessive. Working long hours, having no social life, and being excessively patient are some of the behaviours of the moral masochist (Cavanagh, 2006).

Referred to as altruistic surrender, the third archetype presents the spinster teacher as a sacrificial martyr. The sacrificial position makes up for the female teacher's sexual inferiority. As she is unmarried, she works out her sexual problems upon children through companionship with and dedication to students. The danger behind this personality profile was the supposed negative effects on young female students. It was believed that these single teachers would encourage female student crushes, but without crossing any boundaries. Due to her celibate life, it was feared that the teacher was critical of men and would pass their critical judgments onto impressionable young students. Overall, the teacher's sacrifice was a way to compensate for some inferiority, usually the failure to find a husband. Finally, there is the tyrannical disciplinarian. The spinster who fit this fourth profile was seen as harboring sexualized aggression. She was the sadistic teacher who inflicted corporal punishment upon her students; she was satisfied through making the lives of those around her, predominantly her pupils,

unpleasant. Many of these teachers supposedly threw tantrums, shouted at, and ridiculed their students. She was also seen as the sexually dominant teacher (Cavanagh, 2006). As a spinster who is defined as sexually dominant, the tyrannical disciplinarian provides a good segue to discussing the teacher as seductress, the perhaps more controversial component of the spinster/seductress binary.

The Teacher as Seductress

Who Is She? It appears the teacher as seductress fits a typical profile and employs typical grooming patterns on her male students. Knoll (2010) provides an overview of the patterns involved in female teacher sexual misconduct. Synthesizing various findings from newspaper sources and school surveys from 2004-2010, all from a North American context, Knoll explains that the vast majority of known female teacher perpetrators, close to 90%, are white and often act excessively nurturing. Knoll breaks down some of the misconceptions about female perpetrators, who are often perceived as less harmful than their male counterparts. The work of Fromuth et al. (2016) also supports the claim that female teacher sexual misconduct is less likely to be perceived as negative (compared to male teachers) and as something that is a normal part of the high school experience. However, as Knoll (2010) explains, there is usually considerable malintent and forethought behind the female teacher's behaviour.

According to Knoll (2010), the typical female perpetrator has a difficult time understanding how and why her actions are inappropriate and often ignores the imbalance of power in her relationship with a minor, convincing herself that the relationship is consensual. However, the typical grooming patterns of female teacher perpetrators make it difficult to justify that the relationship is power-balanced. Many of the typical grooming patterns are, at first glance, easily confused with dedication. Female teacher sexual misconduct cases often involve

students who are experiencing difficulty and whose increased vulnerability is targeted. These cases often begin with the teacher giving the student extra help and support through difficult circumstances. The teacher will offer mentoring, tutoring, and advice on projects. This extra time is seen as altruistic, but is in fact given to establish a false sense of trust. Extra help in school gradually shifts to extra attention outside of the school environment, such as the teacher offering to drive the student to school and buying them gifts. The teacher will also go as far as making parents aware of their sacrifice. As cases often involve vulnerable students, parents are likely to feel grateful that the teacher is giving their child extra help and attention. The teacher's behaviour gradually begins to include inappropriate emails, phone calls, or messages; it also becomes more overtly affectionate as time passes. This often leads to the teacher's behaviour being noticed by other students and faculty, with other students making jokes and open references to the apparent link between the teacher and student. This disingenuous, sacrificial behaviour is consistently used in female educator sexual abuse (Knoll, 2010).

Compared to male teachers, female teachers engage in sexual relationships with students far less frequently. Up until a few decades ago, relationships leading to marriage between male teachers and female students in Canada, the United States, and England were described as "natural" and "wholesome" (Cavanagh, 2007, p. 5). Although campaigns to raise awareness about teacher sexual misconduct and prevention policies since the 1980s have made these relationships much less acceptable, male teachers still commit significantly more sexual misdemeanors than female teachers. The big difference is that the behaviour of male teachers is not judged in the same way. It is noted that "In none of these countries [Canada, the United States, and England] has there been an outcry about the sexual improprieties of male teachers (unless they involve boy students) comparable to what we now see in response to the sexual

improprieties of female teachers" (Cavanagh, 2007, p. 5). Moreover, male teacher sexual offenders are more likely to be repeat offenders; even after receiving warnings for inappropriate behaviour, they are likely to continue (Christensen & Darling, 2020). When it comes to sexual relationships between male teachers and female students, the research shows that the relationships are easily categorized as wrong, but disciplinary action is hardly enforced. In many cases, the male teacher is discreetly sent to another school (Cavanagh, 2007). In the context of higher education, Lane (1998) explains that student suffering is of utmost concern when female college students get romantically involved with their male professors. Due to the disproportionate amount of power held by the male teacher, she argues that a consensual relationship, even without coercion or even if the encounter is initiated by the student herself, is not possible. These relationships are damaging to female students and threaten gender equity in the academy. She argues that stricter codes and guidelines are needed, but the sad reality is that although deemed wrong, these relationships continue to happen and there are few, if any, consequences for male teachers. In fact, there is a trend of male teaching assistants following the example of male professors (Lane, 1998).

Christensen (2018) writes that "Although it is indisputable that males make up the majority of child sexual offenders, this does not negate the reality of female child sexual offenders" (p.177). Granted the number of female teacher perpetrators is lower, Christensen and Darling (2020) found interesting similarities between women and men in such cases, and even found a trait that appears to apply exclusively to women. Their study is a worthy contribution as they find that not enough studies on teachers who engage in sexual misconduct include female teachers in their sample and this has led to a "gender-biased (or gender-blind) view and response to this type of abuse [which] may mean prevention measures and responses to both victims and

perpetrators are unsuitable or inappropriate" (p. 24). In their study they examined the case files of 40 teachers (20 female and 20 male) who had sexually abused their student. These cases all took place in England between 2006 and 2016. Using a mixed-method approach they came up with a typology of teacher sexual offenders made up of four categories. Three pertain to both men and women: (1) minimisers and deniers, (2) poor mental health or stressors, and (3) young, early career. The fourth category, (4) 'I was overpowered', was found to be exclusive to the female teacher perpetrator cases. The minimisers and deniers took a long time to admit to any wrongdoing and once they did, minimized their offence. They made multiple "permission-giving self-statements" (p. 30) and passed on blame to the child or their employer. They also showed a "lack of insight, deep-seated attitude, and lack of remorse" (p. 30). Those in the category of poor mental health and stressors were found to be going through difficult life circumstances either prior to or during the abuse. A distinct finding from this group of perpetrators is that they were the most remorseful and most willing to take responsibility for their actions. In the third and final category pertaining to both male and female perpetrators, most were younger and newly-qualified teachers and the victims in these cases were usually older teenagers between 15-18 years old. The fourth category, 'I was overpowered' was one that was only seen in female teachers; however, it is worth noting that it was found in only 3 of the twenty cases. In these cases, the female teacher claimed they were fearful of their student, "indicating that they were the victim" (p. 31). Such claims from these three cases were "met with denunciation" (p. 31) by members of the National College for Teaching and Leadership, which regulates the teaching profession in England.

We can see from the evidence above that the female teacher seductress uses particular grooming patterns (Knoll, 2010) and that although cases of teacher sexual misconduct involving

female teachers are less frequently occurring, there is some overlap in their behaviours and characteristics with male offenders. However, male teachers rarely face the same public scrutiny as female teachers, thus leading into why the teacher seductress is feared.

Why She Is Feared. It is almost startling to consistently read the claim that a female teacher having sex with a male student is considered a normal part of the high school experience (Dollar et al., 2004; Fromuth et al., 2016; Knoll, 2010). In many print media accounts of such relationships, the female teacher is often "depicted in a more sympathetic tone, with the romanticization of the offenses (e.g. 'pupil lover') appearing to mitigate the accountability of their acts on some level" (Christensen, 2018). Myers (2006) explains that relationships between female teachers and male students are perceived as "amusing, 'a school boy fantasy come true' and even a rite of passage" (p. 55). This is all startling and apparently contradictory, considering the reactions to such relationships once they are revealed. If the relationships are, in actuality, as normative and amusing as they are perceived, it does not seem like they would be subject to as much outrage and scrutiny as they are. Clearly these relationships are problematic. The fears and public outcry of the teacher as seductress are all linked to a type of transgression. The seductress is often described as crossing a particular line and for that she is punished harshly. In examining the literature, there were different reasons proposed as to why the teacher as seductress scares and offends people to the degree that she does. In looking at these different reasons, no matter the wording or the detailed explanation, it is apparent that these reasons are not so different after all and all seem to link back to one key fear: The teacher as seductress is abhorred because of the Oedipal anxieties and threats to heteronormativity she unleashes. This is why female teacher seductresses, unlike the male teachers who commit the same offences and in greater instances, are subjected to intense media scrutiny for their transgressions. Thus, the scenario of the female

teacher sleeping with a male student is both glamorized as a normal part of the high school experience and scrutinized as a transgression. Furthermore, the scrutiny is often mixed with a lot of intrigue with cases garnering significant media attention (Cavanagh, 2007). This is the main reason for the "sex panic" (Angelides, 2010, p. 74) that ensues once relationships between female teachers and male students come to light.

According to Tamboukou (2000), "The contemporary image of the woman teacher seems strongly bound to her maternal qualities, real or potential. Just because it is 'natural', women teachers are usually expected to conform to the model of mothering" (p. 467). When the female teacher seduces her male student, she disrupts this model and as a result threatens "normative heterosexual familial structures" (Cavanagh, 2004, p. 325). She becomes a phallic mother and is now set as an antagonist to the domesticated mother or good mother. In most cases of female teacher-male student relationships, the mother of the boy in question is the domesticated mother figure, often depicted testifying against the vile actions of the teacher/phallic mother. Both Cavanagh (2004) and Jagodzinski (2006) discuss the teacher as a femme fatale in their work. In discussing the disproportionate amount of media attention garnered by school sex scandals involving female teachers compared to male teachers, Cavanagh (2004) writes that "female sexual predators are constructed as *femme fatale*-like figures" (p. 316) and that these figures are "a worrisome combination of sexual aggressivity, internal neediness and psychotic independence" (p. 325). In most sex scandal cases, the media ensures that the female teacher is described as dangerous. Jagodzinski (2006) concurs that the femme fatale is dangerous. They arise through the female teachers' paradoxical negotiation between being the nurturing mother and the phallic mother. Young boys are believed to be threatened by female teachers who exert their authority (this is the phallic mother; the dangerous femme fatale), yet at times female

teachers must put aside their nurturing roles and exert authority. When the young male student seduces his teacher and reclaims his authority, the disgraced femme fatale is punished.

The young male must overtake the teacher. The teacher as a mother figure has power over the boy, but this is a threat to his masculine development so he must claim it back. As such, the female teacher is reduced to an object (more specifically, a sex object); in this context the young boy is seen as the victor who has reclaimed his power (Jagodzinski, 2006; Johnson, 2005; Johnson, 2006). Maher (2004) sums this up in writing "To put it more bluntly, though we might accept a woman as sexual (as long as she is heterosexual) and we might accept a woman in a position of authority, the two together at the same time is threatening to masculine privilege" (p. 203). This is perhaps why the female teacher-male student relationship is interpreted as more controversial than the more common male teacher-female student relationship. Maher (2004) explains that when a female student gets involved with a male teacher she has the potential to become privy to all the knowledge and power he possesses, perhaps gaining some for herself. After all, we must not forget a man's connection to the mind as seen through the mind/body split. The teenage boy is viewed as losing his power if he finds a way to identify with the female teacher. Because he might lose power as opposed to gaining it, he must reclaim it. Overall, the female teacher is supposed to be a maternal figure, but if she tries to exert power in this maternal position, she is seen as a threat. As maternal figures, if the female teacher engages sexually with her male student, who is coded as a son, it is incest (Angelides, 2010; Cavanagh, 2004).

Feared by Some, Fantasized by Others. In female teacher-male student sexual relationships, the female teacher is considered dangerous and monstrous. As a maternal figure, she commits what is deemed an incestuous act. It is important to note that the teenage boy is not always portrayed as a victim. In line with him being seen as victorious once he overtakes the

authority of the female teacher, he is also praised, a phenomenon known as the myth of *the lucky bastard* (Angelides, 2010). Angelides (2010) explores this myth using the real-life school sex scandal involving former American teacher Debra Lafave and a 14-year-old male student in 2004. Media accounts of the scandal focused heavily on Lafave's conventional good looks, describing her as " 'every boy's dream come true', 'a walking Barry White song', a 'sexpot', 'hottie', 'stunning blond schoolteacher' and 'somewhere between…a Playboy bunny and the starlets of auto magazines' " (p. 73). In a particularly crass online poll asking people whether or not they would like to be molested by her, almost 90% of respondents answered yes. The descriptors and the poll more than hint at the luck of the young boy. Angelides (2010) argues that in media cases such as these, audiences tend to focus on the female teacher exclusively, getting pleasure in both the salacious details of the case and in condemning the teacher. He argues that we need to pay more attention to the sexual agency of young boys. He argues that "In almost all mainstream media reports, there is…a simultaneous attempt…to downplay this cited adolescent desire and assertiveness in an effort to denounce the behaviour of the women" (p. 76) and that this happens because we are uneasy about discussing boys' sexual agency. In the Lafave case, for example, there was evidence that the young boy was willing to have sex with his teacher. Although the argument presents a counter-point to the problematic issue of how female teachers involved in sex scandals are portrayed in the media, we must be careful when pointing the finger at boys' sexual agency for it ignores the power dynamics of the teacher-student dyad.

A sexual encounter with a female teacher is perceived as positive by many, but this is challenging as it makes it more difficult for teenage boys to "label their own sexual experiences with a teacher as inappropriate" (Fromuth et al., 2016, p. 169). This perception was found repeatedly in the literature with males being seen as enduring less harm than female students

when they have sex with a teacher (Dollar et al., 2004; Fromuth et al., 2016; Muniz & Powers, 2022; Myers, 2006). They are often seen as envied and victorious.

The Sexualization of Female Teachers on Screen

Popular representations of teachers are powerful and influence how students view their teachers, how teachers view themselves, and how society regards the teaching profession as a whole (Brunner, 1991; Weber & Mitchell, 1995). In addressing the cyclical relationship between teachers in real life and teachers on screen, Delony and Delony (2013) explain that, "cultural assumptions influence media representations, which in turn influence cultural assumptions" (p. 14). Using a cultural studies approach to analyze the sexualization of teachers on film and television, they explain that we see what we see on screen because that is what exists in real life. The reality at this time is that cultural representations of teachers are not doing much to raise the status of the teaching profession. However, and unfortunately, this may be the case only for female teachers. The life-changing and inspiring teachers on film are typically male, whereas female teachers are conflicted, lonely, awful, unprofessional, accidentally heroic, and sexualized (Delony & Delony, 2013). In her work on teachers in television and film, Dalton (1995, 2013) uses what she coined the Hollywood Model to lump teachers into broad categories of good and bad. These "reductive" categories have the potential to "foster a lack of trust in teachers, their training, and their professionalism" (2013, p. 86). In examining the movie *Bad Teacher* (2011), Dalton (2013) explains that the good and bad women in the film are defined as such based on sexual behaviour; we see this in both the female teachers and female students, making it seem like these are "universal types" (p. 86) or categories by which to define women. From the literature, just as in real life, it seems that with female teachers on screen, categories of good and

bad are intertwined with sexuality and the spinster/seductress duality is mirrored in popular representations of teachers as well.

Bauer (1998) maintains that Hollywood over-sexualizes all professions and teaching is no exception. According to Delony and Delony (2013), the sexualized image of the teacher on screen was not always the norm. Just as the unmarried teacher was the ideal before 1950 in real life, teachers on screen at that time were also depicted as doing away with sexuality. The majority of female teacher characters on screen up until the 1980s were unmarried and childless and there was no focus on their personal lives. The classic example is Miss Brooks from the television show *Our Miss Brooks* (Lewis, 1952-1956) who is portrayed as teaching to bide her time before marrying. Fedorov et al. (2018) reviewed over 1300 films about teachers and the professional risks that come with the profession, one of them being sex. They explain that before the 1980s, films in which teachers were sexualized were not well received with audiences. Delony and Delony (2013) cite 1984 as the year in which the image of the sexualized teacher became more normative with the release of Van Halen's *Hot for Teacher* music video (Angelus & Roth, 1984). The video showcases a blond, bikini clad teacher dancing on her desk while her male students stare up in admiration. She appears to be their ultimate fantasy. When she is dressed in actual clothes, she is wearing a short black skirt with a high slit and she suggestively bends over her desk. At the start of the video, while students are settling into class and waiting for their teacher to show up, we hear "What do you think the teacher is gonna look like this year?" (Angelus & Roth, 1984, 1:37). The immediate focus and expectation, even before meeting the teacher, emphasizes her looks. The video switches from bland black and white to color right after this question when the teacher bursts onto the scene in her bikini. The only

spinster-type of woman noted in the video is the student's actual mother. She seems like the domesticated mother, starkly contrasting the teacher as phallic mother.

We have reached the point that "in almost every movie about teaching since 1989…sexuality and teaching go hand in hand" (Bauer, 1998, p. 308). The image of the female teacher as seductress has been normalized. There are now movies, such as *Bad Teacher* (2011), in which most of the plot centers around a teacher who flaunts her sexuality (Dalton, 2013). Numerous teen dramas –television shows which center around the lives of teenagers– seem to include an inappropriate sexual relationship between a teacher and student, and often this depiction is made up of the female teacher-male student dyad. Some of these shows include *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Whedon et al., 1997-2003)*, Gossip Girl* (Schwartz et al., 2007-2012)*, Dawson's Creek* (Kapinos et al., 1998-2003)*,* and *Riverdale* (Berlanti et al., 2017-2023)*.* Not only are storylines about teacher-student sexual relationships numerous, they are also sensationalized depictions which typically "[dramatize] the sexiness, romance, and humor of student-professor liaisons" (Barbella, 2010, p. 46). These storylines tend to be sensationalized at the expense of the female teacher characters. These depictions are not spared of what is known as the *pornographic technique* in which women are both fantasized and punished. This technique is used persistently in media representations of women, including teachers (Cavanagh, 2007). Unfortunately, academic research on teacher-student relationships is scarce, despite the fact that this type of storyline is very popular in television shows targeted to teenagers (Crookston, 2020).

The consensus is that we are in a phase in which harmful notions about teaching are depicted on screen. The portrayals of the profession have always been somewhat extreme and romanticized, but current images work against the profession and it has become dangerous to identify with fictional teachers (Gregory, 2007). I believe the images of teacher-student sexual

relationships to be the most dangerous, in line with Crookston's (2020) claim that negative consequences of such relationships are typically softened or ignored which "helps to further normalize and romanticize this relationship, perhaps leading fans to believe that a romantic teacher-student relationship is permissible without potentially life-altering outcomes" (p. 111). As such, it is not surprising that relationships between female teachers and male students are glamorized and viewed as normative and less harmful (Christensen, 2018; Dollar et al., 2004; Fromuth et al., 2016; Muniz & Powers, 2022) considering that is how they are typically portrayed on screen. I believe that the way female teachers are depicted on screen has contributed to the classification of these relationships as an admired experience, one in which the adolescent boy is seen as lucky to have experienced it.

Feminist Backlash as a Theoretical Framework

We can see from the review above that the undermining of the female teacher is incessant and that this undermining often has a sexual undercurrent to it. We see how the female teacher has been subjected to bodily control. The spinster teacher has been turned into a monstrous and dangerous figure despite the documented well-adjustment exhibited by single teacher. While the spinster was shunned, heteronormativity was promoted through preferential hiring of young, married teachers. Additionally, the female teacher seductress faces much harsher scrutiny than the male teacher seducer (who abuses at higher rates), yet at the same time the sexualized female teacher is normalized. Finally, all of this is sensationalized and over-dramatized in media representations of female teachers. In many ways, much of the contradictory and damaging perceptions of female teachers can be seen as feminist backlash.

Definition and Historical Overview of Feminist Backlash

In *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, Susan Faludi (1991/2020) explores the apparent ills plaguing women in the 1980s. Perpetuated by biased journalism, inaccurate and falsified statistics, and vague testimonials, feminism was blamed for all of women's troubles. Female crises such as man shortages, ticking biological clocks, increased susceptibility to mental disorders –even having a greater chance of falling into a coma– were all pegged as consequences of female liberation. In reality, these "crises" or "myths" were nothing more than backlash against women's progress and served to stifle it. The following scenario demonstrates backlash myths in action: Female liberation in the 1970s contributed to a greater number of women delaying marriage to focus on their own education and careers. As such, by the 1980s, women who had delayed marriage were now in their mid-thirties and finding themselves gainfully employed, but unhappy. This unhappiness stemmed from the fact that they were single. Not only were they single, their chances of finding a husband were slim. Even if they found one, there was an infertility epidemic affecting women over 30. Therefore, by focusing on their own education and employment, women lost their chance to be married and have children (i.e. to be happy) and this was all due to the influence of female liberation. In this scenario, the only likely true statement is the first one which states that many women delayed marriage in pursuit of education and employment.

Faludi (1991/2020) argues that pinning the blame on feminism is "absurd" and "the afflictions ascribed to feminism are all myths" (p. 7). Apparent female troubles from the 1980s such as man shortages, infertility, and female burnout

> have had their origins not in the actual conditions of women's lives but rather in a closed system that starts and ends in the media, popular culture, and advertising

> –an endless feedback loop that perpetuates and exaggerates its own false images of womanhood. (1991/2020, p. 7)

A backlash is a fear-induced "attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women" (Faludi, 1991/2020, pp. 9-10). It serves to ensure that women keep to their designated roles by acting as a "preemptive strike that stops women long before they reach the finish line" (p. 11). Essentially, it is a response to the predominantly male fear that women might possibly attain equal status. As such, backlashes come about concurrently with historical gains in women's rights. They "are hardly random; they have always been triggered by the perception –accurate or not– that women are making great strides" (p. 10). At the Seneca Falls women's rights convention in 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony advocated for female liberties such as education and voluntary motherhood. Shortly after, a "cultural counterreaction" (p. 63) followed where women were subjected to the same flawed arguments (such as man shortages for single, educated women) that their female counterparts would face a century and a half later. President Theodore Roosevelt intoned that women who delayed childbearing for their own aspirations were "criminals against the race" (p. 64). In the 1910s and 20s, women suffered another counterassault after winning the right to vote. Feminist writers were silenced and painted as threats to national security. New federal and state laws pushed women out of the work force and ensured that those who did keep their jobs were payed less than their male counterparts. The media declared feminism a barrier to women's happiness and memberships in feminist organizations saw a drastic decline. Women may have won the right to vote, but these counter-measures were put in place to ensure that they never actually attained equal rights (Faludi, 1991/2020).

A similar pattern emerged in the 1940s when women attained a more prestigious economic status. During the Second World War, while men were at the battle front, women took over their various jobs and they were revered by the government and the general public. American Congress passed over thirty bills for women's rights in the 1940s. However, things quickly regressed once the war was over and men could return to work. Faludi (1991/2020) writes, "Employers who had applauded women's work during the war now accused working women of incompetence or 'bad attitudes' –and laid them off at rates that were 75 percent higher than men's" (p. 66). Again, feminism was to blame and suddenly it was believed that "Independent-minded women had gotten 'out of hand' during the war" (p. 67). This independence was dangerous and it was time for women to go back home and fulfill their destiny as a good housewife. The echoing of the reverence and subsequent disdain towards the spinster teacher is difficult to ignore here.

This pattern of advancement-to-backlash happened again in the 1980s to counter the gains that women's rights groups made throughout the 1960s and 70s. Faludi's original text examined backlashes throughout the 1980s and the first few years of the 1990s, but backlashes against women are still relevant and ever-present today. In recent writings, Faludi explains that the backlash against women's rights is still "loud and clear" (Faludi et al., 2020, p. 337) and compared to the backlash of the 1980s which "was far more subtle" (Faludi et al., 2020, p. 338), things are not so subtle now. She claims that if her book was written in 2020, it would be "direr in many respects" (1991/2020, p. ix). It seems "the more women speak up and demand their rights, the more a threatened male populace lashes back" (1991/2020, p. xi). Although social movements like the #MeToo campaign have succeeded in dethroning abusive patriarchs, "the patriarchy continues to win the day" (Faludi, 2017, para. 19). As such, continued exploration of

backlashes and the attempts, whether overt or subtle, to dismantle women's progress are warranted and necessary.

Overview of Backlash in 1980s Film and Television

As Faludi (1991/2020) stipulates, backlashes are disseminated through the media, popular culture, and advertising and are not rooted in the genuine conditions of women's lives (p. 7). The issues that women face "[come from] outside the gates of the women's movement and the community of women" (p. xii) meaning backlashes happen primarily at the hands of men. Media representations of women are often curated by men; they are typically inaccurate representations of women and end up further promoting backlash myths, sometimes intentionally and sometimes not. One of the dangers of promoting backlash through media texts such as film and television is the creative license that these mediums give writers and directors, compared to, for instance, journalists. Although the press is heavily responsible for perpetuating backlash myths, journalists are still accountable to the requirements of their field. For example, a journalist can be very selective with the statistics they pull from a given study to paint a certain picture of women; however, they should not invent statistics. In film and on television, there are no boundaries. Throughout the 1980s, these industries saw no limits to "toning down independent women and drowning out their voices (p. 128).

Independent women on film were turned into villains of which Glenn Close's Alex in *Fatal Attraction* (1987) became the archetype. As a single, independent career woman who interferes with the life of a nuclear family, Alex became the most hated female figure of the moment. It was documented that male theatre-goers voraciously shouted out phrases such as "Beat that bitch!" "Kill the bitch", and "Punch the bitch's face in" during the last 20 minutes of the film (Faludi, 1991/2020, p. 125). Her death at the end of the movie was first pitched as a

despair-driven suicide, but test audiences hated her so much and wanted her death to be harsher, hence the final version of her being shot by the innocent, good wife. According to Faludi (1991/2020), "the point driven home in the final take of *Fatal Attraction* [is]*:* The best single woman is a dead one" (p. 136). Throughout the 1980s women on screen were "passive and weary" (p. 139) and those who resisted the domestic life "[paid] a bitter price for their recalcitrance" (p. 141).

Similar trends were featured on television. There was animosity toward women because they represented the majority of viewership, thus television creators were resentful of their dependence on women for the success of their shows. Faludi explains:

> TV prime-time programmers are both more dependent on women's approval than filmmakers and, because of their dependence, more resentful. To serve a female master is not why the TV men came west to Hollywood. (And most are men; more than 90 percent of television writers, for example, are white males.) They say they want shows that draw a large audience, but when those shows feature autonomous women, they try to cancel them. (1991/2020, p. 160)

Women stopped watching shows that pushed backlash agendas, but these shows kept turning up regardless. The few shows that were created by women and showcased strong female characters, such as *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998) and *Roseanne* (1988-1997), faced hostile criticism (mostly from men) despite their strong ratings and the fact that they were successful enough to each air for 10 seasons. Typical, male-written shows at the time ignored feminist issues; as far as female roles, these shows "[placed] suburban homemakers on the top, career women on the lower rungs, and single women at the very bottom" (Faludi 1991/2020, p. 161). If a show featured a working mother, she was often represented in a negative light. Single women on television at the time

often fit one of two stereotypes: “the coldly calculating careerist or the deeply depressed spinster. Either she had no emotions or she was an emotional wreck. The single careerist belonged to the lowest order of females” (Faludi 1991/2020, p. 171). They often faced mental breakdowns or drug addictions and only recovered once they realized that all they ever wanted was to be married and have children. If the female character in question was single and a feminist, she was depicted as cold-hearted and friendless. Susannah, a character on the show *thirtysomething* (1987-1991) played by Patricia Kalember, was portrayed in this way. Her job was working in a community centre helping the homeless and female victims of domestic violence, but she was depicted as humorless, rigid, isolated, and “inhumanly cold” (Faludi, 1991/2020, p. 178). Her cold personality does not seem to align with her undoubtedly altruistic occupation. As far as 1980s television goes, “millions of female viewers…[faced]…distorted [images] of themselves in the backlash TV mirror” (Faludi 1991/2020, p. 180).

As evident in Faludi’s (1991/2020) exploration of backlash in film and television summarized above, it is important to question whose agenda is being pushed in representations of women on screen. It can be argued that popular representations of women on screen support various cultural attempts to restrict women’s progress. These flawed representations are not restricted to the 1980s and continue to turn up on screen today; in particular, we see backlash myths perpetuated with female teacher characters on television.

Present Study

Research Aims and Questions

As demonstrated in the literature, the female teacher is consistently linked to sexuality. Although concepts such as marital status and age are not specific criteria applied in hiring female teachers today, the link to sexualization is still present. Johnson (2004) writes that as a pre-

service teacher she was warned "to take extra precautions to de-sex [her] body in order to ward off unwanted male attention" (p. 6). I too was given such advice. It appears that female teachers cannot just be. Female teacher identities, whether a spinster, a seductress, or a mother figure, are almost always connected with sexuality.

This connection is also evident in popular representations of female teachers. When it comes to female teachers on screen, many depictions are highly sexualized. As noted earlier, upon personal observation, it seems one sexual storyline in particular appears to be quite common: that of the female high school teacher having sex with a teenage male student. These sexual depictions warrant exploration because popular representations of teachers have a powerful influence on how teachers view themselves (Delony & Delony, 2013). I echo Dalton (2013) who explains that we need to care about these salacious, and perhaps damaging, portrayals of female teachers on screen "because people are watching and making connections among teacher movies and links between these media texts and their lived experience" (p. 81). It is dangerous to ignore and write-off these images as humorous anecdotes that have no impact on the lives of real teachers (Mitchell & Weber, 1999). When we consider that a facet of backlash is to make sure that "portrayals of strong and complex women that went against the media-trend grain [are] few and far between" (Faludi, 1991/2020, p. 126) we need to question what images of the female teacher are left for audiences.

All of this becomes that much more important to explore when we consider the increasing rates of teacher-student sexual misconduct. Findings show that as many as 1 in 10 students in 8th to 11th grade in the United States will be subjected to sexual misconduct at the hands of a school employee (Muniz & Powers, 2020; Russell et al., 2022). In Texas alone, cases of relationships between a teacher and a student rose by 42% during the 2017-18 school year and

have been consistently on the rise in the last decade. As if these numbers were not startling enough, they are likely higher as many cases go unreported (Russell et al., 2022). Moreover, Knoll (2010) explains that sexual abuse charges are often reduced to misdemeanors and thus not flagged in FBI background checks. This often results in teacher sexual perpetrators being rehired in other school districts. A practice known as 'passing the trash' has also been documented. In this practice, which is meant to avoid criminal prosecution and other legal proceedings, both school district and teacher keep quiet about sexual misconduct allegations. The teacher is discreetly passed on to another district (Knoll, 2010; Russell et al., 2022). Although the sexualized representations of female teachers on screen cannot be labelled the cause of these high numbers and disturbing trends, the implications of these glamorized, sexual relationships need to be explored as "sexual offenses, particularly offenses committed by an authority figure, can cause long-term trauma to the victims" (Russell et al., 2022, p. 2) and have adverse effects on the student's social and academic lives and their mental health (Muniz et al., 2021).

Female teachers are typically defined through a sexual lens. This transfers to popular representations of female teachers who are depicted in an overtly, and often unrealistic, sexualized manner; these fictional representations have an impact on real teachers. It is important to explore the implications of these sexualized depictions and their impact on real teachers. Based on this, my research seeks to answer the following questions. These questions will be answered in two phases, both of which will be explained in my methodology.

1. How is female teacher sexuality portrayed on television and how does this portrayal reinforce feminist backlash?

2. What are female high school teachers' lived experiences pertaining to the broader context of the sexualization of female teachers? This question is further broken down into two sub questions:
    a. How do the participant teachers respond to fictional representations of female high school teacher sexuality?
    b. How do the binaries concerning female teacher sexuality relate to the teacher participants' own lived experience as a female teacher?

Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Design

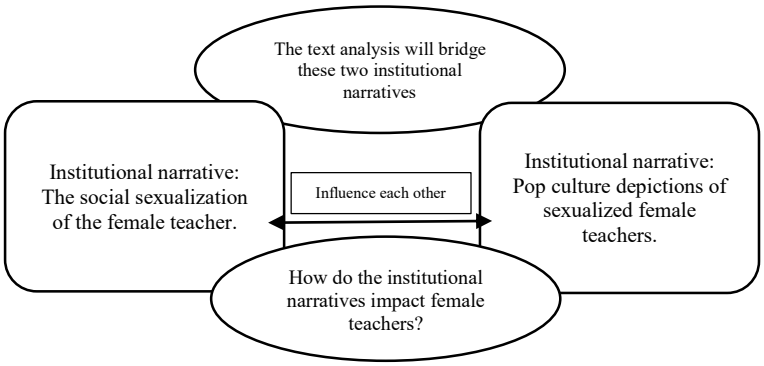
Using an interpretive paradigm, my study combines two approaches, phenomenology and narrative inquiry, to better understand sexualized representations of female teachers. As phenomenology is understood to have had a strong influence on narrative inquiry (Merriam, 2009) and as both of these approaches serve to better understand lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2017), I felt it appropriate to acknowledge both. A phenomenological approach serves to better understand, analyze, and compare people's lived experiences to bring forth the essence of a phenomenon; this fits with my study as I seek to examine female teachers' lived experiences pertaining to the broader context of the sexualization of female teachers. The phenomenological approach has also been identified as appropriate for the study of "intense human experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 25) such as those pertaining to sexuality.

Moreover, due to the influence that institutional narratives have on my study, it is essential to acknowledge narrative inquiry as part of my research design. Institutional narratives are the dominant narratives of larger organizations which set the stage for the personal stories we tell. The social, cultural, and political contexts of these dominant narratives are highly influential

(O'Toole, 2018). Narrative inquiry is about individual experiences, but also about how institutional narratives impact such experiences (Caine et al., 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2017). The popular representations of teachers which we witness on television are dominant narratives. The more general social sexualization of female teachers that we see through her attachment to the body and labels such as spinster and seductress are also institutional narratives. These institutional narratives were influential in both phases of the study. Like phenomenology, narrative inquiry is also a useful approach in discussing sensitive topics like sexuality. Johnson (2005) sums up the benefits of narrative inquiry in her work on teacher bodies and sexual dynamics in the classroom. She writes that it is "important" (p. 146) to give teachers "a space to share stories about these kinds of events that *do* [*sic*] occur and are very much a part of being a teacher" (p. 146) and that "one way to understand better the role of teachers' bodies and desires is to listen to each other's narratives…to see how others are experiencing and managing sexual dynamics in their classroom" (p. 146). There were, in the end, many stories shared by the teacher participants. In short, as approaches, both phenomenology and narrative inquiry promoted the examination of and sharing of stories to better understand teachers' lived experiences. Figure 2 showcases the intertwining narratives present in the study.

Figure 2

Intertwining Narratives



Explanation of Phase 1 and Phase 2

Phase 1: Text Analysis

Pop culture documents, such as television shows, are proven to be useful sources in qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). The first phase of this study is a text analysis of six female teacher-male student relationship narratives from six different television shows to examine the phenomenon of the sexualized female teacher and to answer the following question: How is female teacher sexuality portrayed on television and how does this portrayal reinforce feminist backlash? As such, these six storylines were examined through Susan Faludi's (1991/2020) explanation of feminist backlash. The text analysis was completed before the focus group discussions and individual interviews took place in order to bracket my interpretations.

Phase 2: Focus Group Discussions and Individual Interviews

The second phase of this study entailed focus group discussions and individual interviews with 10 female teacher participants to answer the following question: What are female high school teachers' lived experiences pertaining to the broader context of the sexualization of female teachers? This question is further broken down into two sub questions. The focus group discussions sought to answer the following: How do the participant teachers respond to fictional representations of female high school teacher sexuality? The individual interviews sought to answer: How do the binaries concerning female teacher sexuality relate to the teacher participants' own lived experience as a female teacher? Each of the 10 participants took part in one focus group discussion and one individual interview.

Phase 2, Section 1: Focus Group Discussions. As sexuality can be a sensitive topic to discuss, opening this phase of the study with the focus group discussions was preferred. Discussing female teacher sexuality in the context of television clips served as a distancing

device to enable the participants to talk freely about female teacher sexuality without necessarily feeling forced to discuss their own personal experiences. Clips from the same six television storylines that were used for the text analysis were used to frame the focus group discussions. The clips were divided into four montages: (1) introduction of the teacher, (2) private meetings between teacher and student, (3) sexual encounters, and (4) consequences. Discussions took place after each montage was viewed. An interview guide was prepared (see Appendix A), although used sparingly as the teacher participants were exceptionally forthcoming with their opinions and observations. I did occasionally jump in and ask what they thought about a particular storyline if I noticed it was not being referenced in the discussion. I also stepped in to provide context when asked; as we did not watch full episodes and some shows were unknown to the participants, I was occasionally asked to clarify some points of the storyline. Three focus group discussions were held; each discussion lasted close to two hours and each was audio recorded. Further elaboration on the focus group structure will be provided in Chapter 5.

Phase 2, Section 2: Individual Interviews. After taking part in a focus group discussion, an individual interview was scheduled with each participant. For each participant, the interview took place no more than 10 days after taking part in the focus group discussion; I tried to keep the gap between the focus group and interview as short as possible to maintain momentum and to best ensure that the focus group ideas were fresh in the participants' minds. An interview guide was prepared (see Appendix B). Each participant was further asked about the clips, but the majority of the interview was spent discussing the sexualization of the female teacher in a broader sense. We talked about the mind/body split and the spinster/seductress binary. We also discussed how the sexualization of female teachers impacted the teachers' day-to-day teaching life. Of the ten interviews, six participants were able to meet in person, while four were better

accommodated by a virtual meeting on Zoom. The interviews were all audio recorded (as per the application, the Zoom interviews were both audio and video recorded, although for transcription purposes, only the audio recording was utilized). The interviews varied in length between 25 to 40 minutes. Further elaboration on the individual interview structure will be provided in Chapter 6.

Description of the Participants

This study sought 10-15 female teacher participants, each to take part in one focus group discussion and one individual interview. This targeted sample size was based on criteria proposed by Hennink et al. (2020) who stipulate that there is a difference between simply identifying issues and understanding issues when conducting qualitative research. Setting the range at 10-15 was to ensure a move beyond identifying. In the end, 10 participants took part in the study. Twelve were originally recruited, but two participants rescinded their participation the morning of their scheduled focus group discussion. As the focus group discussions were already organized in accordance with the remaining participants' schedules and availability, the study moved forward with the remaining 10 participants to remain mindful of their busy teaching schedules. Although this number was at the lower end of my targeted range for participants, the focus group discussions and interviews were still fruitful, rich in anecdotal evidence, animated, and insightful. I still feel the lived experiences of these teachers were captured and that a transition from identifying to understanding was made. To further justify using ten participants, Hennink et al. (2020) stipulate that a homogeneous group of participants reach saturation more quickly. The participants ended up being a fairly homogeneous group.

The study made use of purposive sampling to intentionally select participants with certain characteristics who are rich in information on the issue being studied. The inclusion criteria for

participants was that they had to have experience teaching high school and identify as female. Apart from the specific experience of being a female high school teacher, variations in work experience, age, ethnicity, race, and relationship status were welcome. The only exclusion criterion was that the study was not open to pre-service teachers. Sexuality is a sensitive topic and comfort amongst participants is essential (Hennink et al., 2020). Given this point, putting a pre-service teacher in a situation where they would have been discussing a sensitive topic around tenured teachers could have led to discomfort and a power imbalance in the focus groups. Having 17 years of experience in the field myself, I used my professional and social networks to recruit participants. This networking enabled me to reach as many teachers as I could throughout various school boards and some private schools in the greater Montreal area. In the end, 10 teachers agreed to participate and all of them are either current or past colleagues. No teachers from the private schools and other school boards came forward to participate.

The 10 teacher participants had a mean age of 45.8 years and an average of 17.2 years of teaching experience. Eight of the participants were teaching high school currently, while two were presently occupying consulting posts at their school board. Four of the 10 had some experience teaching higher education on a part-time basis at some point in their teaching career. Apart from one participant who started her career as an elementary school teacher before moving on to high school, none of the other participants had working experience in an elementary school. The subjects taught by the teachers included: English Language Arts, media studies, French, social studies, ethics, mathematics, science, and music. Although there is variety in these subjects, six of the teachers have experience teaching English Language Arts. As the participants ended up being present and past colleagues, to protect confidentiality, I have not specified which participants teach which specific subjects. Regarding personal demographic details, all of the

participants are white. Two of the participants noted they were single, while the other eight specified they were in committed relationships; of these eight, six are legally married. Of the 10 participants, seven are mothers. Each participant filled in a demographic questionnaire to gather the aforementioned information (see Appendix C).

To anticipate any discomfort in discussing a sexual relationship between a teacher and teenage student, participants were asked on their demographic questionnaire whether they had witnessed these relationships on television before and to give a brief 1-2 sentence explanation of their reactions to the relationships. Nine of the participants had witnessed such storylines. Seven participants provided a brief explanation of their thoughts on the storylines. All seven explanations demonstrated a disapproval of such depictions, noting terms such as "undermined the teaching profession", "disappointed", "I don't think it depicts reality", and "uncomfortable". Although the disapproval was evident, there was nothing to suggest that serious issues or heightened distress would surface during the upcoming discussions.

On a final note regarding the participants, Table 1 breaks down how the participants were broken down into their focus groups. All of the names are pseudonyms.

Table 1

Participants Organized by Focus Group

Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3
1. Evelyn 2. Carina 3. Betty 4. Émilie	1. Maeve 2. Dora	1. Taylor 2. Sophie 3. Lynn 4. Megan

Recruitment Strategies and Ethical Considerations

Hennink et al. (2020) explain that ethical issues such as informed consent, minimizing harm, and confidentiality can be even more pronounced in qualitative research pertaining to sensitive topics such as sexuality. As previously stated, I recruited participants through my own professional and social networks. Coercion was minimized by only reaching out to potential participants once via email. I used a single email approach to maintain a distance and to avoid anyone feeling pressured to participate, which one might feel when they are asked in person or asked multiple times. Using my network heightened the likelihood that some participants would know each other. This point was documented in my Summary Protocol Form for ethics approval. My focus group introduction statement addressed that the participants could know each other; as such, participants were asked before the discussion started to keep details of the focus group discussions and one another's identity exclusive to the group (see Appendix A). In the end, some participants did know each other and there was some camaraderie observed during the focus group discussions. I feel this enhanced as opposed to hindered the discussions. Participants seemed at ease with each other and comfortable talking about the sexualized depictions; they shared jokes, laughed together, and supported each other's observations and discomfort. At the same time, this led to more comfortable and agreeable exchanges when participants had opposing viewpoints. I feel some of the participants knowing each other made them appear more comfortable when offering alternative or conflicting insights. Finally, considering that my participants were recruited through my network, I had to keep in mind my researcher positionality. As also stipulated in my Summary Protocol Form, I kept this in mind with my intention to recruit teachers with permanent contracts. This would put us on the same level of authority and the hope was to have them see me as a peer. I do feel this role as a peer was

achieved. In the focus groups I strove to have the participants take the lead with the discussion; I tried to minimize my talking points and spoke the most when it came to providing some background context on the storylines (mostly at the participants' requests). As for the one-on-one interviews, my goal was to minimize a sense of authority by designing them more as semi-structured conversations. Being a teacher myself, I have a shared experience with the participants which I feel promoted a rapport and sense of trust between us. I did let the participants do most of the talking, but kept myself on the same level by complimenting their insights with some of my own. As also outlined in my Summary Protocol Form, participants were given a token of gratitude for contributing their valuable time to this project. A gift card was given to each participant before the focus group began.

To note, there were no distressing incidents brought to my attention prior to, during, or after the discussions and interviews. In fact, it was the opposite. The only feedback I received was the participants telling me they appreciated having an avenue to discuss how the sexualization of female teachers related to their lives. At the end of the interviews, participants expressed that they found the process "fun" (Maeve) and "interesting" (Sophie, Lynn, and Taylor); Carina said "I'm so happy to be a part of this [study]". Dora and Maeve said at the end of their focus group, in a positive respect, that they felt like they were in school again. Finally, Evelyn mentioned in her interview that she and Émilie actually talked further about what they watched in the focus group the following day. As a researcher, I appreciate the fact that the topic stimulated further discussion. As such, potential ethical issues due to my connections to the participants and their potential connections to each other were considered throughout the research process.

Text Selection Criteria

This project incorporated six fictional narratives from six different television series: *Friends* (Crane et al., 1994-2004)*, Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Whedon et al., 1997-2003)*, Dawson's Creek* (Kapinos et al., 1998-2003)*, Gossip Girl* (Schwartz et al., 2007-2012)*, Riverdale* (Berlanti et al., 2017-2023)*,* and *A Teacher* (Fidell et al., 2020). There were four criteria for choosing these storylines.

Relationship Involves a Female High School Teacher and Teenage Male Student

Sexual relationships between male teachers and female students are problematic and more frequently occurring; however, they are not fraught with the same contradiction and distortion as those between female teachers and male students. These points apply not only in reality, but on the screen as well. My interest lay in examining the distinct nature of the female teacher in such sexualized situations and her relationship with a male student. There have been interesting findings on the influence of gender on teacher-student sexual relationships. In teacher-student relationships involving same-sex dyads, students are more likely to be perceived as victims, especially so by men when examining the male teacher-male student dyad. Men are at the same time less likely to view the female same-sex dyad as predatory, possibly due to hyper-sexualized media depictions of lesbian sex (Muniz et al., 2021). Contrarily, the lesbian teacher has been viewed by some as a dangerous predator and threat to heteronormativity (Cavanagh, 2007). These findings warrant further exploration, but my main focus is the female teacher-male student dyad because of the " 'hot for teacher' effect" (Muniz & Powers, 2022, p. 556) which glamourizes the relationship and makes it appear harmless. At the same time, female teachers are punished in distinct ways and more harshly in media representations. I want to explore the normalized sexualization of female teachers through the persistent depiction of this relationship

on television. Therefore, my interest was specific to the dynamics at play between the female high school teacher and the teenage male student.

Using Clips from Television as Opposed to Film

Although the teacher-student sexual relationship has also been depicted on film (Fedorov et al., 2018), I want to use clips from television for the key reason that the serial nature of television shows enables the audience to bond with characters. I do believe the bond that the audience has with characters to be a key factor in the outcome of the female teachers' fates. Most of the female teacher characters are guest appearances and they engage with male leads. This opens the door to being more sympathetic to the male character as we have a stronger bond with him. This has implications for how we judge the female teachers' actions. The serial nature of television also enables the characters to be more well-developed compared to film.

Using Contemporary Television Shows

Although sexualized representations of teachers on screen have been occurring since the 1960s (Fedorov et al., 2018), this study focused on more contemporary representations, the earliest airing in 1997 and the most recent in late 2020. I felt that using contemporary shows would resonate more with participants and avoid distractions based solely on the time period of the show (i.e. dated clothing or jokes). As the shows were more contemporary, there was a greater chance that participants may have watched all or parts of the series; I didn't see this as a drawback as I felt they would still be able to critically examine the shows, perhaps even see them in a new light. It is worth noting that although list spans 23 years, there is a noticeable gap between the *Dawson's Creek* storyline which aired in 1998 and the next one, *Gossip Girl,* which aired in early 2009. However, this gap does not counter the point that these relationships are frequently depicted on television. Many teacher-student sexual relationships occurred on the

small screen during this gap on shows such as: *Boy Meets World* (Jacobs, 1993-2000), *Gilmore Girls* (Sherman-Palladino et al., 2000-2007), *Degrassi: The Next Generation* (Marvin et al., 2001-2015), *Veronica Mars* (Silver et al., 2004-2008), *The O.C.* (Bartis et al., 2003-2007), and *One Tree Hill* (Schwahn et al., 2003-2012). However, these selections were not considered as they all featured a male teacher-female student dyad or were set in college.

Geographical Context and Language

To facilitate understanding and avoid misinterpretation due to language, all of the six shows used were produced and set in the United States and in English. Using only English language shows created in the United States might seem restrictive, but the worldwide appeal of these shows should be considered. Although created in the United States, these storylines are being viewed by audiences (and perhaps resonating with female teachers) around the globe. For example, both *Friends* and *Gossip Girl* are each broadcast in over 100 countries. A lot of the literature on female teacher sexuality centers on Canadian, American, and British contexts. This is not to imply that teacher-student sexual relationships are not of concern in other contexts; Myers (2006) cites examples from China, South Africa, Botswana, and Malawi, among others, to explain that the concern extends beyond North American and British contexts. Similar to the argument to use contemporary shows as they may resonate more with participants, I feel the geographical context and language of these six shows will also resonate with participants.

Brief Descriptions of the Fictional Teachers

Below is a description of each fictional teacher. The descriptions include key character traits and a brief summary of the sexual relationship. Also included in the description is a rationale for the storyline's inclusion. I focused this on one or two distinct features of the storyline to showcase the variety of the selections.

Alice Knight

Alice Knight was a minor, recurring character on the television show *Friends*. Her character first appeared in the season three episode entitled, "The One with the Hypnosis Tape" which aired on March 13th, 1997. Alice is a 44-year-old home economics teacher and is in a relationship with Phoebe's 18-year-old brother, Frank Jr. I believe that *Friends* was the show that defined my generation's upbringing. It is nothing short of beloved by audiences and is still widely watched on streaming services today. However, this cannot be an excuse to overlook the damaging teacher representation in this episode and how humor is used to justify it. The way Alice Knight's character is presented provides an interesting comparison to the other teacher characters as she looks more like a stereotypical spinster, but acts hyper-sexual. Although she appears in multiple episodes, only her first appearance was included as this is the only one that deals directly with the teacher-student sexual relationship.

Natalie French

Natalie French appeared in one episode of the fantasy series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The episode from the show's first season, titled "Teacher's Pet", aired on March 24th, 1997. Natalie French is actually a she-mantis (a mythical type of praying mantis) posing as Sunnydale High's substitute biology teacher. She assumes a beautiful female form with the goal of luring virgin teenage boys to her lair to harvest her eggs. One of those students is Buffy's friend, 16-year-old Xander Harris. Similar to *Friends, Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is also a cult phenomenon. The supernatural elements included in the series make it a fascinating addition; the other-worldly characters are metaphors for real life and it will be interesting to explore how the she-mantis compares and fares to the human teacher characters.

Tamara Jacobs

Tamara Jacobs appeared in a total of nine episodes in the first two seasons of the show *Dawson's Creek*. Seven of the episodes are relevant to the teacher-student sexual relationship; six aired in January and February 1998 and the seventh aired late October 1998. Tamara Jacobs is the newly-hired English teacher at Capeside High. She is 36 years old, new in town, and recently divorced. She meets Pacey Witter, one of the teenage male leads on the show, a few days before starting her new job and they begin their sexual relationship a few weeks into the school year. The fact that Pacey is only 15 years old is most noteworthy as he is the youngest teenage boy involved in these six storylines.

Rachel Carr

Rachel Carr is a first-year English teacher character who appeared in three episodes of *Gossip Girl*'s second season in early 2009. She has sex with an 18-year-old male student, Dan Humphrey. She is originally from Iowa and depicted as having some trouble adapting to her life as a teacher in New York City. Her character is particular due to the childlike and naïve behaviour she exhibits. In fact, although her exact age is not stated, it can be deduced through a comment she makes to Dan that she is around 23 years old, making her the youngest and most inexperienced of all six female teachers. This brings up some interesting comparisons and contrasts framed around the accountability of the teacher and student.

Geraldine Grundy

Geraldine Grundy is a 35-year-old music teacher who appeared in the first two seasons of the show *Riverdale* from January to October 2017. Based on the context of the show, this appears to be her second year teaching at Riverdale High. She is having an affair with 16-year-old Archie Andrews and their affair must remain hidden for more than just the obvious reasons; they must keep it hidden or else they will be implicated in a murder. This storyline adds variety

to the project as Miss Grundy's grooming methods are distinct from the other storylines and she meets the most dramatic end compared to the other female characters. Moreover, her character is a recreation of a classic spinster character from the Archie Comics series, thus transforming the typical spinster into a manipulative seductress.

Claire Wilson

Claire Wilson is a married, 32-year-old English teacher in the mini-series *A Teacher* released in late 2020. A couple of months into her new post at Westerbrook High School, she initiates private tutoring with one of her students, 17-year-old Eric Walker, and shortly afterwards they begin a sexual affair. Set in Texas, the mini-series in its entirety sheds light on the implications of the teacher-student sexual relationship. The mini-series is a pertinent addition due to its realism and well-developed story. Compared to some of the other texts, the fact that this one takes a more serious approach and does not mask issues and consequences with humor or outlandish plots makes it useful for comparison. Her character is also distinct as she is the only one who is married and cheating.

Researcher Reflexivity

Hennink et al. (2020) describe researcher reflexivity as "a process that involves conscious self-reflection on the part of researchers to make explicit their potential influence on the research process" (p. 19); this process is continuous and should be paid attention to throughout the entire research process. It is for this reason that I have separated my reflexivity into two sections: pre-data collection and post-data collection. I have done this with the intention to be mindful of how my role as a researcher has developed and may have shifted throughout the research process.

Researcher Reflexivity Pre-Data Collection

Researcher reflexivity has two parts, personal reflexivity and interpersonal reflexivity (Hennink et al., 2020). It is important to consider personal reflexivity before interacting with participants and collecting data as it considers my own background and assumptions and how these may influence my work. This is also the reason phase one of the study, the text analysis examining the fictional narratives as feminist backlash, was completed before participants were recruited and any focus group discussions and interviews took place. I wanted to interpret the storylines without any potential influence from the participants. Once I actually started gathering data from the participants, it was exciting to see how our ideas aligned. As a female high school teacher, I am part of the phenomenon being studied and have my own experiences pertaining to the sexualization of female teachers to reflect on. As far as my background goes, I started teaching when I was only 23 years old and taught students who were just six years younger than I was in my first year. Throughout the course of my career and to the present day, I have had to deal with comments made about my appearance and body, from both students and colleagues. Actually, at the start of this school year, one comment came from an actual stranger, a man waiting for the train after school. He noticed I was speaking to some students and then proceeded to tell me how confused he was about my physicality: I carry my things in a school bag, but I look a bit older than the kids; I'm not in a uniform, but I look young. Some may argue I am making too much out of innocent stranger conversation, but the emphasis on my appearance as a female teacher was overly emphasized and, as such, bothersome to me. Being caught in these situations, whether by colleagues, students, or strangers, is often difficult for me to handle.

In most cases, I was lost for words during these experiences. I began reflecting more concretely on the impact that these events had on me before officially starting this project, even completing a feminist *currere* describing some of them. An educational *currere* is an

autobiographical process which enables teachers to reflect on how their past educational experiences shape their present lives as teachers (Pinar, 2012). For my feminist *currere,* I reflected on memories which pertained directly to being a female teacher, those centered around things like my appearance, clothing choices, and relationship status. This *currere* enabled me to take stock of some of these experiences and better understand how the nature of comments targeted to my body and appearance really stayed with me, without my even realizing it. I assume this might be the case for fellow female teachers as well. As a researcher, these experiences and their impact are coming into the research with me.

Regarding sexual relationships between teachers and students, I have been made aware of this kind of behaviour among colleagues, both male and female, and I have always disapproved of it. I find these relationships, for a lack of a better word, *gross*. I have always viewed them as abusive and extremely inappropriate. The concept of feminist backlash inherently critiques how women are represented. As such, I do acknowledge that through using this lens, there is little opportunity to showcase these teacher representations in a positive light. However, I did attempt to acknowledge any positive aspects of the representations, which came about mostly in the analysis of *A Teacher*. Although the age gap between me and my students has widened over the last 17 years of my career, in my eyes, even when I was only six years older than my students, they have always been children. I just do not understand how an adult can bring themselves to engage in that kind of behaviour with a child. My personal stance and bias on teacher-student sexual relationships comes into play in analyzing these fictional narratives. I am against these relationships when they happen in real life; as well, I am against the constant popular representations of female teachers as out of control, sexualized beings. This positioning impacted the judgments made against the fictional female teachers in the text analysis. Hennink et al.

(2020) caution that reflexivity could become "overly self-indulgent and potentially [paralyze] the research process" (p. 20). To find the right balance it is recommended to keep track of our own position through research notes. I did this while watching and re-watching the fictional narratives; the notes outlined key scenes and dialogue, as well as personal observations. Many of these personal observations noted my opinions of the narratives.

Using feminist backlash as a frame, I went into the analysis process with the intention of critiquing these storylines. I do this not to discount the point that these relationships happen in real life, but to point out that these fictional representations do not address these abusive relationships in a responsible way. They either glamourize the relationships or skim over the implications. In examining female-perpetrated sexual abuse, Muniz and Powers (2022) write that, "teachers have a custodial relationship over students, precluding any type of consent –even if a victim is above the age of consent" (p. 553). My stance as a researcher is that these images are sensationalist, disregard the seriousness of abuse, and corrode the popular image of the female high school teacher. I acknowledge this bias and am aware that it has influenced my interpretations of the texts.

Researcher Reflexivity During and Post Data Collection

Interpersonal reflexivity is also important to consider as I used focus group discussions and individual interviews to gather data from fellow female teachers. Hennink et al. (2020) explain that the situational dynamics between the researcher and participants can impact knowledge creation. As I discussed in defining my participants and elaborating on my recruitment strategies and ethical considerations, my participants were recruited through my professional and social networks. I reached out to all the female colleagues in my current school as well as ones from schools I have worked at in the past. I also asked professional acquaintances

from private schools to pass on my recruitment email. Finally, although she was not considered for participation herself, a relative who works in a different school board was also asked to pass on the recruitment email. In the end, the participants were made up of colleagues from my current school and some that I worked with in the past; my attempts to recruit from private schools and other school boards were unfruitful.

The fact that I have an existing professional relationship with my participants is acknowledged. Merriam (2009) explains that "purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 77). I feel that this was achieved by recruiting through my professional and social networks. I tried to be aware of how attachment to my participants could affect my data collection and future interpretation of results. I kept my interpretations to a minimum during the focus group discussions and restricted my speaking points to introducing the clips and providing context when asked. With the interviews, I stuck to the interview guide, but did sometimes add personal anecdotes to compliment what the teacher participants shared. Participants asked me some questions as well during the interview, which I answered. This occasional back-and-forth questioning was only natural considering I am a teacher myself and we were discussing experiences as female teachers. A first round of member-checking happened once all the focus groups and interviews were transcribed. Participants were given the opportunity to review their focus group and interview transcripts and to let me know if, upon reflection, there were any passages they wanted removed. Nine of the 10 participants got back to me. No issues were flagged and no requests to remove data were brought to my attention.

I believe the fact that I am currently a high school teacher minimized any impact that my role as a researcher or perceived "expert" on the topic may have had. The fact that I live the same

reality as these teachers hopefully helped them see me as a peer in this process. In fact, I think in a handful of ways, the participants are the experts, not me. Half of them have been teaching for longer than I have, thus they brought more experience to the table. A handful have experience teaching in other school boards, in the private sector, and abroad; some have occupied administration and consulting posts with their school board. This is experience that I lack, as I have been a high school teacher with the same public school board my entire career. As such, the participants were able to bring in interesting comparisons to their existing reality. Another area in which they brought in expert experience that I do not have is that seven of the participants are mothers. The maternal is linked to the sexualization of the female teacher and this was discussed at many points throughout the data collection process. To reiterate, in many ways, I feel like they are the true experts.

As previously mentioned, I purposely started with the focus group discussion to make participants feel more at ease. As the sexualization of female teachers can be a sensitive topic, my hope was that participants would feel less on the spot focusing comments on the television clips as opposed to being asked direct questions. When my study was in the planning stages, part of the reflexivity process entailed being ready to have an open mind to views that differed from my own. Being against these depictions and the unnecessary hyper-sexualization of female teachers on screen, I needed to be ready to acknowledge that the participants might not view the depictions as harmful. As these relationships occur in real life, I had to be aware of the fact that I may have a participant who has engaged in such a behaviour. Throughout the data collection process, there was no indication that the participants supported these depictions or had engaged in such actions themselves. Based on points made during the data collection process, it was clear that the participants wanted to discuss the sexualization of the female teacher because they find

the representation bothersome. As will be touched on in the results and discussion, there were numerous claims about the importance of the teaching profession and the dedicated contributions of female teachers; as such, the consensus was that these images are problematic. My participants and I were definitely on the same page.

In the post-data collection phase, I feel the part in which my connection to the participants stands out the most is in wanting to do right by their words. I acknowledge that a connection to my participants already existed before the research process began as they are past and current colleagues. I feel like my connection to them has been enhanced through transcribing the data, explaining their salient points, and combining their words and mine to create shared narratives. Because I know these women, I feel an increased responsibility as a researcher to properly reflect their opinions. On the one hand, my connection to them can be a bias, but on the other hand, and more importantly, it is my motivation to be true to them. A final round of member-checking took place once the focus group and interview results, discussion, and implications were written up. Participants were given the option to review this work and to flag if they felt any of their words and ideas were misconstrued or if they felt they were misrepresented in any way. Six of the 10 participants got back to me. No issues were brought to my attention during this second phase of member-checking. Participant feedback was positive; a few specifically noted how they enjoyed reading the results and discovering how their own voice and ideas linked to those of others.

Chapter 4: Text Analysis Results and Discussion

Phase 1: Six Fictional Female High School Teachers as Popular Culture Examples of Backlash

Just as Susan Faludi (1991/2020) explored how feminist backlash myths were perpetuated on television in the 1980s, this text analysis uses her backlash theory to explore six fictional television storylines depicting a female high school teacher having sex with a teenage male student. The television storylines promote negative images of women who have, in certain ways, attained independence through their careers and they further promote the low status of single women in particular (apart from one teacher character who is married; although her marriage does end as the result of the affair). All of this is done through the specific characterization of the female high school teacher. As teachers, the female characters in the storylines exemplify the popular backlash idea that trouble arises when women attempt to be independent career women. Just as male writers and producers were highly responsible for perpetuating backlash on screen in the 1980s (Faludi, 1991/2020), a male vision is highly prominent in the writing and directing credits of the storylines. Only one of the shows, *A Teacher,* has a strong female presence in the writing and directing credits (see Table 2). According to Cragin (2015) "the meaning of television shows, films, or magazine ads might seem to reside primarily in their content, but there are many aspects of their construction as visual images that provide interpretive contexts that shape meaning" (p. 170). She lists the concept of *gaze* as the most crucial when examining media images, specifically those that sexualize women. First proposed in 1975 by Laura Mulvey, the male gaze, "a 'male' way of looking at women (based on voyeurism and fetishism)" (Cragin, p. 170) is highly embedded in media texts. The woman on screen is both an "erotic object for the characters within the screen" and an "erotic object for the spectator" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 11). The impact of the male gaze should be noted as in the six storylines discussed below, it is mostly men writing and directing the representations of female high school teachers and, from this vantage point, perpetuating this

backlash. Through these storylines, the teaching profession, a female-dominated profession, is misrepresented. These storylines lower the status of female teachers to satisfy a male fantasy, promoting the myth of the *lucky bastard* (Angelides, 2010) which classifies sex with a female teacher as a young boy's ultimate sexual fantasy. The text analysis is organized thematically, each theme encompassing backlash ideas and myths which were promoted on television throughout the 1980s and continue to be apparent today. The four themes are: (1) saved by the home, (2) save the boy, shame the teacher, (3) the best teacher seductress is a dead one, and (4) the continuation of feminist recantations.

Table 2

Male and Female Contributions to the Writing and Directing of the Six Storylines

Show	Season and Episode(s)	Writing Credits	Directing Credits
Friends	Season 3, episode 18	2 men, 1 woman	1 man
Buffy the Vampire Slayer	Season 1, episode 4	3 men	1 man
Dawson's Creek	Season 1, episodes 1&2 Season 1, episodes 3&4 Season 1, episode 5 Season 1, episode 6	1 man 2 men 1 man and 1 woman 2 men and 1 woman	1 man 1 man 1 man 1 man
Gossip Girl	Season 2, episodes 16&17 Season 2, episode 18:	2 men and 1 woman 1 man and 2 women	1 woman 1 man
Riverdale [a]	Season 1, chapters 1&2 Season 1, chapter 3 Season 1, chapter 4 Season 2, chapter 12	1 man 1 man and 1 woman 2 men 2 men	1 man 1 man 1 man 1 man
A Teacher [b]	Episodes 1, 2 Episode 3 Episodes 4, 8, 9, 10 Episodes 5, 7 Episode 6	1 woman 1 man and 1 woman 2 women 2 women 1 man and 1 woman	1 woman 1 woman 1 woman 1 man 1 man

Note. The information in Table 2 was retrieved from online records on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb).

[a] *Riverdale* refers to its episodes as "chapters".

[b] *A Teacher* is a mini-series and has no specific season(s).

Theme 1: Saved by the Home

A key facet of backlash is to stifle women's career aspirations and send them back to their only socially acceptable place of (unpaid) employment: the home. Although scientific studies tracking single women's mental health in the 1980s were virtually non-existent, nothing stopped the backlash movement from claiming that single, employed women were at a greater risk of suffering nervous breakdowns (Faludi, 1991/2020, pp. 50-51). Some psychologists termed the plight of working women an "epidemic" (p. 51) and, based on "[hunches]" (p. 50), spewed out statistics about single women making up the majority of psychiatric patients. These claims were readily believed by the public. The likely reality about single women's mental health, that "employment improves it" (p. 51) and that "single women [enjoy] far better mental health than their married sisters" (p. 51), often went ignored. This truth was likely ignored because relegating women back to the home calms any fears (i.e. male fears) of their potential advancement in the workplace. In fact, male depression rates were the ones climbing in the decade after the women's movement gains of the 1970s (p. 55). The backlash solution to single career women's faux troubles was to put career aspirations aside and accept what would truly make them happy and fulfilled in the long term: finding a husband, procreating, and focusing their efforts on the home.

Getting women back to the home was propagated by *Good Housekeeping'*s subtly deceitful New Traditionalist advertising campaign. New Traditionalist ads took up full pages in publications such as the *New York Times* and were plastered on bus shelters from 1988 to around 1990. The advertisements were impactful as they targeted a woman's sense of self as opposed to just her wallet (Darnovsky, 1991). The campaign promoted the idea of a woman embracing marriage, homemaking, and child-rearing to attain fulfillment, but promoted it as a *choice* a

woman made for herself. This played on women's desire for autonomy, by making them think the choice to go home was one they were making willingly for themselves. The ads described the New Traditionalist woman as "an independent thinker who 'made her own choices' and 'started a revolution' " (Faludi, 1991/2020, p. 106). She " 'found her identity' by serving home, husband, and kids" (p. 106). The 1980s New Traditionalist woman was in fact modelled on the typical 1950s housewife (p. 70). It is clear she was not starting a revolution, but was being manipulated into moving backwards thirty years. In addition to advertising, this concept was also promoted on television with storylines that "[brought] back regressive fantasies about motherhood and marriage" (Faludi, 1991/2020, p. 166).

Historically, we also saw a version of the glorification of the home in the teaching field. Prior to the 1950s, single female teachers, who had fewer familial obligations, were preferred hires over married teachers because of the commitment they brought to their jobs. Single female teachers fared quite well; they bonded and enjoyed strong friendships with fellow female colleagues and enjoyed the financial independence that came with their teaching job (Grumet, 1988; Tamboukou, 2000; Whitehead, 2007). However, once it was established that the single, female teacher was a threat to the typical female role of wife and mother, she was villainized and comedized. Married teachers took over the spinster teacher's top status after the 1950s. Young, married women, even if they abandoned teaching a few years after being hired to focus on the home, became the professional ideal (Cavanagh, 2005).

Alice Knight: How to Become a Domestic Seductress

Of the six female teacher characters, there is only one who is spared a negative fate. When we consider that two of the six teachers end up dead, Alice Knight fares *really* well and this is due in large part to her mirroring the New Traditionalist idea of womanhood. Played by

Debra Jo Rupp, Alice Knight was a minor, recurring character on the television show *Friends* (Crane et al., 1994-2004). Although she made guest appearances in a total of six episodes throughout the series' third and fifth seasons, her most notable appearance is her first in the season three episode entitled, "The One with the Hypnosis Tape" (Crane et al., 1997) which aired on March 13th, 1997. Phoebe is excited to meet her 18-year-old brother Frank Jr.'s new girlfriend. Her excitement quickly dissipates when it turns out to be Alice, his 44-year-old home economics teacher. The relationship is presented as a serious one as Frank Jr. and Alice reveal that they have imminent plans to get married for they "wanna have kids right away" (Crane et al., 1997, 5:27). Phoebe rallies her friends, Ross and Joey, to convince Frank that the relationship is a bad idea and to end it. When this attempt fails, Phoebe tries an alternate method, convincing Alice to dump Frank. This attempt works, but only for a brief moment. The couple cannot seem to take their hands off of each other –their intense public make-out sessions became a running joke throughout their storyline– which leads to Phoebe giving in and deciding she will "let this [relationship] happen" (Crane et al., 1997, 21:52).

Friends is a light-hearted sitcom, but more importantly it is one of the most beloved sitcoms to have ever aired. It essentially defined the late 1990s and early 2000s and audiences today are still "addicted to it" (Morris, 2020, para. 23). An avid fan of the sitcom myself, I always enjoyed Alice's appearances, for there is something endearing about Debra Jo Rupp, a great actor whose comedic work is commendable and authentic. My genuine adoration of the show and of Rupp as an actor are perhaps biases that originally prevented me from seeing the serious issues this storyline presents. The fact that the show is a comedy can also be a barrier to seeing these issues. We may chuckle at her intense make out sessions with Frank, but in these scenes, Alice demonstrates the overt sexual aggressivity often associated to the female teacher

seductress. Her aggressivity is also shown when she suggestively growls at Frank right before one of their kissing scenes (Crane et al., 1997, 6:08). Her relatively plain appearance juxtaposes her sexual aggressivity, making the whole situation comical. However, if the relationship between 44-year-old Alice and 18-year-old Frank were real, Alice would likely face intense public scrutiny and outrage. Not only would her actions and physical appearance be put under the microscope, she would likely end up in jail and never find herself in front of a classroom again.

What is most interesting is that there are no negative consequences for Alice. She quickly gains the acceptance of the main characters and of audiences by the end of her first episode, she never loses her job, she marries Frank, and Phoebe becomes a surrogate for their triplets. Alice is different from the typical female teacher seductress on television as she ends up building a traditional life with Frank, composed of marriage and multiple children; therefore, we accept her. Alice's eagerness to marry Frank and have children play up the angle that she has been a lonely spinster for a long time and is now finally starting her life outside the classroom. Although she never leaves her job as a teacher, she still supports New Traditionalist principles through teaching home economics. Through her subject, she can promote back-to-the-home ideals by teaching young women how to turn a ruined tablecloth into "a stylish throw" (Crane et al., 1997, 13:48). Alice also promotes New Traditionalist ideals through her connection to motherhood. Female teachers have a "long history of being coded as mother, lover of children" (Cavanagh, 2007) and even though Alice distorts this natural code by being a seductress (Tamboukou, 2000), she is still accepted by audiences because she becomes the mother of Frank's children. However, we tend to overlook the fact that she is old enough to be Frank's *actual* mother, and not just the

mother of his children. With 26 years between them, Alice could have likely birthed Frank. Although this should come across as disturbing, for some reason it does not.

Conversely, it is the single women (a group harshly criticized in backlashes) on the periphery of the Frank and Alice storyline that are depicted negatively, even though, unlike Alice, they have not engaged in criminal activity. Frank's actual mother, referred to as Mrs. Buffay, is single and bitter. We can infer this from a season 2 episode when Phoebe shows up at her door looking for her father and Mrs. Buffay remarks sarcastically and resentfully that he left the house to go grocery shopping four years ago and she is expecting him back any minute (Crane et al., 1996, 16:50). As she is single, it makes sense from a backlash perspective to present her as bitter. She is mentioned twice throughout "The One with the Hypnosis Tape" and in both instances in a negative sense. In the first instance, Frank briefly recounts that he fought with his mother because she claims that, at 18, he is too immature to get married. There is agreement to this from friends Monica, Ross, and Joey, thus supporting Mrs. Buffay's opinion. Later in the episode, Frank recounts that his mother tied him to the porch to prevent his relationship with Alice from continuing. We accept and like Alice, but lean toward disliking the single and somewhat aggressive Mrs. Buffay. However, aren't Alice's actions worse? Although tying her son to the porch is somewhat questionable, Mrs. Buffay's resistance to the marriage is reasonable.

Although we never stop liking Phoebe as a character, in this episode she is single and her actions are self-labelled as evil. From a backlash perspective, singlehood and evilness are a well-matched pair. She has to defend her supposedly cruel actions, saying, "I know that you think I did this, like, totally evil thing, but I so didn't" (Crane et al., 1997, 20:18). She says this when explaining why she pushed Alice to break off the relationship. She has to defend herself even

though her initial reaction to the relationship is justifiable. When she first hears about the relationship she tells her friends it is "sick and wrong" (Crane et al., 1997, 7:53), that it is "not fair to Frank" (Crane et al., 1997, 8:15) and that "it's not good home economics" (Crane et al., 1997, 8:20). These statements show that the relationship is problematic; I would argue that the average gut reaction to a relationship between an 18 and 44-year-old is that it is "sick and wrong". However, the apparent love between Frank and Alice, their path towards New Traditionalism, and some well-timed jokes, make us overlook this. Phoebe ends up having to repair the indisputably problematic relationship she broke apart. It is the single women who are the wrong-doers for they exhibit resentment, use physical restraint, and are against the relationship. They are, ironically, cast as the evil-doers who are blocking Frank and Alice from potential happiness. Alice, who is in the position of the seductress, is not treated as one. We are not threatened by her or afraid of her; moreover, we have a hard time distinguishing her actions as dangerous.

In the end, there is a lot that is wrong with Frank and Alice's relationship. Yet, it is the one that is the most digestible to audiences. It seems that Alice's depiction as a single woman who desires to lead a more traditional life through marriage and child-rearing is what saves her. We forget as an audience that she used some questionable means to attain this New Traditionalist goal. We forgive and accept her actions because she gets married and has children. At the same time, the image of the female teacher as a professional gets thrown to the wayside.

Theme 2: Save the Boy, Shame the Teacher

The professionalism of the female high school teacher is also threatened in storylines that shame her at the expense of the teenage male characters. Both Tamara Jacobs from *Dawson's Creek* (Kapinos et al., 1998-2003) and Rachel Carr from *Gossip Girl* (Schwartz et al., 2007-

2012) meet a shameful end after they have sex with a male student. Both are English teachers, new to their jobs, and take almost no time at all to get close to their teenage male students. Despite their positions of authority as teachers, these female characters are powerless, naïve, and silenced. In the late 1980s film and television, "women [were] reduced to mute and incidental characters" (Faludi, 1991/2020, p. 151) while networks "[boosted] their macho output" (Faludi, 1991/2020, p. 157). Male actors, such as Tom Selleck in *Magnum P.I.,* were told to act more masculine and toughen up. Even though polls showed that audiences were not that interested in more police dramas and Westerns showcasing heroic, tough men, executives claimed that audiences were "sick of male 'wimps'" (Faludi, 1991/2020, p. 157). Network executives wanted heroic men on screen and the message that boys win out is one we witness decades later in the *Dawson's Creek* and *Gossip Girl* storylines. Both Tamara and Rachel are silenced and ostracized while their male counterparts get out of the controversial relationship with no negative repercussions.

Tamara Jacobs: The Shamed Sea-Side-Town Seductress

The teen drama *Dawson's Creek* (Kapinos et al., 1998-2003) premiered in January 1998. Set in the fictional sea-side town of Capeside, Massachusetts, the show chronicled the lives of four teenagers as they navigated relationships, found their identity, and explored their sexuality. The drama was an immediate hit with audiences. Pacey Witter, played by Joshua Jackson, was one of the four leads and his storyline when the show premiered involved losing his virginity to the new English teacher at Capeside High, Tamara Jacobs, played by Leann Hunley. Through Pacey's storyline, the show made its introduction to audiences using (or perhaps, exploiting) the concept of the female teacher as a seductress. As the show was new and Tamara was not a permanent character, it seems the storyline was used just for its shock effect and to draw in

audiences. With almost no female presence in the writing and directing credits of the six episodes that make up the majority of Tamara and Pacey's storyline (see Table 2), we can infer that the single female high school teacher is used as collateral damage to perpetuate the male adolescent fantasy of sleeping with an older, attractive teacher, or as Tamara discusses in one of her lessons, claiming the "forbidden fruit" (Williamson et al., 1998b, 9:57).

Pacey's character serves as an interesting contrast to the other male characters making up this analysis for a few reasons and this contrast adds to the powerlessness exhibited by Tamara. First, at 15-years-old at the time of the relationship, he is the youngest teenage male. He is also the only one in which it is clearly stipulated that he loses his virginity to his teacher, in what he calls a "high-level fantasy fashion" (Williamson & Miner, 1998a, 25:10). What is interesting about Pacey is the maturity and power the writers chose for him to demonstrate throughout the story arc despite his young age; this is also frustrating as it passes on the message that a 36-year-old woman is incapable of showing more maturity than a 15-year-old boy. From a backlash perspective it makes sense that Tamara, as an older, single woman, is flawed. Backlashes paint a single woman's life as a "gallery of horrors" (Faludi, 1991/2020, p. 115); they succumb to poor decision making and mental instability, for which the only cure is marriage (Faludi, 1991/2020). We see Pacey's contrasting maturity in a few instances. Shortly after they sleep together, Pacey spots his teacher conversing and laughing with another teacher, Mr. Gold. His immediate reaction is jealousy as he inaccurately assumes that Tamara is also sleeping with Mr. Gold. When Pacey confronts Tamara about this, he questions her morality and judgment by stating that she should have told him she was sleeping with multiple partners considering the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases (Williamson et al., 1998a, 27:29). Despite the fact that jealousy is his prime motivator, at 15-years-old, it is a fairly mature request to be clear about how many

sexual partners one has in concurrence with another. In terms of power, Pacey is shown to demonstrate this over his teacher when he first tries to make a connection with her. Tamara insists there was no sexual intention behind their interactions, but Pacey feels strongly that she was flirting with him. Instead of allowing her to speak, he, in a haughty tone demonstrating anger at being rejected, explains the situation to her. Or in the context of modern vernacular, he mansplains it to her. He tells her that she finds flirting with young boys enticing because she is "feeling a little insecure about hitting 40" (Williamson & Miner, 1998a, 38:05). Fantasizing about sleeping with a young boy "helps [her] stay feeling attractive" (Williamson & Miner, 1998a, 38:18). He presents these explanations to her as truths. As an older, attractive, and single woman, Tamara is presented as a sexual tease. Her response to Pacey gives him even more power in this situation. In response to this she tells him he is not a boy, implying she sees him as a grown man, and kisses him. She then apologizes and abruptly leaves. Her powerlessness is obvious: in response to a boy's reproach (for he is just a boy), she is not only apologetic, but reinforces his rebuke and grants him power by kissing him.

Pacey is further portrayed as a mature hero when he saves his teacher's reputation. News of the affair spreads throughout the school when Pacey openly tells his best friend about it in the school bathroom and they are overheard by someone in the next stall. However, Pacey is the one who saves the day for his teacher. When she is brought before the board, he steps in and lies on her behalf so she does not have to. He tells the board that although he is impressed by how serious they are taking the allegations, they should "chalk [this] up to adolescent fantasy" (Williamson et al., 1998b, 26:07). Tamara looks at him with both admiration and appreciation as he says this. As a lead character, Pacey needs to come out of this storyline unscathed. When he visits his teacher one last time, she tells him that he does not need to apologize for his actions in

the bathroom and that she is “deeply appreciative” of him taking the blame (Williamson et al., 1998b, 35:03). She lets him off the hook and the audience follows suit.

Tamara’s self-descriptions highlight some of the misconceptions and judgements about older, single women at the hands of backlash. After first kissing Pacey, she explains that they did something “absurd” (Williamson & Miner, 1998a, 33:55) and that her actions were “deadly wrong” (Williamson & Miner, 1998a, 34:10). She continues to say that he deserves an explanation, but that would get into “10 years of therapy” (Williamson & Miner, 1998b, 34:22). Moreover, she describes herself as being in a “hopelessly troubled state of mind” (Williamson & Miner, 1998a, 34:14). Her comment about her mindset and her insinuation that she has been in therapy for a decade are both said in a self-deprecating way. When privately tutoring Pacey outside school hours –for it appears every female teacher-male student sexual storyline on television needs to start with this cliché– he tries to shift the tutoring session to something more sexual. In a twisted play on reverse psychology to try to scare Pacey about the reality of the situation, Tamara says they should have sex on her desk and asks him if he has condoms with him (Williamson et al., 1998c, 19:04). Pacey has been demonstrating macho confidence up until this point, even telling his teacher that he is “the best sex [she’ll] never have” (Williamson & Miner, 1998a, 38:28) when she first refuses him, but this clearly throws him off and he shyly explains that this would be his first time. Realizing the impact of her ploy, Tamara is startled and ashamed. She tells Pacey he should go home and find someone his own age instead of an “insane middle-aged woman” (Williamson et al., 1998c, 19:39). Describing herself as an insane woman whose actions can only be dissected through a decade of therapy mirrors the backlash misconception that single women were in constant states of “psychic distress” (Faludi, 1991/2020, p. 111).

Tamara's most prominent moment of shame occurs after the affair comes out. Students in class are outright degrading her with sexual comments and innuendos. While teaching *Romeo and Juliet,* Tamara announces to the class that it is "the most notable exploration of the forbidden fruit theme that [they'll] examine this year"; to that, a student mumbles "not anymore" loudly enough for everyone to hear (Williamson et al., 1998b, 9:59). The most notable exploration is now the rumor circulating that she had sex with Pacey. Once Pacey sits down in class, another student, again loud enough for everyone to hear, asks him to settle the bet over whether Tamara's breasts are real or silicon. At this crass remark, she utters an empty threat about staying after class to which the student replies "you promise?" (Williamson et al., 1998b, 10:20). At this, all Tamara does is stare at Pacey while her body and reputation are being degraded by her teenage students. Although Pacey looks somewhat embarrassed, the rest of the boys do not. The boys in the class are written as the ones with the power; they flaunt their power with little regard for any authority the teacher might have. The message is that they can openly insult, sexualize, and demean their female teacher with no consequences to their actions. When a female teacher exerts authority, male students can retaliate by targeting her body (Fisanick, 2007).

Completing her image as a troubled single woman, Tamara is further self-deprecating and silent when she decides to leave Capeside. She explains that just because she is older and more mature, it does not mean she knows what to say in break-up situations. She tells Pacey that she is 36 and wants to be the mother of a child and not the girlfriend of a child (Williamson et al., 1998b, 37:08). She mentions her ticking clock (Williamson et al., 1998b, 37:04), a classic backlash myth used to scare women who delayed motherhood to pursue their education and career and to steer them back to the traditional path of child-rearing (Faludi 1991/2020). Alice from *Friends* was accepted because she was a motherly-figure. Her storyline was also comedic

allowing jokes to be made at her expense; this lightens the seriousness of the situation. Moreover, Frank was not a series regular so there was no need to prioritize the audience's view of him over Alice. This cannot happen for Tamara. Her reputation and career need to be sacrificed to save Pacey, the series regular. As such, the reputation of female high school teachers is also diminished. She brought some shock-value to a new show which likely garnered some audience attention and now she can be tossed aside. She resigns from her teaching job and announces that she is leaving Capeside and, in a very spinster-style move, will go and live with her sister in Rochester (Williamson et al., 1998b, 35:53). While in Capeside, she lived alone in a house on the beach, but she is now no longer an independent woman capable of living on her own. Alas, Tamara is not the only poorly-portrayed female teacher whose storyline ends in shameful retreat.

Rachel Carr: The Seductress who gets Shamefully Schooled

Laura Breckenridge portrayed first-year teacher Rachel Carr in three episodes of *Gossip Girl*'s (Schwartz et al., 2007-2012) second season. The main focus of the three episodes is her illicit relationship with 18-year-old student, Dan Humphry, one of the male leads on the show played by Penn Badgley. When Rachel's actions catch up to her, Gossip Girl –the voice behind the online platform students use to spread gossip– announces, "Looks like the teacher just got schooled" (Queller et al., 2009, 16:21). Throughout Rachel's storyline, various teacher puns are delivered at her expense, but this one about being schooled seems to capture her character completely. She is the exaggeratingly naïve teacher seductress who has to be taught a lesson.

Being the youngest teacher in this analysis, it is not surprising that Rachel's most dominating character trait is her childishness. Similar to silencing women on television and film, backlashes also use various measures to infantilize women. One way in which this was done in

the 1980s was through clothing, with male designers promoting clothing that made women look like human dolls. Even though female buyers fought against these trends through their refusal to buy such items, infantilized fashion kept coming because

> minimizing the female form might be one way for designers to maximize their authority over it. The woman who walks in tiny steps clutching a teddy bear –as so many did on the late '80s runways– is a child who follows instructions. (Faludi, 1991/2020, p. 198)

Rachel is infantilized throughout her storyline. Textual evidence from the show suggests that Rachel is around 23-25 years old. Her current job at Constance Billard School is her first paying teacher contract and when she is first noticed by Dan, he assumes she is a "new kid" (Schwartz et al., 2009a, 6:14). She is infantilized from this first descriptor. When Serena, Dan's on-again/off-again girlfriend, explains that she is the new Shakespeare teacher, Dan is shocked and asks if she is suffering from "Benjamin Button syndrome" (Schwartz et al., 2009a, 6:18) implying that she looks too young to be a teacher. When Rachel and Dan become closer, she expresses that there would be potential to date if he was older and she wistfully jokes that he can "call [her] in five years" (Schwartz et al., 2009b, 26:59). This evidence supports the inference about her young age. Her physical age and appearance cannot be helped, but Rachel's behavior does nothing to show maturity or authority as an educator and she is represented as excessively childish. Having just moved to New York from Iowa, the stereotype of the lost country girl in the big city is enhanced with Rachel. She calls herself "out of place" (Schwartz et al., 2009a, 6:40) and appears over-reliant on students to learn the ropes of the big city; she is the child who needs and follows instructions.

Rachel's childishness is what leads to her eventual downfall. When Blair Waldorf, a student with a lot of influence and power, decides she is going to get revenge on Rachel for a low grade and really show her what it means to teach at Constance, the reasoning is that "A new teacher is like a child. It has to be taught. And spanked" (Schwartz et al., 2009a, 19:44). The sexual connotation behind the word spanked could allude to her eventual relationship with Dan, but the idea of her being referred to as a child who has to be taught is what really encapsulates her character. Rachel acts like a child when she herself spreads rumors on Gossip Girl, a practice amongst students she first condemns for it is what sparks rumors about her and Dan (and at that point, they were just rumors). The rumors spread about her threatened her job, so she counters by spreading gossip which revokes Blair's acceptance to Yale. When her sexual relationship with Dan actually begins, Rachel is presented as the one who cannot control herself. Moments before sleeping with Dan, Rachel is dismissed from her teaching post because of the rumors of a potential relationship with Dan, the evidence being a photo of Dan stroking Rachel's hair while they are dining at a restaurant (Schwartz et al., 2009b, 33:28). Dan visits her at her apartment to apologize for his behaviour at the restaurant, but Rachel interrupts him with a kiss and declares "I don't teach at Constance anymore" (Schwartz et al., 2009b, 40:17) implying they are free to act on their feelings. At that, they immediately jump into bed. We can note a parallel between Dan and Pacey here as they both show the maturity to apologize for their impulsive actions. Although Rachel has just been fired from her teaching job for possibly the worst reason ever, she does not seem to have any qualms about this. In fact, her claim about not working at Constance anymore is said with relief. In this scenario, she, the adult, is represented as the teenager unable to control sexual urges. The punishment for her sin as a seductress begins right away. In an

ironic twist of fate, while she is having sex with Dan, her headmistress is leaving her a voicemail explaining that they have reconsidered her termination (Schwartz et al., 2009b, 40:50).

Not only does Blair consider Rachel a child who needs to be punished for her actions, Rachel is also reprimanded like a child when Dan's father, Rufus, intercepts a note she wrote for Dan. In the note she asks Dan to meet her at her apartment for a tryst and even leaves him a key. She creates a romantic, candle-lit setting in her apartment, but, in an especially cringe-worthy scene, it is Rufus who shows up at her door. Like a child caught behaving badly, Rachel can say nothing to defend herself when Rufus hands her back the key. Gossip Girl does chime in though, stating, "Poor Miss Iowa caught playing Mrs. Robinson. Looks like the teacher just got schooled" (Queller et al., 2009, 16:21). We would hope Rachel would learn from her actions, but this does not end up being the case. A little while later she crosses paths with Dan in the hallway at school and admits that it was "reckless" (Queller et al., 2009, 21:46) of her to send the note; they sneak into the school's costume closet to talk privately, but immediately end up having sex on school grounds.

Similar to Pacey in *Dawson's Creek,* Dan is the one who is portrayed as the adult and he is the character who needs to come out of this storyline in the better position. The storyline purposely sets him up as an adult who is conscious of the consequences of his decisions. After the key interception, Rufus warns his son about the potential consequences of his relationship with Rachel: That she could be fired and he could be expelled. Dan's counter argument: He is 18 and he can make his own decisions about who he dates (Queller et al., 2009, 16:52). The emphasis on him being 18 takes away any legal issues stemming from the storyline and ensures that when the love affair ends, there are no lasting legal issues to contend with. It seems like this statement of age was purposely used to counter any negative effects of the storyline on Dan's

character; after all, he is a lead on the show and needs to come out of this storyline as well-liked as he was before it started. Being well into the second season, the audience has a bond with him and that needs to be upheld. This leaves Rachel to be the only one punished for the relationship and leaves Dan on the moral high ground.

Dan maintains the moral high ground, maturity, and authority from the start of his encounter with Rachel. When she first goes to visit him at Rufus' art gallery and Dan calls her Miss Carr, she corrects him and says he can call her Rachel (Schwartz et al., 2009a, 40:22). She gives up some of her authority in this instance. When a rumor spreads about Dan "giving a certain new teacher more than just an apple" (Schwartz et al., 2009b, 13:09), Dan's male classmates high-five him and say "Good job man!" and "Way to go!" (Schwartz et al., 2009b, 12:32). This exemplifies the myth of the lucky bastard (Angelides, 2010) in which the teenage boy is praised for fulfilling the ultimate teenage boy fantasy of sleeping with a female teacher, but is also used as a way to uphold Dan's character. Instead of relishing in the praise from his peers, Dan, who has not slept with Rachel at this point, demonstrates maturity and integrity, calling the rumor "absurd" (Schwartz et al., 2009b, 13:26) and questioning why anyone would do something like that to a teacher "everyone [loves]" (Schwartz et al., 2009b, 14:03).

Rachel does try to reclaim some of her lost authority, but fails. As the potentially powerful female teacher is a threat to a young boy's budding masculinity, he must reduce her to an object, more specifically a sex object, and reclaim his power (Jagodzinski, 2006; Johnson, 2005; Johnson, 2006). Dan's behaviour accomplishes this. When Rachel tries to reclaim some authority by acting like her teenage students (i.e. by spreading gossip on Gossip Girl) it blows up in her face and is what prompts Dan to scold her and put her in her place. He tells he that all her "talk about integrity and ideals" (Queller et al., 2009, 34:15) is now meaningless. In addition, he

tells Rachel that even though both she and Blair connivingly spread gossip, her actions are worse because she is the adult (Queller et al., 2009, 34:28). In this scene, Rachel's actions in the costume closet also catch up to her. The audience learns that Dan was somewhat deceitful in the costume closet. The words he spoke to Rachel about his inability to stay away from her end up being lines from a play he is rehearsing, thus insincere. We witness Rachel realizing she has been duped while watching the performance in the auditorium (Queller et al., 2009, 27:45). Although she confronts Dan about his performance of these lines, Dan still comes out the victor. When he tells Blair that Rachel is responsible for the revocation of her Yale acceptance, he also flippantly adds "and we just had sex in the costume closet so you can do whatever you want with that" (Queller et al., 2009, 34:52), implying she can send it to Gossip Girl and punish Rachel for her actions. In the end, she is the seductress who must pay for her transgressions. She is the one who apologizes to Blair for her actions and claims she does not know who she has become (Queller et al., 2009, 35:38). Rachel's final moment on the show further saves Dan. Shunned from New York City, she heads home to Iowa in shame, but makes sure to send Dan a repentant letter before she leaves, thanking him for his kindness.

Both Tamara and Rachel are presented as helpless women who need to be saved by men (even teenaged men), a trend that was also perpetuated in 1980s backlash (Faludi, 1991/2020). At the end of their storylines, they have no option but to withdraw, leaving their respective jobs in shame. They were initially presented as teachers who could make a positive impact. Tamara shows genuine concern for Pacey's academic problems (Williamson et al., 1998c, 6:05). Rachel supportively reads and provides feedback on Dan's short stories (Schwartz et al., 2009b, 3:06) and is presented as the only teacher to ever genuinely care about Serena (Schwartz et al., 2009a, 13:17). We must question why this altruistic behaviour is frequently presented as a catalyst to a

sexual relationship on television and the messages perpetuated by presenting career-minded and caring teachers in such a negative and unrealistic light. Tamara and Rachel should face consequences for their actions, as should any teacher –male or female– in real life. That is not the issue. The issue is the perpetuation of the female teacher-male student sexual relationship storyline and how it degrades female teachers and sugar-coats the consequences on young men.

Both Tamara and Rachel are portrayed as helpful, but this is over-powered by their weak-minded personalities. Contrary to this, there are two female teacher characters who exhibit stronger personalities. Their storylines suggest that the teacher transgressor must pay a price for her crimes. The weak female teachers face a shameful retreat. The strong teachers face something worse: violent death.

Theme 3: The Best Teacher Seductress is a Dead One

By the mid-1980s, television storylines in which women were viciously attacked became ubiquitous, rivalling slasher films. It was becoming increasingly difficult to find women in starring roles on television; most appeared on screen in guest-starring roles as victims of various crimes and illnesses (Faludi, 1991/2020, p. 156). This was also evident on the big screen where audiences witnessed one female character after another being subjected to violence. It is rather distressing to learn that these portrayals of violence were sometimes celebrated by audiences. One such example would be male audiences cheering during the gang rape scene in the film *The Accused* (Faludi, 1991/2020, p. 151). The message on screen in the 1980s was that the best kind of single woman was a dead one (Faludi, 1991/2020, p. 136). The analysis below will demonstrate that the female teacher seductress on screen is not spared from a violent fate.

As documented in the literature, the teacher as seductress is a threatening and abhorred figure because of the threat she poses to heteronormativity and the Oedipal anxieties that stem

from this (Cavanagh, 2007). In real-life accounts of female teachers who have slept with male students, the female teacher is villainized by the media (Jagodzinski, 2006). As the predatory female teacher is seen as dangerous, the threat she poses must be dealt with. Two of the storylines choose to deal with this threat by killing the female teacher. Natalie French from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Whedon et al., 1997-2003) and Geraldine Grundy from *Riverdale* (Berlanti et al., 2017-2023) are two female teacher characters who are violently killed for their actions. This further denigrates the status of the female teacher. This is not to say that the female teacher seductress should not face consequences for her actions, whether we are discussing a real-life case or a fictional one. However, to see women violently killed on screen while male counterparts in the same situation get off without punishment (or are even rewarded) demonstrates the double-standard. For example, Ross on *Friends* faces no negative repercussions when he dates his student Elizabeth and on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* teaching assistant Riley Finn dates Buffy with no consequence. In *Pretty Little Liars* (King et al., 2010-2017)*,* Ezra Fitz ends up marrying his teenage student, Aria, in the series finale. Even in real-life, male teachers face less punishment (Lane, 1998; Winks, 1982).

Natalie and Geraldine are both presented as villainous and manipulative throughout their storylines, which is meant to justify their deserved fate. However, in the end, not much is learned from their deaths and both characters' purposes seem to only promote negative stereotypes about female high school teachers. Again, this is mostly a promotion of a male perspective of the profession as there is no female presence in the writing and directing credits for the episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and only one female writer credited in the six episodes that cover the *Riverdale* storyline (see Table 2).

Natalie French: Slaying the Seductive She-Mantis

As a teacher, I have never been fond of the phrase 'teacher's pet' as it implies favoritism from the teacher and insincerity from the student. However, as the title of the fourth episode in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* (Whedon et al., 1997-2003) debut season, it works well. In "Teacher's Pet", which aired on March 24th, 1997, actor Musetta Vander makes a guest appearance as the substitute biology teacher, Natalie French. She assumes the role after beheading Dr. Gregory, the students' actual biology teacher, and stuffing his body in the cafeteria freezer. After a series of suspicious events, Buffy and her friends conclude that Miss French is not who she seems. She is actually a she-mantis, a mythical type of praying mantis, and her motive for killing Dr. Gregory is to have access to virgin teenage boys to fertilize her eggs. Although her character appears in only one episode, an analysis of Natalie French contributes to understanding how sexualized popular culture representations of female teachers serve to promote the backlash against women's progress. The series is based on the fantastical and every episode typically introduces a new vampire, demon, or force of darkness that must be contended with. The fact that the force of darkness in question here is a female teacher and the fact that the mystical elements of the show give creative license to exaggerate storylines, we see the envelope being pushed: Negative messages about female high school teachers, and by extension women in general, can be enhanced as the show is not rooted in and restricted to realism. As there is no human-side to her character, we root for Buffy when she slays Natalie. However, we need to consider the implications of characterizing Natalie as a teacher. Natalie French's character exaggerates stereotypes of the female teacher as both a spinster and as a femme-fatale.

According to Cavanagh (2006), spinster teachers suffering from the masculinity complex were considered physically unattractive, which contributed to their overall mental instability (Cavanagh, 2006). This is similar to the myth that single women are believed to be more prone to

mental instability (Faludi, 1991/2020). Although Natalie is very overt with her sexuality, she also demonstrates some traits of the lonely, unstable, and (apparently) physically unattractive spinster. We see this in a brief scene depicting her eating lunch in a typical spinster fashion: Alone at her desk, for even at school the spinster has no social life. Her lunch itself is quite bland and pathetic, composed of white bread with mayonnaise spread on it. In all fairness she does surprise the audience by adding bugs to the mayonnaise right before the scene ends (Whedon et al., 1997, 24:15), but the overall boring, solitary lunch represents the spinster as one too dedicated to school to do much else, including ensuring that she has a decent meal to eat. In her introductory lesson to the class she introduces the praying mantis and this scene further establishes her identity as a spinster. In her description of the cannibalistic praying mantis, which unbeknownst to her students is a self-description, she calls the insects "noble, solitary, [and] prolific" (Whedon et al., 1997, 12:01). As demonstrated in the literature, it would be difficult to find three terms that would better capture spinsters and the reverence shown towards them before the 1950s (Cavanagh, 2005; Atkinson, 2008). They are also "forced to live alone" (Whedon et al., 1997, 11:37) highlighting the loneliness of the single spinster.

Paralleling a spinster, Natalie appears to go to great lengths to make up for her bodily inferiority (Cavanagh, 2006) and one scene in particular is quite telling in proving that she does have a bodily inferiority complex. When she shows the students a praying mantis, with its triangular head and bulging eyes, she asks Buffy why the insect would live alone. Buffy suggests because it is "bug ugly" (Whedon et al., 1997, 11:44). The other students laugh, but the comment stops Natalie in her tracks; she looks saddened and insulted for it is as if she is being called ugly. Her reaction shows offense and insecurity. This is likely the reason she has overcompensated by taking on such an attractive human form. In fact, most comments about her refer to her pleasing

physical appearance. When Giles, the school librarian, says that "she's lovely. Well, in a common, extremely well-proportioned way" (Whedon et al., 1997, 19:43), Buffy proceeds to call her "Miss Well-Proportioned" (Whedon et al., 1997, 19:47). When Natalie is officially discovered for what she is, a she-mantis, it is noted that she was born in 1907 making her 90 years old. At this Giles comments that she is "extremely well-preserved" (Whedon et al., 1997, 35:50).

Compared to her traits as a spinster, Natalie's traits as a seductress are much more overt. Ultimately, her actions as a seductress are what warrant her slaying. Her ploy to lure virgin boys to her basement lair means she needs to get the students to her home. She lures Xander to her house by pretending that she left the supplies they needed for an afterschool project at home. Instead of doing what any logical teacher would do, to reconvene on another day, she suggestively invites Xander over in the evening to work on it. As if the invitation was not inappropriate enough, when he arrives she is dressed in a low-cut, short black dress to work on a science project. When she coyly asks Xander if she should change, he responds, "that's the most beautiful chest –dress– I've ever seen" (Whedon et al., 1997, 27:54) and she seems pleased at his Freudian slip. By this point the audience knows she is not what she seems, although Xander does not. This could cause us to overlook the damaging female teacher representations present here. We know she is not actually a teacher so perhaps her actions become excusable. However, their inappropriateness has to be acknowledged as she is taking on the role of a teacher. We need to consider the actions that follow: she serves Xander a martini which is likely tainted as it causes him to pass out minutes later; while stroking his face she asks him if he has ever been with a woman, and when he sheepishly looks at her implying that he has not, she tells him "I like it. You might say, I need it" (Whedon et al., 1997, 29:19); she then draws attention to his hands and

asks him “Would you like to touch me with those hands?” (Whedon et al., 1997, 29:57). Like the teacher seductress described as a femme fatale, Natalie French clearly demonstrates her sexual aggressivity and authority in this exchange with Xander. In her first lesson on the praying mantis she explains that the female praying mantis is more aggressive than the male and a student comments with the sexual innuendo that there is “nothing wrong with an aggressive female” (Whedon et al., 1997, 12:12). However, we do find aggressive females, or more specifically, authoritative and powerful female teachers, problematic. Jagodzinski (2006) explains that once the male student seduces the authoritative teacher and reclaims his own authority, the femme fatale is punished. Natalie French is still punished even though she never gets to seduce Xander in the end. Buffy storms the lair just in time and hacks off the evil teacher’s head. In this instance, the audience feels a sense of relief when the scary female teacher is killed.

Geraldine Grundy: The Seductress Takes her Final Bow

It is likely that when most people think of teacher Geraldine Grundy from the famous Archie Comics series, they picture her in a purple outfit, scowling, and with her grey hair in a classic bun. However, the creators –to be more specific, the male creators– of the series *Riverdale* (Berlanti et al., 2017-2023), which is based on the characters from the comic series, chose to depict her as a 35-year-old music teacher. Instead of a traditional grey-haired bun, this Geraldine’s trademark are her supposedly seductive, yet childish-looking, red heart-shaped sunglasses. As opposed to being depicted as a typical spinster, she is young, beautiful, and involved in a sexual relationship with her 16-year-old student, Archie Andrews. Played by Sarah Habel, Geraldine Grundy had a pivotal role in the series’ debut season. In the series opener, the audience finds out that she is already in the middle of an affair with Archie, played by K.J. Apa. In a flashback scene a few minutes into the first episode of the show, we see her driving around

in her old Volkswagen Beetle; she spots a buff Archie walking home from his day-shift on a construction site. She lowers her heart-shaped glasses to get a good, lusting look at him. She does not seem to be phased by the fact that this is her student and she smiles as she offers him a ride. The scene then cuts to night-time where she and Archie are having sex in her car (Aguirre-Sacasa & Toland Krieger, 2017a, 13:35). The affair continues throughout the summer and things get complicated when Geraldine and Archie hear a gun shot while out on a secret picnic. When the body of a student, Jason Blossom, is discovered a few days later, Archie realizes the gun shot they heard relates to Jason's murder. Archie feels compelled to go to the police; however, Geraldine refuses as it will reveal their affair. She uses her power over him claiming that if he says something, they will "never see each other again…I'm putting myself in your hands" (Aguirre-Sacasa & Toland Krieger, 2017b, 17:11). This example shows how she manipulates Archie. Geraldine is portrayed as having no morals, only caring about herself, and as being incapable of learning from her actions. Archie, a teenager, is portrayed as being capable of distinguishing right from wrong and ready to face the consequences of his actions. Similar to Dan, Archie is presented as morally superior. Archie knows that sleeping with his teacher was wrong and he will get into trouble, but he is capable of realizing that the situation of a teenage boy being murdered is much worse. However, her threat about never seeing each other is effective. Archie relents and decides to keep quiet (Aguirre-Sacasa & Toland Krieger, 2017b, 25:16).

Geraldine only thinks of herself. Her lack of self-awareness and selfishness is also displayed when the affair is revealed and she agrees to quit and leave town. She clutches a cello bow gifted to her by Archie and leaves, apparently distraught by the whole situation. The key word is *apparently*. A few minutes later there is a scene of her leaving town in her Beetle. She is

wearing a short denim skirt and her signature heart shaped glasses. As a group of teenage boys walk by her car, she flirtatiously pulls down her glasses to stare at them the same way she stared at Archie (Aguirre-Sacasa et al., 2017a, 40:17). In the season two opener, Geraldine makes another appearance. She seems to have moved on, working as a music tutor in the town of Greendale. We see her tutoring a young boy named Ben whom she surprisingly kisses once the lesson is over, clearly proving she has not learned anything about the outcome of her relationship with Archie and can even be classified as a serial predator. The male writers of the show make the female teacher into a manipulative figure and one incapable of learning from her actions or showing any understanding of the difference between right and wrong. This is demonstrated with her outcome. She continues to be sexually involved with minors and the only way to deal with her is to kill her. When the music lesson is over and Ben leaves, the Black Hood, the mysterious villain on the show, quietly breaks into her home and strangles her with the cello bow Archie gave her (Aguirre-Sacasa et al., 2017b, 41:53).

Something particular about Geraldine's storyline is what it conveys about the grooming process. When we meet Archie and Geraldine in the first episode, it is the summer and they already know each other; this makes it possible that some grooming took place before this moment, but we never see it on screen. The first episode suggests that Geraldine picks Archie up on the side of the road in the afternoon and they are having sex in her car later that evening. As Knoll (2010) describes, grooming is a technique used in teacher sexual misconduct. The behaviours associated to it seem altruistic, but entail considerable malintent. The main purpose of grooming is to build false trust and to create opportunities to have contact with students. We have to question what kind of message is passed on through the *Riverdale* storyline if the female teacher sleeps with a student without any prior grooming. Even Natalie, the praying mantis,

demonstrated grooming through her science craft project. Is the female teacher so out of control that she must jump into bed with a minor when she spots him walking without a shirt on? This sexualizes the female teacher on television to the point that a sexual encounter with her is a given; she does not even put in the effort to get close to the student and build a bond with him beforehand. One typical grooming pattern exhibited by female teacher perpetrators is going out of their way to give their student extra help and tutoring outside of class time (Knoll, 2010). Ironically, the private tutoring in this storyline comes after Archie and Geraldine have slept together. Archie has to practically beg her to agree to an independent study class so that he can improve his music (Aguirre-Sacasa & Toland Krieger, 2017a, 14:23). Another aspect of the typical grooming pattern involves the teacher buying gifts for the student (Knoll, 2010), another concept that the storyline turns on its head. In this case, it is the student buying a gift for the teacher. When suspicions over the affair arise, the independent study has to come to an end, so Archie buys her a cello bow, a "Don't forget me gift" (Aguirre-Sacasa et al., 2017a, 31:08). In the end, this is the instrument used to strangle her to death. Being gifted by a student, it is symbolic of her finally paying for her many crimes. As demonstrated through the two examples above, Geraldine's character is so sexualized that there is no need for her to engage in grooming.

Both Natalie French and Geraldine Grundy are killed for their actions. They both suffer the harshest punishment, but they are also the only two female teacher characters who are repeat offenders. Although punishment for their respective behaviour is merited, using the death of the female teacher as punishment is problematic and supports a backlash agenda that strong women must pay a price. Additionally, it uses the teaching profession as a scapegoat to pass on this message. Despite the fact that their actions are morally questionable, the teachers show some strength; however, this proves again that a strong woman, or strong female teacher, is

problematic. In the classroom, Natalie French is authoritative and well-prepared. She gives what appears to be an engaging and thought-out lesson to her students on the prowess of the praying mantis. She is authoritative, strong, and sexually liberated and for these qualities she must be punished. Even further, her sexual liberation needs to be twisted into her being a teacher and committing a crime. Geraldine Grundy is portrayed in a similar way. She cannot be portrayed as sexually liberated with men of an appropriate age; it has to be a repeated and illegal pattern with minors. In a backlash context, we can infer that portraying a woman who explores her sexuality in a healthy and legal way would be threatening to the male voices behind these storylines. Faludi explains how by the 1980s "women's sexual behaviour and attitudes had changed so much that they were now close to mirroring men's" and that "the speed with which women embraced sexual and reproductive freedom could be frightening" (1991/2020, p. 413). Perhaps one way to combat this fear is to manipulate this sexual freedom by turning it into abusive behaviour for which the woman is harshly punished.

Theme 4: The Continuation of Feminist Recantations

The media's backlash against women's progress, especially in film and television, is often perpetuated by men and is a fear response to women's progress. However, Faludi (1991/2020) recounts that the propagation of backlash was not exclusive to men and that mentors of the women's movement were also involved (p. 293). She explores how the backlash's strength made even some of the most prominent female thinkers of the 1970s women's movement recant their past arguments. In her analysis of "neofems" (p. 293) Faludi describes several women who contributed to backlash. Sylvia Ann Hewlett was one such example. In the 1970s she helped garner support for the Equal Rights Amendment, but a decade later recanted, claiming that the women's movement created " 'a lesser life' " (Faludi, 1991/2020, p. 325) for women. This and

similar claims were a gift to backlash as the media would "invoke Hewlett's work whenever they wanted to underscore the tragic consequences of feminism" (Faludi, 1991/2020, p. 326). There was nothing more convincing than having a feminist renounce feminism. However, what was often ignored was the fact that most of Hewlett's claims about the downsides of feminism were untrue. Hewlett's most famously cited claims about the pitfalls of the women's movement were that it was anti-family and ignored mothers; however, poll after poll showed that when women were asked about this, they disagreed (Faludi, 1991/2020).

Hewlett was not the only feminist to contribute to backlash. Published in 1963, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was a defining text of the women's movement, but her book *The Second Stage*, published in 1981, seemed to present contradictory ideas, notably that feminism had ignored the desire for motherhood (Faludi, 1991/2020). Although Friedan was not alone in recanting some of her earlier claims, she "had the potential to be the most damaging to the feminist cause" (p. 332) because she was "the household name, synonymous in the minds of millions of Americans with the women's liberation movement" (p. 332). When Faludi questions how this could happen, she can only guess that *The Second Stage* might be an expression of Friedan's dismay at being "locked out of the feminist power structure" (p. 333). Although we cannot know for sure, what is certain is that Friedan's recantations, along with other feminists such as Hewlett, show that "perhaps under the backlash the tendency to turn and bite one's tail is inevitable" (p. 333).

Claire Wilson: When Women Perpetuate Backlash

We see from the two examples above that backlashes are not promoted strictly at the hands of men. *A Teacher* (Fidell et al., 2020) is a mini-series and tells the story of a 32-year-old married, English teacher, Claire Wilson, who engages in a sexual affair with her 17-year-old

student, Eric Walker. The show is set in Texas, a state in which inappropriate teacher-student relationships have "increased by 249% in the past decade" (Russell et al., 2022). It is the only text in this analysis that has a strong female presence behind the camera (see Table 2); but ironically, I see it as being just as damaging as the others. All of the other storylines have elements that enable me, as a viewer and teacher, to detach myself from the storyline (for example, the comedy in *Friends*, the fantasy world in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, even the fantasy world of rich New York socialites in *Gossip Girl*) and thus conclude that it is yet another unnecessary regurgitation of the teacher-student sex storyline cliché. I see the trope and can easily detach it from reality. *A Teacher* comes across differently because a lot of the *everyday* school scenes are realistic. There are two such examples in just the first four minutes of the first episode. The first when Claire Wilson is introduced as a new staff member in a meeting and awkwardly has to wave to everyone (Fidell, 2020, 1:32) and the second when the senior class is chanting in the hallway establishing themselves as the alphas of the year (Fidell, 2020, 4:42). These are two scenarios I have witnessed countless times in the meetings and hallways of the school I work at. The two scenes genuinely made me wonder whether the writing team interviewed real teachers for ideas or had experience as teachers themselves.

A Teacher is also different from the other texts because the teacher-student sexual relationship is not just a passing storyline. The entire 10-episode mini-series explores the initiation, development, and consequences of the sexual relationship between Claire and Eric. The last episode of the series skips 10 years to the future to show the lasting effects of it. In reviews, the miniseries has been praised as "a thorny, uncomfortable triumph" (Hill, 2021, para. 16) and for initiating "a long-overdue obligation to educate younger viewers on this subject rather than using it purely as entertainment" (Berman, 2020, para. 9). After my first viewing, I

would have agreed with the above reviews, especially after watching the final episode when Claire and Eric meet 10 years after their affair. She is now re-married with two children; he works with troubled youth, but is still affected by the abusive relationship. I still find the final scene powerful. Claire and Eric meet up at a restaurant after she reaches out to him. Her motive is to see if he is ok after all these years and to somewhat apologize for her actions. She explains that she "violated her role as an educator" (Fidell et al., 2020c, 21:08) and brings up that she should have stopped him when he first kissed her in her classroom. At this, Eric tells her she is "in denial" (Fidell et al., 2020c, 21:44) and gives her a reality check. She clearly has been using the kiss to put onus on him, but he explains that she is the one who privately tutored him, that took him on a trip to visit the University of Texas, and the one who told him to get in the back seat of her car. She was the one with all the agency and power. He tells her that "he lost years" (Fidell et al., 2020c, 22:04) worrying that he ruined *her* life, before realizing that he was not to blame. She counters that now, as a mother, she does not understand how she did what she did and says she has to live with it and wants him to be ok. At this he calls her out again. He tells her she has not reached out to see if he is ok, but because she is "sick of feeling guilty" (Fidell et al., 2020c, 20:14). She says she is always one Google search away from ruin, but he still does not let her get away with it, telling her "you're still making this about you" (Fidell et al., 2020c, 22:57) before getting up to leave.

There are a few things that can be appreciated about this scene. First, we see the negative repercussions on Eric. In the other storylines, all the boys are fine, even Pacey who is only 15 when he sleeps with Tamara. We can argue that it takes Eric years to realize his teacher's abuse and the other shows do not have the time for this, but the other storylines happen early on in each series and years later we see no negative consequences on any of the boys. There is no discussion

on the relationships being abusive. Second, Claire is a more realistic female perpetrator. We see her grooming, we see her denial, and we see her narcissism. She continuously makes excuses for herself and justifies her harmful actions, which is what is typically seen with female teacher sexual perpetrators (Knoll, 2010). A noteworthy example of her defensive behaviour is when she admits the sexual affair to her colleague, Kathryn. After Claire and Eric spend a weekend away together for Eric's birthday, Claire and Kathryn meet up for night out. Kathryn makes the correct guess that Claire is having an affair; she claims Claire has been glowing for weeks. Claire finally admits to an affair and Kathryn eagerly pries for information. Although Claire is reluctant at first, she gushes explaining that he is younger and that she has "never felt this way before (Fidell et al., 2020b, 19:10). Excited and smiling, she finally admits to Kathryn that "it's Eric" (Fidell et al., 2020b, 20:46). When Kathryn confusedly asks who Eric is, Claire clarifies that it is Eric Walker. Kathryn laughs assuming Claire is making a joke. After clarifying that she was not joking, Claire has a fearful look on her face as if she was expecting Kathryn to simply accept the affair. All Kathryn can repeat in confusion and disbelief is that he is a kid and a student. This is where the narrative Claire has been telling herself shows through. She starts blurting out excuses that they are in love and that he is 18 and over the age of consent (although their sexual affair began before his 18th birthday). Kathryn calls it a "monumental abuse of power" (Fidell et al., 2020b, 21:54) and says she has to report it. Worried and panicking, Claire tells her that if it is reported her life will be ruined and that Kathryn forced her to say his name as if that absolves Claire of any blame (Fidell et al., 2020b, 21:34). With Claire's actions we see a realistic portrait of her narcissism. She makes excuses for her actions and continues to do so 10 years into the future.

As such, *A Teacher* strives to present a realistic picture of abuse at the hands of a teacher. The series' creator, Hannah Fidell, explained that the series enabled her to explore " 'what it means to be a victim and the changing nature of victimhood' " (Hill, 2021, para. 4). We might ask, then, how can the series be an example of backlash? Its differences from the previous texts might demonstrate it as otherwise. However, we need to go back to the feminist recanters of the 1980s. Fidell claims that her own experience with sexual assault and the #MeToo movement were driving influences in her creation of the show. It is her attempt "to explore what the perpetrator of her own assault might have told himself to justify his actions" (Hill, 2021, para. 4). Reading this point stopped me in my tracks. If the story was meant to be an exploration of her own assault at the hands of a male abuser, then why is *A Teacher* centred around a sexual relationship between a female teacher and a male student? According to Hill's (2021) critique of the mini-series, one of its strong selling points is that it is an "inversion of what audiences might expect to see, which is to say, a young male teacher getting inappropriately involved with one of his students" (para. 13). I could not disagree more. It is not an inversion of what we might expect to see as we are inundated with sexualized representations of female teachers on television. We do see many storylines with male teachers having relationships with female students, but we often see neutral or positive consequences to such relationships. Not bounded by the same time limits as a regular prime-time drama, as a mini-series, *A Teacher* had the opportunity to use a male teacher character and explore realistic consequences of the abuse which inspired it. As is documented in the literature, male teacher sexual perpetrators outnumber women (Cavanagh, 2007; Christensen, 2018) and face less punishment despite the clear labelling of their behaviour as abusive (Dollar et al., 2004; Fromuth et al., 2016). Instead, the abuser was cast as female. Part of Fidell's motivation behind this was to explore the often-ignored consequences of sexual

assault on male victims (Hill, 2021, para. 14) which I do feel is necessary and important considering the much-cited claim that young boys are considered to experience less harm than girls when they have a sexual relationship with a teacher (Dollar et al., 2004; Fromuth et al., 2016; Myers, 2006). This is not surprising when we look at the majority of the storylines explored in this analysis in which the negative consequences on the boys is virtually non-existent.

I do not disagree with the representations put forward in *A Teacher.* Despite the fact that a female teacher is, yet again, sexualized in this representation, she faces a realistic punishment of jail time and there are lasting consequences to her actions such as her inability to get a job and being barred from her children's school (Fidell et al., 2020c, 23:36). This is a stronger message than Rachel who goes back home to Iowa, Tamara who goes into hiding at her sister's house in Rochester, Alice who gets married and lives happily ever after, or Geraldine and Natalie who are both killed. But we must question why a story influenced by a male abuser replaces him with a female one. Despite its honourable intentions, the predominantly female writers and directors of *A Teacher* have contributed to painting yet another negative picture of a female high school teacher.

In examining the six fictional television storylines as examples of feminist backlash, we see the implications that this has on the teaching profession. More specifically, we see fairly negative representations of female teachers. These images, primarily curated by men, show female teachers to be flighty, self-deprecating, immature, and manipulative. The teaching profession appears to be used as a backdrop to perpetuate harmful backlash myths, thus showing complete disregard for the complexities and seriousness of both the profession and female teachers in particular. Faludi (1991/2020) explains that popular culture is an avenue in which

backlash myths are perpetuated and this is evident in the storylines. The myths are not rooted "in the actual conditions of women's lives" (p. 7). We can say that these storylines do not reflect the conditions of real teachers' lives. Phase 2 of this study seeks to look at actual conditions by exploring the opinions and stories of real teachers in the context of the sexualization of the female high school teacher.

Chapter 5: Focus Group Results and Discussion

Phase 2, Section 1: An Exploration of the Impact of the Fictional Storylines on Real Teachers

Phase 2 of this study sought to examine female teachers' lived experiences pertaining to the broader context of the sexualization of female teachers. This first section of Phase 2 draws on the data collected through three focus group discussions. Using the same six storylines which were used for the text analysis in Phase 1, it sought to answer the following question: How do the participant teachers respond to fictional representations of female high school teacher sexuality?

Recapitulation of Participants and Focus Group Structure

Three focus group discussions were held over a span of two weeks in November 2022 to discuss the 10 teacher participants' reactions to six fictional storylines depicting a female teacher sleeping with a male student. Each participant took part in a discussion; the groups were broken up as evenly as possible based on the teachers' availability. Focus group 2 was meant to have one more participant, but as the participant withdrew on the scheduled date of the discussion, it still moved on with just Maeve and Dora. It still proved to be an exceptionally fruitful discussion despite only having two participants. A participant also backed out of focus group 3 on its

scheduled date, so it moved on with the four remaining participants. The 10 participants were split up as outlined in Table 1, which has been reproduced here.

Table 1

Participants Organized by Focus Group

Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3
1. Evelyn 2. Carina 3. Betty 4. Émilie	1. Maeve 2. Dora	1. Taylor 2. Sophie 3. Lynn 4. Megan

Each focus group discussion was organized around the same four montages of clips. Each participant was supplied with a blank, lined notecard in case they wanted to keep track of their ideas while watching the montages. Some of the notecards were submitted at the end of the focus group, but as their content was a repetition of the participants' verbal comments, the cards specifically were not used as data for the analysis. Table 3 outlines the breakdown of the montages and the storylines used for each one.

Table 3

Organization of Montages and Storylines for the Focus Group Discussion

Montage	Storylines Used
Theme 1: Introduction of the Teachers	- *Friends* - *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* - *Dawson's Creek* - *Gossip Girl* - *Riverdale* (approximate length of entire montage: 8:38)
Theme 2: Private Meetings between Teacher and Student	- *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* - *Dawson's Creek* - *Gossip Girl*

	- *Riverdale* - *A Teacher* (approximate length of entire montage: 13:29)
Theme 3: Sexual Encounters	- *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* - *Gossip Girl* - *A Teacher* (approximate length of entire montage: 7:22)
Theme 4: Consequences	- *Friends* - *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* - *Dawson's Creek* - *Gossip Girl* - *Riverdale* - *A Teacher* (approximate length of entire montage: 16:14)

In the first montage we watched clips that introduced the teacher and this included excerpts from every show except *A Teacher.* The second montage was made up of clips showcasing a private meeting between the teacher and student and it utilized all of the shows except *Friends*. The third montage showcased sexual encounters and it included clips from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Gossip Girl,* and *A Teacher* (a sexual encounter happened to be included in the *Riverdale* clip from the first montage and participants were advised that they could take that into account). Finally, the fourth montage, centered around the various consequences of the sexual relationship, included clips from all six shows. We discussed each montage right after its clips were played. Not all of the six shows were included in each montage. The reasons for this are as follows. *A Teacher* was excluded from the first montage for time limits as, being a mini-series, the introduction of the teacher character takes a whole episode. *Friends* has no scenes depicting a private meeting or a sexual encounter, therefore it was not possible to include it in those montages. *Dawson's Creek* was omitted from the sexual encounters montage because its underlining message was similar to *Gossip Girl*, yet it had no dialogue; thus *Gossip Girl* was chosen instead.

Data Coding Procedures for the Focus Group Data

Each focus group discussion was audio recorded. I began transcribing the audio recordings immediately after the focus group discussions took place. I transcribed all of the data myself through repeatedly listening and typing, except in one aspect. I did have some of Émilie's words, which were predominantly in French, automatically transcribed to guide my transcription (mostly for verb tenses and spelling). I still relied mostly on my French language skills to transcribe her words as, being full of errors, the automatic transcription was often a hinderance and did not catch her informal phrases and contractions. Other participants also spoke in French occasionally, but I was able to transcribe these shorter points without any aid from automatic transcription. Transcribing the data myself through listening and typing was something I was adamant about doing, despite the potential convenience of automatic transcription. Hearing the participants' voices over and over again made me feel connected to them; and because I was so familiar with their words by the end of the transcribing process, this gave me an even greater drive to represent those words properly. Listening to their laughs, sensing their sarcasm, and hearing their intonation brought me closer to their lived experiences as female teachers.

Once the three focus groups were transcribed, I began the process of coding my data. The data were coded inductively following Saldaña's (2021) approach to coding qualitative research. Again, I wanted to code manually as opposed to using qualitative data coding software. Although this software is useful for managing large amounts of data, it can be "inadequate for the nuanced and complex work of data analysis" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 44). I completed my coding of the focus group discussions in two cycles. For my first-cycle coding, I used both in-vivo coding and values coding. With in-vivo coding "a word or short phrase from the actual language of the qualitative data record" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 137) is used as a code. This approach is appropriate in studies

that want to prioritize participant voices; in looking to examine the lived experiences of female teachers, I felt this was an appropriate choice. Values coding is the application of codes that "reflect a participant's values, attitudes, and beliefs" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 167). As I coded, I differentiated between a value (something of importance), an attitude (a way of feeling or thinking) and a belief (opinions, assumptions, etc.). I felt values coding was an appropriate choice as I was looking to understand how the participants felt about the sexualized representations; it was natural that they would express opinions and discuss what was important to them.

I completed my first-cycle coding in two steps. First, on hard copies of the transcripts, I underlined the individual data codes. Next, on an electronic copy of the transcript, I purposely kept the written transcript on the left half of the page in order to create a separate text box on the right. In this text box is where I recorded all of the underlined codes which were numbered as I went along. The in-vivo codes were written in quotation marks, while the value codes were written in red and labelled V, A, or B (see Appendix D). With all three focus groups combined, I ended up with a total of 1952 codes (made up of 621, 656, and 675 codes for focus groups 1, 2, and 3, respectively).

I then moved on to my second-cycle coding, a synthesis meant to "[put] things together into new assemblages of meaning" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 6). I used pattern coding in this second cycle, the purpose of which is to condense codes into broader categories to then further refine them into themes. Pattern coding is useful in combining "a lot of material from first cycle coding into more meaningful and parsimonious units of analysis" to create a "meta code" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 322). I also completed this process without software and went about this in two steps. First, I wanted to get a sense of what each group thought of the six individual teachers, so for

each montage, I isolated the codes by teacher. This gave me a means of generating the participants' distinct views of each character and helped me become even more familiar with the data. For my second step, I went back to the full list of in-vivo and value codes. I went through the list of codes for each focus group twice. In the first review, I highlighted codes I found pertinent, noted codes that went together, and made preliminary observations in the margins. On the second review, I wrote down the patterns which emerged through the first review on sticky notes, using a different color for each focus group. These sticky notes stood for my categories, of which there were 74 in total (20 from focus group 1; 23 from focus group 2; and 31 from focus group 3). At first these 74 categories were divided by focus group; I then moved on to finding patterns between the different groups. The 74 categories were first condensed into 10 groupings, which was then narrowed down into five tentative themes. These five tentative themes were: power, normalized sexualization, realism, boundary crossings, and consequences (Photos 1-3 in Appendix E provide a visual of this process).

I then created clearer charts of the tentative themes and the categories that were originally recorded on the sticky notes. My goal was to note any redundancy and potentially narrow down these five tentative themes into fewer ones. Through this process, I further narrowed down the ideas into the three themes that make up my focus group results and discussion: (1) intersections of power and boundaries, (2) normalizing the sexy female teacher, and (3) condoning the relationship through inadequate consequences. From there, I went back to my data set and made lists of all the pertinent quotes that applied to each theme. I wanted to isolate the quotes by theme to aid in the integration of appropriate quotes in the results and discussion.

Focus Group Results and Discussion

Intersections of Power and Boundaries: "It's Kind of Like this Boundary Dance as a Form of Foreplay"

Throughout our viewing of the clips, the teacher participants frequently reflected on the powerlessness exhibited by the teacher and the subsequent power exhibited by the teenage boys, a lot of which was shown when the female teacher on screen was navigating the boundaries of her role. In a moment of vexation towards the end of her group discussion, Dora summed up the general feelings expressed throughout all the focus groups when she said:

> *That's what bothered me so much about the private meeting scenes especially was that it really like portrayed the woman to be kind of like helpless…and that's not the case. And, like, you know maybe if they showed something where they portrayed a really young teacher not knowing what to do, that would be different, you know? But that's not what they're portraying. You know what I mean? Go one way or the other. You're a seductress and you're helpless [said with strong emphasis]? Like, you can't.*

According to Dora, the image of the female teacher contradictorily presented as both a seductress (i.e. as typically powerful) and as helpless (i.e. powerless), is a portrayal that does not work. Dora's words condensed the teacher participants' feelings about how this oppositionally powerful and helpless persona leads to some precarious ideas being passed on to viewers.

Essentially, if the teacher is the powerless one in the teacher-student dyad, it leaves the teenage boy to take on the powerful role. A lot of the teacher participants were visibly irritated at seeing the female teacher as helpless and the teenage boy acting as their lifeline. This point got to Evelyn particularly when commenting on *Gossip Girl* and its introduction of the teacher character, Rachel Carr. Evelyn said the storyline enhanced the idea that

> *women are just meant to be these little fragile [things]. Like she's very petite, very young, very like 'oh, I'm so confused haha' [uses a childish voice]. Like we, you know, she can't just be like, 'it's my first day, I own this shit', you know? Like most people would do. Like, you fake it 'til you fucking make it. So how many teachers are like 'hihihi I'm so lost' [uses a childish voice], you know? Not very many. So, like to me, it's also that aspect, the idea of a woman who needs like a man to open the freaking door for her. I got my own door, thank you.*

Another participant, Taylor, also talking about *Gossip Girl,* echoed this sentiment saying, "*um, they're portraying the teacher in a really kind of wimpy, useless way. Like she can't, you know he's complimenting her for taking the subway like a champ*". The use of terms such as 'little', 'fragile', 'wimpy', and 'useless' convey the teacher's helplessness. Evelyn's deliberate use of a childish tone highlights how the character's helplessness is frustrating to her. From her experience, female teachers are not helpless; in fact, she feels the average teacher would put on a more competent persona until they get more comfortable in their teaching role, that being when they 'make it'. She connects the clip to her own experience when she says 'I got my own door, thank you', showcasing that for her, demonstrating self-reliance as a teacher is important. Similarly, from Taylor's perspective, Rachel shows a lack of self-reliance in not being able to take the subway on her own. The power exhibited by the teenage boy, equally displeasing to the teacher participants, is noted in Carina's critique of *Dawson's Creek:*

> *[Pacey] says that line, you know, 'sometimes it's right to do the wrong thing'. And I find then maybe, that's when she kinda turns around and is now gonna consider having this sexual intercourse*

> *with like, a sexual relationship with Pacey…because it's like, you know, 'you're right, doing the wrong thing sometimes, it's ok' [sarcasm]…like as if this was this deep quote and now she'll consider defiling this child [sarcasm; rolls eyes]*.

Her disdain for the line 'sometimes it's right to do the wrong thing' is evident in her sarcasm. She was clearly frustrated at the depiction of the teacher being so powerless that she is swayed by a 15-year-old boy using a cliché line on her.

While Pacey uses cliché lines, Archie from *Riverdale* was seen as more direct with his power. It was Taylor who observed, *"I found Archie, actually there was, he was very powerful. He's clearly making her uncomfortable, he's like staring at her directly, and she's kind of looking back, looking forward. He's stopping her in the stairs publicly and she's fumbling".* Sophie added, *"Something else I noticed in 'Riverdale' is they constantly film Geraldine, like, from above though, she's like, diminutive, she's tiny…like I don't know how big [Archie] is in real life, but he looks enormous".* To this Lynn commented, *"Primarily because they've already had sex".* As such, Archie's power was a lot more obvious. He is, in the clips commented on by the participants, still trying to convince his teacher to continue their relationship, but he was seen as having more power than the other boys. As the teacher's power is reduced and the boy's power is enhanced when she becomes a sexual object (Jagodzinski, 2006; Johnson, 2005; Johnson, 2006), Lynn's conclusion as to why he is more powerful is legitimate.

Moreover, using the line 'sometimes it's right to do the wrong thing' in this context is especially problematic as we are not talking about a hypothetical ethical dilemma; we are talking about sex with a minor. As Betty noted, "*by saying, like, 'it's so wrong', well it is really disgusting [strong emphasis] and wrong and you are a predator right now even if the boy is*

trying to convince you". The same type of behaviour was witnessed in *Riverdale* with Evelyn commenting, *"And Archie, too, it's like, [Geraldine] looks very distraught and yeah, Geraldine is distraught and 'I don't know what to do' [uses a childish voice] and, you know, having that student stepping up again and saying like 'it's ok'*". Moreover, Émilie brought up the same line of thought in discussing *Gossip Girl*, saying, "*J'ai de la misère à comprendre c'est quoi le rôle de chacun, c'est plus elle qui a l'air d'l'étudiante avec le gars. Le gars, c'est lui qui prend soin d'elle*". She felt the teacher looked and acted more like a student than the actual student, thus enhancing her role as powerless. In these instances, it was the teenage boy who took the lead and took care of their adult teacher; they were the ones 'stepping up'.

This all points to the teacher participants' discerning take on the message conveyed when the female teacher is portrayed as powerless and the teenage boy uses his power to encourage her to cross boundaries she should not cross. The teacher characters were seen as willingly "*[putting] themselves in the hands of these young boys*" (Maeve) and in an incongruous sense being the "*one who's doing the seducing, and yet, she's also the one that needs to be convinced, persuaded, consoled, cajoled*" (Dora). Maeve expressed that the storylines presented the teacher's conflict over a sexual relationship with a teenage student as "*this boundary dance as a form of foreplay*". The back-and-forth between the teacher and student is presented as some kind of enticing build up to their eventual sexual encounter. This leads to what the teacher participants expressed as the very dangerous aspect of the female teacher character being presented in a sexualized and powerless way to young audiences. The comments below, broken down by focus group, illustrate this dangerous message.

Consecutive dialogue from Focus Group 1:

Evelyn: "*This is what kids are watching and the idea of like, 'sometimes*

wrong is right' and then they see that and then it does, I think, explain too, students who will try to cross that line and because 'sometimes wrong is right'. Anyways, I just had to share that"

Émilie: "*Mais, moi là, j'en reviens pas que la plupart des femmes disent 'je sais c'est pas correct' mais y l'font quand même.*

Others: *Yes. Oui*

Émilie: *Puis, mais, tu sais où tu sais pas [frustrated tone]? Tsé elles disent là 'oh I know it's not right but' et les petites mains [makes a hand gesture signifying flightiness]*"

Betty: *But it's done in, like, a sexy way, 'this is so wrong' [uses exaggerated flirty voice]*

Consecutive dialogue from Focus Group 2:

Dora: "*It's obvious that they did the seducing and then they're like 'oh, we can't'. And that for me is a bit of a—to be honest, it's a bit of a rape culture trope, to me*"

Maeve: "*Totally [strongly emphasized], like, it's, it's, it's the other—clashing stereotypes going on*"

Dora: "*She seduced me, but also, she needs to be convinced*"

Maeve: "*Now she's a tease*"

Dora: "*Yeah, yeah*"

Maeve: "*She started this thing and then, now, she's like leaving the boy hanging and wanting more and like, what's he supposed to do*?"

Dora: "*The guys are acting like, acting in control once the—and*

the women are acting vulnerable, but it's like, so, they did the seducing, but now they need to be convinced because they started it. It's a very, it's a very rape culture…the woman doesn't really wanna walk away, like, she doesn't really mean 'no'…that's what bothers me"

Maeve: "*So, 'no, yes, yes, but no' kind of thing that I worry undermines—like if that's how the culture portrays a woman trying to refuse a sexual advance, then it's like the thing, can you believe her when she says 'no' kind of stuff?*"

Non-consecutive excerpts from Focus Group 3:

Lynn: "*One thing I noticed, the women were all, um, trying to be ugh, the voice of reason in some cases or to deny, or to say that it wasn't right and to try to put the guy off, and it seemed the males were the ones who were still insisting that 'yeah, it'll be ok', 'you know, but why?'. And it's kinda funny, but that dynamic is sort of what you would expect between people of the same age, but not with the age difference and the power dynamic difference that you would see. I guess, I don't know. I don't know, maybe I'm wrong. But then they give in! Very quickly and say something totally stupid. They give them a stupid line to say, you know like, 'I'm in your hands' [uses a childish tone]. That one got me*"

Taylor: "*I just felt it was reinforcing this 'no means yes' kind of dynamic. A lot of the clips were very much like, 'no, but yes'*

> *[uses a mocking, whisper tone] …it's just the no means yes and you can do bad things, but it's ok, you'll get away with it. It's just, kind of, that whole, I mean, message that it's sending to the viewers, right? And if we think about who are these viewers? They're young people who are learning that there aren't necessarily consequences for your actions*"

Through critiquing the female teacher's powerlessness, the participants discussed the dangerous 'no means yes' message that these shows bring to light, the rape culture trope as pointed out by Dora. This representation of the female teacher navigating boundaries with a student as a back-and-forth, as a dance, appeared to be one of the aspects of these storylines that left the participants the most discouraged. This type of portrayal of refusing a sexual advance is problematic not only in the context of the of the female teacher, but for women in general. In examining the teacher participants' words, I could not help but think of Faludi's (1991/2020) disturbing explanation of male audience reactions to watching the film *The Accused* (1988). The film tells the story of a young woman gang-raped at a bar, while bystanders, who were mostly men, did nothing to stop it. It is a movie based on a true story and at the time of the film's release, rape rates were drastically increasing in the United States. It was especially disturbing to read that male audiences "hooted and cheered the film's rape scene" (p. 151). If we consider this, the broader societal impact of presenting these teachers on screen as saying no, but not really meaning it, is even more problematic. As Dora explained, "*it does something to the imagery of the woman, which is, like, more dangerous than just what's happening*". It goes beyond the walls of the classroom, and as explained by the participants, gives young people the impression that no means yes and that there are no consequences to your actions. As such, the sexualized female

high school teacher is a powerless figure unable to uphold the boundaries that should be maintained in her profession. When she attempts to maintain boundaries, she does not really mean it.

In the teacher-student dynamic, the teacher is typically the one who is supposed to have more power and be able to maintain boundaries. This proves to be problematic when that teacher is female. Megan explained that

> *I mean we know that there is a kind of charge [said with emphasis], an erotic charge to, from you know, a traditional male gaze of um, you know the seduction of a powerful woman because you're bringing them down. You're reducing her power when she becomes your sexual interest which doesn't work in the reverse to the same degree, right? [It's similar to] the female police officer. She's always, as well, a seductress, right?*

By saying it does not work in the reverse, Megan means that a man's power is not diminished when he becomes a sexual interest; there is no brining down of the man. Megan asked if most of the storylines were written by men, which was confirmed, and then commented, "*Because that is part, you know, of the male fantasy, you know, ugh, canon, is having sex with a powerful woman. And who's more powerful in your life? There's mom and then there's teacher, until you're an adult".* This commentary of finding power and satisfaction in bringing down a powerful woman links back to the image of the female teacher as a *femme fatale.* According to Jagodzinski (2006) young boys are believed to feel threatened when faced with an authoritative female teacher (i.e. the dangerous femme fatale); as Megan said, at this point in a boy's life he is typically faced with two powerful females, mom and teacher. The shows depict the boys wielding power over one of

these women. However, a female teacher cannot be expected to act in a strictly nurturing manner at all times. There are moments in the classroom where she has to exert her power and demonstrate authority. This is problematic for the young male student and he must seduce his teacher to reclaim his authority. With this reclamation of power by the boy, the female teacher is condemned. It is not acceptable for the female teacher to be both sexual and powerful at the same time; this combination of sexual and powerful is threatening to "masculine privilege" (Maher, 2004, p. 203). In media coverage of female teacher sexual predators, Cavanagh (2004) explains that the teacher is "constructed as a femme fatale-like figure" (p. 316) and she is "a worrisome combination of sexual aggressivity, internal neediness and psychotic independence" (p. 325). The participants saw this neediness come out in the fictional teachers' need to be taken care of and convinced to cross boundaries by their students.

The female teacher participants expressed a lot of displeasure at seeing the female teacher presented in such a weak light. Through her powerlessness, which was viewed as unrealistic, she became a figure who was easily manipulated into crossing boundaries and making inappropriate decisions. All of this diminishes the professionalism of the female teacher. As Taylor noted, the teachers just *"[don't] feel teacher-y"* and *"there's no respect for [them], [they're] kind of an object*". As if the depiction of the female teacher on screen was not problematic enough when she is turned into a sexual object, these storylines, according to the participants, make things much worse by reinforcing rape culture tropes at the same time, or as Maeve said, we have "clashing stereotypes going on".

Normalizing the Sexy Female Teacher: "They Don't Act Like Real Human Beings"

A second theme drawn out from our focus group discussions was how the image of the female teacher on screen is normalized to be sexual. The participants noticed this through

directorial choices made right from the debut of the teacher character. Commenting on the first montage of clips that introduced the teacher, Maeve noted that scenes were "*shot in a way that is meant to make the viewer look at these women in a sexual way. So it's saying it's normal to think of these women in that way and these teacher figures in that way*". Betty noted that "*the view is very sexualized in terms of how it's filmed"*. This image was created through sexy clothing choices, with one teacher described as being dressed in a "*negligee*" (Maeve), as well as through background music choices. In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the teacher walks on campus to jungle music, while *Dawson's Creek* utilized some "*sexy sax*" (Betty). Even Alice from *Friends*, who was noted to be the least sexual-looking of the characters due to her age and attire, was still dramatically sexualized from the start with Émilie describing that she and Frank jumped on top of each other and kissed, "*alors le sexy est encore là*".

A handful of the fictional teachers were in movement when first presented. Apart from Rachel in *Gossip Girl* who had a clumsy and helpless walk where she cannot open the door, Evelyn noticed how the teachers were walking and called it "*a sexy walk, a cat walk*" that was in slow motion with the camera panning the teacher up and down. Thus, this is not a neutral walk; it is meant to be sexy and showcase the teacher's body. Maeve remarked on this as well, further adding that it highlighted how sexually predatory they were. She notes *Riverdale* in particular. The slow-motion walking, combined with Geraldine's fixed, firm eye-contact makes her look like she's really "*staring [this boy] down*". The slow-motion and bedroom attire were aspects that Taylor found "*particularly offensive*".

In introducing the teacher, we have Alice engaging in an intense make-out session, Natalie and Tamara using a slow cat-walk, and Geraldine, also in slow-motion, openly lusting after a teenage boy—or as Maeve said in exasperation, "*that is not [said with emphasis] a*

teenage boy. That is an adult body that the teacher is looking at". Even if we argue that Rachel is being portrayed in a less sexual way as she is fumbling and struggling to get through the door, Evelyn did comment that her fragility is something that "*is sexually appealing, I think, in society, for a lot of men*". These normalized sexual images undercut the profession as we are meant to read the female teacher as sexual the moment we see her. Actually, we can even see this before watching a minute of *A Teacher* through the title alone. Betty noticed this and thus began the following exchange in Focus Group 1:

> Betty: *Même le titre, even the title A [emphasized] Teacher*.
>
> Evelyn: *A [emphasized] Teacher*.
>
> Betty: *A Teacher, which teacher?! [strong emphasis]*
>
> Émilie: *En général, en général*
>
> Others: *[laughter]*
>
> Betty: *It should have been The Teacher, That Teacher ['The' and 'That' emphasized; slams hand on desk for added emphasis]*

Through the title alone, the sexualized image of the teacher is generalized to all female teachers. Betty was clearly displeased at the use of an indefinite article in the title to generalize the teacher, as if all teachers engage in this inappropriate behaviour with students. As such, all six of the fictional teachers are sexualized from their introduction, contributing to the idea that it is normal to sexualize the female teacher. The analysis below synthesizes the participant teachers' observations about the normalized sexualization of the female high school teacher on screen.

The She-Mantis as "Une Symbolique". To the participants, the depictions were evidently a "*product of a male director's fantasy*" and thus "*so unrealistic*" (Maeve). As noted in the text analysis, there was a strong male presence behind the camera (see Table 2). Even

without this specific background knowledge, the teacher participants felt the male presence quite strongly, with Maeve, Dora, Lynn, and Megan making direct comments about the storylines being more about the male gaze than about reality. Sophie said the teachers were portrayed as "*slutty or stupid or frivolous*" and that

> *I had a hard time, like, connecting with the teachers, um, and I also felt bad for them and I also felt bad for myself all at the same time [other participants laugh]. I think it's when you see it sequentially, one after the other like that, it's like, it's like being hit over and over by this, like, wave of cultural, I don't know, misogyny*.

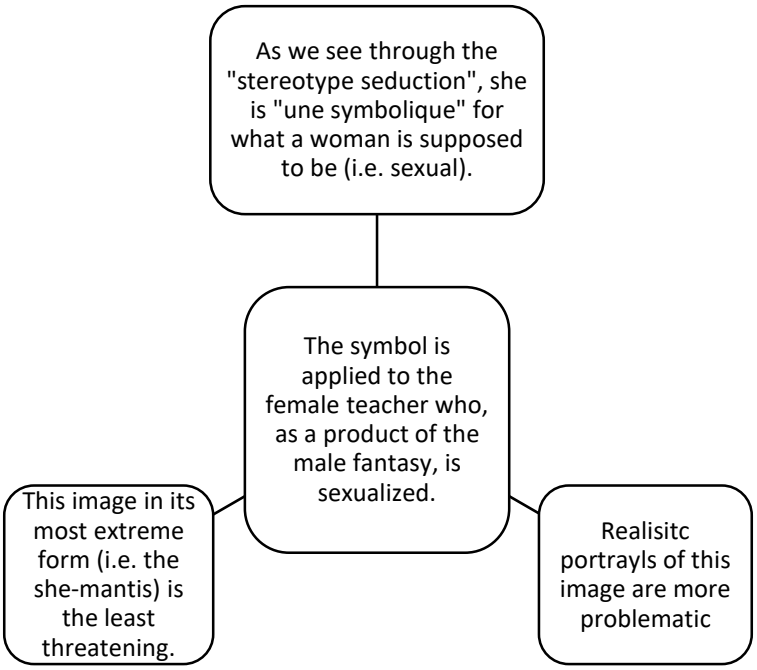
Sophie referring to the images as a wave of cultural misogyny highlights the pervasiveness of the image of the sexualized female teacher. This image seems to serve no purpose, except to satisfy a male fantasy. Real teachers do not see themselves in the depictions. Lynn, in regards to Alice's lack of realism, said, "*never mind pedagogy, she's not even a competent human being almost*". Evelyn wondered why, "*you don't just have a woman who's just there, like, normal, smart or what*". Dora noted about Rachel, "*they're not realistic, they're not real people*" and "*she's not a teacher…it didn't actually feel like she was a teacher*". In describing Natalie, Dora said "*she's not realistic at all…even as a woman. I just mean that as a person, she's not a realistic, like remotely realistic*". In a moment of exasperation describing all the teachers Dora finally said, "*the other women, are not, they don't act like real human beings*".

Never mind as teachers, as we see, there were multiple instances where the female teacher characters were difficult to process as actual humans. Interestingly, the one character that is not actually human, Natalie French, the praying she-mantis from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, was ironically the one most digestible to the participants. Her storyline demonstrated what

Megan described as a "*stereotype seduction*" with the woman overtly throwing herself at a man and the man being "*completely besotted*" which "*reinforces that about male sexuality, that they're overwhelmed by the beautiful woman*". At that, Sophie responded "*their penis is deciding for them. And then 'boys will be boys' comes up again, right?*". According to Lynn, the episode is clearly "*some fantasy of his [referring to writer and director Joss Whedon]*". Through the presentation of the stereotype seduction and the male fantasy behind that, the storyline of the she-mantis can be read as symbolic. Evelyn summed up the she-mantis storyline as "*une symbolique dans l'sens que, comme ça représente la femme et ce qu'elle essaie de faire*". Figure 3 showcases the role that the she-mantis storyline plays in accordance with the others.

Figure 3

The Symbolic She-Mantis



All of the teacher characters are sexualized, but Natalie French is the most overtly sexual. Émilie said, *"Buffy là, c'est comme des lignes d'un film porno"*. Her storyline presents an extreme version of what we see when a female teacher commits this sexual transgression: the teacher is

depicted as highly sexual, there is an appeal to this and at the same time there is an outrage. As such, the teacher needs to be punished. In this extreme case she is punished by death. Throughout the experience the boy is drooling over her and comes out of the situation unscathed. Despite the explicit sexuality and drastic punishment of the teacher, the teacher participants were not as bothered because the genre of the show, fantasy, "*makes it less uncomfortable, that it's probably not really gonna be about sex so much as she's some other kind of fantasy monster creature. So she's preying on a kid and it feels less monstrous in a way*" (Maeve). Far from monstrous, according to Sophie, it comes across as a "*hilarious porno*". The other shows cannot really get away with what *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* can. They have more realistic settings and backdrops; therefore, when this type of storyline is included, it is indeed about sex with a female high school teacher. The teachers' sexualization and negative outcomes are intended in the other shows. With the overtly sexual she-mantis as a symbol for what women are supposed to be, that is highly sexualized and punished for it, depictions that are supposed to be more rooted in reality become problematic. The teachers are still sexualized and this leads to added unrealistic plot points that the participants took issue with.

Contrived Scenes with High School Boys. When examining the fictional storylines as examples of feminist backlash, the point about sacrificing the female teacher to save the teenage boy was made. In the depictions of the female teacher-male student sexual relationship on screen we see the boy portrayed in a more positive and unrealistic light. This representation was not lost on the female teacher participants and they took issue with this. One particular observation about an unrealistic plot point enhancing the teenage boy stands out. After watching the clips showcasing the private meetings between teacher and student, Sophie said the following about Claire and Eric from *A Teacher* and Rachel and Dan from *Gossip Girl*:

> *I found the conversation between Claire and Eric, I was sort of like, Eric is a [pause], he's a high school boy, right? Why is, why is Claire even, like, interested in like having a conversation with this person? [laughter from others] Like, I wasn't really sure. Like, it's as though the writers of these shows have never spent time with, like, a high school boy [intense laughter from everyone else in the group]. As a woman, I would never [emphasized] be interested. And, ugh, why would you? There is nothing like, enticing, about talking to someone who is in that age group or, I'm just like, wow, is this a small town? Is this like, is there nobody [emphasized] else to talk to? [continued laughter from others] And so this woman is stuck talking to this like, buffoon, who's like trying to get his SAT scores up. I'm like, 'what!?' [tone of disbelief]. She should be at a wine bar, talking about her, I don't know. Like, what?! What is this? Like, each, all of these scenarios are so contrived, like they're so not, they can't be real. You know in, ugh, 'Gossip Girl', oh good grief! I mean, again [emphasized] is there? Like, get on Tinder, I don't know.*

Sophie's commentary had us in stitches and the point about how unappealing it could be to hold a conversation with a teenage boy became a running joke throughout our focus group discussion. However, laughter aside, her fellow teachers were very much in agreement with her. There were multiple comments of support sprinkled throughout her frustrated tirade, with Taylor voicing "*yeah, yeah*". Lynn also said "*very true*" multiple times and then added in reference to *Gossip Girl*, "*there's no excuse. There are other things to do in New York. Like [Sophie] said, like,*

c'mon, go to a museum. There's tons of things". What is frustrating and connected to the comments that Claire should be at a wine bar and Rachel should go on Tinder or to a museum, is that a conversation with a teenage boy is being put on the same level as having a more stimulating adult conversation. The reason Sophie's commentary stuck with the group throughout the whole discussion is likely because it is undeniably accurate. From my experience as a female teacher, coming across a teenage male student in a setting outside of school usually results in a wave or nod at most; the most likely outcome is that the child avoids eye contact and ignores me. Quite frankly, that is perfectly fine. It is not to say that a female teacher cannot have a decent conversation with a male student; these do happen in the confines of school and usually about school-related issues. However, to portray a conversation with a teenage boy outside of school, in the evening, and about real-life things, as being a sought-out experience for a female teacher is just bizarre and far-fetched. The average teacher would likely feel like Sophie and not want to have a prolonged hang-out with a male student.

The portrayal of the teenage boys as being on the same social level as the teachers was further observed at Lynn's comment about *A Teacher* where she noted:

> *And he liked one of her pictures, so like, social media, like they're being put on the same social playing field if you will, and it's almost like a teenage relationship, we're gonna make out in the car, we're gonna do it in the car…it's weird for an adult to be doing that*.

The depiction of these boys as being on the same social playing field as the adult teachers was bothersome to the teacher participants as it uplifts the boy and downgrades the female teacher. The female teacher portrayed in this light exhibits unrealistic behaviors. She is entertaining conversations with young boys outside of school when she should seek out more realistic, adult

settings to find people her own age to spend time with. She should spend time at a wine bar or at a museum or make a profile on an online dating platform, such as Tinder, to meet a man her own age. Giving a teenage male student access to one's private social media account, as referenced in Lynn's comment above, is also problematic. Granted it is a realistic detail as "social media platforms and online communication platforms may be where many of these relationships are initiated and fostered" (Russell et al., 2022, p. 2). Therefore, it could be seen as a warning of the consequences of a teacher opening the door to their private life to students. However, for the participants, this was behaviour they would never engage in; they have a good understanding of the boundaries that need to be kept, as Betty expressed in a comical, albeit serious, tone, "*We almost look at it as 'oh, this is a normal thing that should happen'. It's like, NO! [strong emphasis] No students in the cars! No students coming to your house!"*. The female teacher is reduced to having sex in a car in two storylines, *A Teacher* and *Riverdale.* As Lynn noted, this is a bizarre depiction; it is behaviour attributed to a teenager who does not have privacy in their home.

Regarding the sex scenes in particular, the boys were problematically presented as sexually mature, thus enhancing their image. The participants noticed this in the *Gossip Girl* sex scene. Carina explained, "*the sex scene is hot, it's loud, there's music playing. Again portraying this idea that 'it's ok now', and like, it's a hot sexy scene, ok [sarcasm]. He knows what he's doing, he's taking his shirt off*". Carina's use of sarcasm and tone indicate that this is not how she is interpreting the scene, but explaining how audiences are meant to see positively. Maeve made a similar point saying, "*And that music, that like badass, 'we're doing something really wrong. It's so exciting' and just like—oh god*". She paused at the word 'like' and then uttered a very discouraged 'oh god'. Sophie explained the use of the loud music to represent "*a release of*

sexual tension somehow? It's like a, I don't know, trying to show you that this is meant to happen or it's like fun and exciting" or as Betty noted, to show the audience that "*you're supposed to be on the same kind of wavelength as them*". It is clear the audience is meant interpret this problematic sex scene as positive. The participants also noted that the *Riverdale* car sex scene was initiated very quickly once the teacher showed interest in the student. The "*steamy [sarcastic]*" (Evelyn) scene is also romanticized as a coordinated backseat encounter where the boy appears to, again, know what he is doing. Adding to the lack of realism is the fact that this apparently coordinated sexual encounter is happening in a tiny Volkswagen Beetle.

These fictional encounters on television are set up in a way that implies that the teacher is open to explore social interactions with teenage boys outside of school. In all of the storylines, the teacher is presented as willing to schedule time with these male students outside of school hours and, in some cases, not for purposes related to school. As Sophie mentioned, it was as if the writers of these shows have never spent time with teenage boys. Going back to these depictions being a male fantasy, perhaps this is why these fictional boys are being written as appealing to the female teachers and as sexually skilled. Christensen and Darling (2020) explain that most cases of abuse at the hands of teachers occur outside of school environments, "hence the importance of clear policy and procedure around contact (both in person and via electronic means) between staff and students outside of the organisation" (p. 32). Bearing this in mind, it is important to avoid unrealistically romanticizing such encounters in popular representations of teachers.

Binaries of Normalization: Bombshell or Mother. The de-facto sexualization of female teachers traps them as it does not leave much room for varied identities. When we consistently see one pattern on television we can forget that in real-life, female teachers are different and

come to the job with unique life experiences. Early in our discussion, Evelyn noticed the limited personalities of the teachers:

> *it's very, um, gender role based in terms of, it's either you're a mom or you're a sex symbol. There's no, um, there's no in-between. It has to be, like, I'm either a bombshell and I'm going to sexually seduce you or I'm going to be your mother*.

She saw the clips as creating a binary of bombshell/mother for female teacher identities. Participants took issue with the two identities that the media has to offer. Carina explained:

> *[this is] what the media portrays these sexy, young teachers to be, it just gives that idea about that and then again, and then young boys might try to do something…but then it's like, so you can't be young and attractive and be a teacher either? That's like, so unfair. Should I come in wearing muumuus and making sure that I don't look attractive? And then, like, you know what I mean? So, and you could look attractive, you know, wearing pants and a turtleneck, it doesn't matter.*

Her fellow discussion members agreed. Carina's words convey the difficulty that media portrayals of female teachers create for real ones. Due to these media images, a young, attractive teacher is almost automatically put into the bombshell category and young boys may attempt to cross a line. She mentioned this idea of boys "*trying*" a few times throughout her focus group discussion meaning that young boys' inspiration for flirting with a female teacher may be inspired by the successful attempts they consistently witness on television through these storylines. As far as the attempts go, the teacher's role as she saw it was to "*shut it down*" (Carina). She explained that she had been in situations where she needed to do this.

We can see resentment in Carina's comment through her word choice ("*unfair*") which shows the real-life implications of sexualizing female teachers. Using clothing to explain herself, she sarcastically asks if she should be wearing muumuu dresses to hide and monitor the body, a concept not unfamiliar to female teachers (Johnson, 2005; Atkinson, 2008). She questions how unfair it is that a woman cannot be both young and attractive and be a teacher. Her discussion mates nodded in strong agreement when she said you could still be sexy in pants and a turtleneck. Atkinson (2008) explained that if a female teacher body is hidden with intentional clothing, then the problem of the sexualized teacher body can be solved. We see from Carina's opinion, and her discussion mates' agreement, that this is not necessarily true. A sexualized teacher does not have to be the extreme depiction from Van Halen's "Hot for Teacher" (1984) where the teacher is dressed in a blue bikini, or even like Tamara in *Dawson's Creek* who is dressed in a negligee-type dress at one point. Even covered up completely in a turtleneck and pants, a teacher could look attractive and be sexy. This could imply that the female teacher is in a difficult bind: even if she covers up completely, she can still be sexualized. A female teacher can take measures to put on a more conservative, covered up look, but "*it doesn't matter*" (Carina).

This connects to an interesting comment made regarding the show *A Teacher*. Many of the participants were struck by the more realistic elements of the show, including the appearance of the teacher, Claire Wilson. She was not presented as either a typical maternal figure or a bombshell. Evelyn noted, "*there's the real aspect, I think the show is doing it well in the sense that, to me, this teacher is your everyday-looking teacher*". This is contrary to, for example, Tamara who at one point is dressed in a short skirt and has her legs on her desk, or Rachel who, as Sophie noted, dressed less and less like a teacher, in "*spaghetti tank [tops]*", as her storyline progressed. Claire looked like an everyday teacher. Although the scene was not shown to

participants, in looking back to the scene in which Eric first develops a crush on her, she is dressed in a formal cardigan and pants. Although not a turtleneck, I do not think Carina would be too surprised to hear of a teacher sexualized dressed in a cardigan and pants. This shows again, that even covered up, the female teacher is sexualized.

Evelyn further commented on the impact of younger, attractive teachers being automatically sexualized. Note that her entire passage was expressed using a quizzical tone. She probed:

> *it's very interesting because then also, like, the idea too, that if a teacher looks like that, if a teacher is younger, if a teacher is attractive, if a teacher dresses a certain way, then like, you shouldn't do that? Or like, that doesn't belong in the teaching field? Like, what are we supposed to be? Like, more maternal? We're not allowed to be sexy? If we look a certain way then is it like, that idea is like, you're kinda asking for it?*

At this, Émilie responded, "*Mais je pense que c'est ça qu'il présente. Mais dans la vraie vie, c'est, c'est que tu as l'droit d't'habiller comme tu veux. Puis tu as l'droit d'être belle*". By using the phrase "*asking for it*", Evelyn was reflecting on the same point that Carina brought up when explaining that young boys might try to flirt with their teacher. Her whole passage being stated in an inquisitive tone goes back to her earlier statement that the depictions are very gender role based. Her words showcase the bind that female teachers are in. The phrase about attractiveness not belonging in the teaching field is especially discouraging as it presents the idea that attractiveness determines one's place in the profession. Similar to the spinster teachers of the 1950s who were classified as unattractive and thus not belonging in the field (Cavanagh, 2006), attractive teachers today also face scrutiny; they need to be on guard and ready to cover up and

shut down young boys' attempts to sexualize them. It is a sad reality that superficial concepts determine a female teacher's place in the profession and not concepts such as competence and drive to be in this profession. Émilie agrees that the media is presenting the idea that a young, attractive teacher is a given to be sexualized. She counters that in reality you have the right to be attractive and to dress as you want. However, media depictions make it difficult for female teachers to easily embrace that they have the right to be attractive and ignore the role their appearance plays in their daily job.

Looking at the other side of the binary, the motherly character is Alice, who the participants saw as fulfilling a mother-role to Frank. As she is also sleeping with him, this "*messes everything up*" (Carina) and makes it "*become weird*" (Evelyn). Therefore, instead of acting as the "*mother figure whose gonna take care of him*" (Carina), this becomes a problematic display of a child with "*mommy issues*" (Carina). First it is interesting to note that even as a motherly-figure, Alice is still sexualized. Carina described her as "*the most non-sexual character there*" likely due to her "*homely*" appearance. However, Émilie was quick to counter that "*même si elle n'est pas le cliché de la femme sexy, mais on voit que c'est très sexuel*". In all three focus groups, Alice was described as fulfilling a mother's role in Frank's life, albeit in a disturbing way. Evelyn was "*weirded out*" by the relationship and felt Frank had "*mama issues*"; Betty called it "*gross*"; Maeve called it "*weird*"; Dora noted the "*awkwardness*"; and Taylor's word choices were "*disgusting*" and "*cringe-worthy*" as to her, Frank was clearly "*looking for a parent*". Megan summed Alice up as follows:

> *This is [meant to be perceived as] funny because she's old, you know. It's silly, it's mom, right? Like, there's, it has a different flavor to it, it's not, you know, because it's so ridiculous that a woman who looked like that*

> *would have those kinds of responses to a young man so her sexuality is a joke. Like, there is a kind of subtext*.

And finally, Émilie noted a unique point about Alice and Frank saying, "*Mais, pour moi, moi j'ai l'impression que dans Friends, le gars y'a comme un retard mental puis elle, elle abuse de ça, tsé…pour moi, c'est ça qui me dérange*". Although Émilie's tone when saying this made us laugh, we agreed with Betty who responded "*which makes it worse, more disturbing*". As we can see from the descriptions above, falling in the category of mother as showcased through Alice seems no better than falling into the character of bombshell. The mother figure is still highly sexualized for Alice is always depicted as intensely making out with Frank; she growls and moans repeatedly in her scenes. In a sense she is also like a manipulative seductress taking advantage of Frank's need for a mother figure or potential mental delays. Finally, like the more typical, attractive seductress, she is not meant to be taken seriously either, but in this case because she is older. Whether the bombshell or the motherly teacher, Dora expressed that

> *I feel like…that there's a certain amount of um, you know, there's more likelihood that there's gonna be, that a woman's authority in the classroom is undermined in one way or another. And I don't just mean sexually, I mean like, they're expected to do more mothering type behaviors and so like, I already feel like, it, it reflects what's already going on, that there's already an undermining, forgetting about the sexual component, and so, and then the sexual component comes in and undermines it even more*.

As such, Dora feels that female teachers are already undermined by being expected to play a motherly role, in addition to the further undermining that comes from sexualized representations.

In looking at the options of being seen as a bombshell or as a mother, it appears neither option is appealing.

Condoning the Relationship Through Inadequate Consequences: "Nothing Really Happens to These Women"

The teacher participants had a lot to say about the fourth montage of clips which centered on the consequences that the fictional female teachers faced as a result of their actions. In general, it was observed that "*nothing really happens to these women*" (Evelyn) and "*it's almost like it's acceptable*" (Carina). This is interesting because we watched observable punishments, but these were clearly not strong or realistic enough to emphasize that the teachers faced appropriate consequences for their actions. Apart from what the participants viewed in *A Teacher,* they noted that the consequences did not do much to contribute to serious exploration of the teacher-student sexual relationship. Even death, the harshest consequence had little impact in showing the implications of such relationships. The slaying of the she-mantis teacher in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was actually touched upon the least by the participants. Maeve did note that we could link her death to "*the destruction of the teacher's career",* but it was understood for the most part that "*[Buffy] kills her because she's a praying mantis [laughter] and you have to kill her"* (Carina). Thus, the genre of the show makes her death expected.

The participants were very much attuned to the fact that the consequences of a teacher-student sexual relationship were minimized in these storylines. This could go back to the idea that the storylines serve to "*[offer] a kind of sensationalism*" (Megan) and that the shows are not really "*interested in really investigating the emotional realities of these situations*" (Dora). Evelyn noted that it seems the "*worst that happens is [the teachers] leave on their own accord*" which we saw in *Dawson's Creek, Gossip Girl,* and *Riverdale.* At the same time Evelyn felt that

"*you want them to also leave, you're just like, just go and start your life somewhere else, you know?*". This reaction stems from the frustration with the teachers' accumulated poor decisions and actions. The teacher participants did not seem too surprised at the lack of serious and realistic consequences of these storylines, as with these types of shows, mainly teen dramas, "*you're not gonna see a real consequence*" (Carina). When such storylines are included for sensationalism and with little intention to dig deeper into the serious issue of the teacher-student sexual relationship, harmful images of the teaching profession are condoned.

Nothing to Something. The participants took particular issue with Alice from *Friends* regarding the lack of consequences in the comedy. Alice's lack of understanding and the fact that nothing really happens was disturbing to them. Maeve noted that "*the female teacher came across as not understanding anything*", meaning that she showed no awareness that her sexual involvement with a student is wrong. Maeve's choice to use the phrase 'the female teacher' as opposed to saying Alice's name directly, generalizes the depiction of Alice's idiocy to the profession. Taylor emphasized this directly in saying "*So again, yeah, again it's just this kind of diminishing of the female teacher character in a way, she's just so idiotic*". In fact, "*she's presented as being so silly, to the point where Phoebe, who's not a very smart, she's not a smart character, but that Phoebe has to feed her her lines because she can't remember what to say*" (Lynn). In this case, the lines she is fed are about why her relationship is wrong. This idiocy is presented for laughs, but is problematic because "*she has no, no sense of wrong*" (Taylor) or "*no moral compass*" (Megan). The fictional teacher's lack of a sense that her actions are wrong is then transferred to the audience's acceptance of her. Being familiar with the show, a few of the participants brought up future episodes where Phoebe ends up carrying triplets for Frank and Alice, thus furthering the acceptance of their relationship. As Dora noted, when Alice's character

is first introduced, "*everyone's aware of the awkwardness*". The other characters are sickened by the relationship, but as the show is a comedy, this awkwardness is used to turn the relationship "*into a joke*" (Dora). Dora then continued, "*but it's not really a joke if they have these touching moments where Phoebe has a baby for them*". Therefore, at the start, the teacher-student sexual relationship is used for laughs, which Evelyn admitted never made her "*pay [attention to the issues] cuz for me it was always really funny*". Further into the story, touching family moments are created; this is less for laughs but more to promote the acceptance of Alice. Without consequences, the seriousness of Alice's actions are minimized. With Alice, "*it ends how it started*" (Evelyn), meaning "*nothing ended*" (Maeve). Frank and Alice face no negative consequences and live happily-ever-after.

Contrary to the participants' take on Alice, they did show appreciation for the consequences depicted in *A Teacher.* From nothing happening in the *Friends* storyline, it was refreshing to see something happen in this one. One of *A Teacher*'s intentions was to show the impact of such relationships on male victims (Hill, 2021, para. 14), which is highly glossed over in the other storylines. Watching the final scene of the series, which takes place 10 years in the future and showcases Eric confronting Claire on her responsibility, struck a chord with the participants. Sophie captured the general sentiment of the focus groups in saying, "*the Claire and Eric [storyline] made me really sad*". She admitted that while watching the previous clips, "*I found myself, I was also only thinking of the female teachers, I wasn't necessarily thinking of what Eric was going through*". Her admission is understandable because of the way these storylines are constructed. They are often "*just a trope that [gets] used in a lazy way*" (Maeve) in which the boy never suffers for his actions; therefore, it is understandable to overlook the boy entirely in such depictions as we are not used to seeing him suffer. *A Teacher* was credited for its

realism with a few participants noting that it captures how they think such a relationship would start and end in real life. Due to its more serious ending with Claire going to prison and Eric suffering the consequences of the relationship years into the future, the show avoids undermining the repercussions of such relationships. Carina noted that this was "*the only one that actually has real consequences*". Betty took particular issue with the storylines masking the abuse of the young boy. As a consequence, young boys in the same situation may "*not even [know] their own rights*" (Betty) because of what they see on television. She added:

> *I mean, I think that's where 'A Teacher', I think, does a good job at the end where, he really kinda spells out, like, 'you used me, you're a click away, but I'm living this for the rest of my life*'.

On the same line of thought, Maeve contributed:

> *And I thought it was interesting with 'A Teacher' to have her kind of talk out how she allowed it to happen and what logic she allowed herself to follow and that he was doing these things, but that he calls her on it and recognized that she's the one with the primary responsibility*.

Seeing this outcome of the relationship acted out on screen could potentially make a victim of such a situation more aware of their rights.

Considering real consequences, Claire is the only teacher character who goes to jail for her actions. At learning this, Carina exclaimed in disbelief, "*She goes to prison!?*". This shock highlights that we are so used to seeing teachers on television get just a "*slap on the wrist*" (Evelyn) for their actions. However, Lynn brought up an interesting observation regarding Claire's prison time. Her focus group asked for some background context regarding Claire's

punishment and current life so I explained that she turns herself in and goes to prison. At the start of the final episode, 10 years in the future, she is depicted as re-married with two children. At this Lynn scoffed, "*She didn't go to jail for very long. [laughing] Where did she have time to do all this stuff?*". I had not previously thought about this and Lynn's comment prompted me to go back and look at the clip which showcases Claire with her new husband and two children more carefully. The children look to be around 5-7 years old and there is commentary about them attending swim practice after school (Fidell et al., 2020c). If we factor in time to meet her husband and have these children, Lynn is pretty spot on in noticing that Claire must not have gone to prison for a very long time. Her jail time is further minimized in an earlier episode where Claire refers to her crime as "a small misdemeanor" (Fidell et al., 2020a, 9:14) which may come up on a background check. This all highlights an important issue when it comes to jail time discrepancies between male and female teacher sexual offenders. Women often get shorter jail sentences or avoid jail altogether (Kingston, 2014). This is brought up in the show as once Claire is out of jail, she runs into a parent from the school who cries out disapprovingly, "You're out already!" (Fidell et al., 2020a, 9:24). Looking at all this, are the consequences substantial enough? Despite the show's valuable effort at showing the consequences on Eric, Claire's legal punishment minimizes the severity of her crimes.

Students Acting as Defenders. The female teacher participants noticed that the teenage characters played the role of defenders of their teachers. This could be yet another way in which the teenagers show more power than the adults; however, in the clips, it was seen as a tool to minimize the teachers' abusive actions, which the participants found bothersome and problematic. This was particular to the *Riverdale* and *Dawson's Creek* storylines. Carina noted that in *Riverdale,* "*he defends her too, right? Archie's like, 'she didn't do anything wrong, it was*

me'. So again making her seem like maybe she's almost the victim". Betty also noted that in *Riverdale,* "*everyone turned on the mom and the teacher was just kind of like sitting in the dark and it was like we [emphasized] were meant as viewers to also*" turn on mom instead of on teacher. In *Riverdale*, Geraldine, is confronted by two parents, Archie's dad and Betty's mom (note, Betty is a character and not meant to be confused with the participant). The way the scene is constructed, Betty's mom is vocal in denouncing Geraldine's actions, but the teen characters defend their teacher. As viewers, we are meant to sympathize with the teacher and villainize the mother. It is especially disturbing to see that we are villainizing the mother for wanting to expose the abusive relationship between a teacher and student. Lynn also noted that the teacher is "*put on trial by the parents and it's Betty who comes to the rescue…which is an odd thing…and [Betty] threatens to lie to protect them*". Lynn later brought in the connection to Pacey from *Dawson's Creek* who lies to the school board to save his teacher. Lynn called the depictions of the teens lying to protect their abusers "*weird*". She continued, "*so teens are being, are volunteering to lie to get, so that, to avoid the consequences, yeah. Which is not normal. But to show that is awful*". Sophie, who was "*shocked*" by the lying teenagers added, "*to almost condone the relationship*".

Dora also commented on the students as defenders in *Riverdale*, calling the situation "*the weirdest of all of them*"; that is saying a lot as in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* the teacher is a monster who has her head chopped off. She noted:

> *It was really weird the um, like the interaction with the adults and, you know, it's like there's a lot of, I don't know, the kids are defending her so much and that's, I don't know, it feels like it's like not enough and too much at the same time. Like, the kids are defending [her],*

> *that should be super disturbing…it's disturbing to me to watch them being like 'no she's a good person'.*

Maeve agreed and then noted, "*Right, cuz it seems to become about them [emphasized; meaning the parents] and this like, clear predator, manipulative woman is just like able to slink off and find fresh prey*". The situation with the teacher is minimized to enhance drama between the two parent characters. As such, the teacher-student relationship is not even addressed. Archie's dad brushes it off, which really took Dora by surprise as she stated "*whoa, whoa, whoa, this, you're in the room with the person who took advantage of your son!*". This is the too much and not enough aspect. The children defending the serial predator and the adults doing nothing in the end is all too much to absorb and at the same time it is not enough as nothing really happens to the teacher in this scenario. Geraldine is killed off in future episodes, but not before we see her lusting after and starting relationships with other young boys. This means the teenagers were defending a true serial predator. For *Dawson's Creek,* Dora said "*ok, so this is similar to the Riverdale situation where it's like, we're gonna defend this nice woman, but she seems kind of awful [laughter]*". Again, not enough and too much. Not enough because the teacher gets away with her actions and can start a new life; too much because Pacey's lies are unrealistically believed by the school board.

The instances of the teenagers defending the teachers were seen as further evidence that the storylines are "*treated flippantly*" (Dora). Maeve added, "*we're not gonna have a whole trial sequence and like, boring consequences*" and therefore the storylines are included "*for the drama*". Calling the consequences boring was not to mean the consequences are not important. Maeve meant that showing legitimate legal consequences would likely be interpreted as less

engaging to audiences. This promotes the inclusion of dramatic and unrealistic consequences, which end up minimizing the teaching profession.

Implications

The second phase of this study seeks to understand the lived experiences of female high school teachers in the broader context of the sexualization of female teachers. Utilizing clips of fictional teachers engaged in sexual affairs with male students, the focus group discussions explored how the participants responded to fictional representations of female teacher sexuality. As discussed, we see that the participants took issue with the imbalanced power dynamics, with the fact that the sexuality of the female teacher was normalized, and with the inadequate consequences faced by the female teachers. Considering these three patterns found in the focus group discussions, some overarching implications are discussed below.

Condemning What is Expected

One of the issues of repeatedly presenting female teachers on screen in a sexualized light is the expectation this creates. Due to "*this idea [emphasized] of the female, sexy teacher*" that "*society, I think, and the media has portrayed*" many have come to see "*this idea, this woman, sexy [emphasized] teacher authority figure*" (Carina) as typical. Constructs such as the myth of the lucky bastard (Angelides, 2018) and the hot teacher effect (Muniz & Powers, 2022) confirm Carina's opinion. Male teachers are not impacted in the same way. Megan expressed:

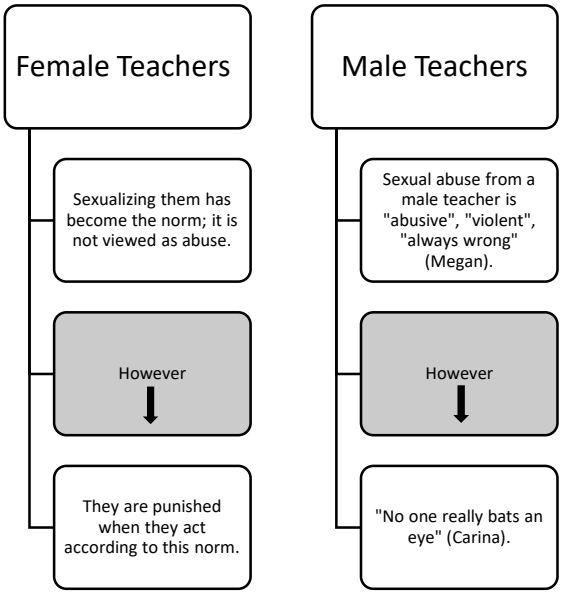
> *It's just the ick-factor is different if it was a man, right? It's sort of like how we would read it would be really, really different because we would be filled, we'd have a different set of emotions because it's so, we're so used to that narrative as abusive and ugh, dist— [cut off her word], you know, violent almost. It's always [emphasized] wrong*.

The research does support the idea that the male teacher-female student relationship is more abusive (Dollar et al., 2004; Fromuth et al., 2016; Muniz & Powers, 2022) and yet at the same time "*no one really bats an eye*" (Carina) or, to put it simply, "*men can get away with more shit than women can, including dating, I guess, ex-students*" (Carina). Evelyn was particularly vocal about this. She presented a hypothetical scenario asking her fellow focus group members what type of reaction she would get if she announced to fellow staff members that she was dating a former student? Émilie answered that she would find this "*vraiment weird*". Evelyn's point was to show that as a female teacher "*people would expect [emphasized] something to be done*" but if they heard a that a male colleague was in the same situation, she said "*I think it would be somewhat accepted or like people would just, like, move on with their day*". This point deviates from what is typically found in the literature. In accordance with viewing abuse that the hands of male teachers as worse than female teachers, stronger sentences are advocated for male offenders (Fromuth et al., 2016). From the participants' perspectives, in their everyday lives as teachers, they are not seeing the harsher stance against male teachers. They see male colleagues get away with more. Perceptions of male and female teacher sexual offenders tend to come from studies which primarily gather data from college students in social science and psychology programs (Dollar et al., 2004; Fromuth et al., 2016; Muniz & Powers, 2020; Muniz & Powers, 2022; Muniz et al., 2021). Although these perceptions have importance, more focus needs to be put on the input of real teachers in the field as what they experience does not concur with existing findings.

The contradictions presented above are unsettling in both a logical sense and a moral sense. Figure 4 outlines what was presented.

Figure 4

Contradictory Expectations for Female and Male Teachers



In an ideal world we would not have to worry so much about the contradictions above as we would hope that an ideal world would be one in which all teachers, male and female, maintain the boundaries they should. However, it has been documented that sexual misconduct between teachers and students is on the rise (Russel, 2022). We need to consider the implications of glamorizing sexual relationships with female teachers and sweeping relationships with male teachers under the rug. Both need to be treated seriously as both have the capacity to "inflict persistent psychological and physical impacts on victims" (Christensen & Darling, 2020, p. 24). The consequences of such relationships need to be taken seriously.

"False Equality" as a Means of Distraction

The potential reasoning behind the inclusion of such storylines is something worth questioning as without proper consequences, these storylines may condone behaviours that are, in actuality, criminal offences and pass them off as excusable and light transgressions. Megan offered a rationale for why the female teacher-male student sex storyline is common. She called it "*[reversing] the tables*" and seeing the female play the role of the predator as "*a novelty*"

(Megan), or as Lynn added, "*it's more taboo also, I think, than a male teacher*". This led to the following exchange between the participants in Focus Group 3:

> Megan: *Like, it's, we're talking about is as a kind of backlash, you know, sort of to marginalize the fact that we still have problems with male predators and male, ugh, you know sexual abuse of women, so you just kind of divert people, well it's, actually 'women do it too' [uses a purposeful whisper tone, as if divulging a secret]*.
>
> Taylor: *Ohhhhh*
>
> Sophie: *Yeah, it's like this false quality effort almost*.
>
> Taylor: *Absolutely, yeah*.
>
> Sophie: *It's like, oh yeah, make sure…*
>
> Megan: *Women, it's, we all do it…*
>
> Sophie: *if we're gonna be equal, well then, we're gonna be equal*.
>
> Taylor: *You have to share this*.
>
> Sophie: *Yeah, yeah, women do it too*.
>
> Megan: *Women do it too*.
>
> Lynn: *That's nuts*.

This is a noteworthy exchange. First, it is important to acknowledge that female abusers do exist and they do inflict physical and psychological harm on their victims despite the fact that "offenses committed by female child sexual offenders have been portrayed in the media with undertones of sympathy and romanticization" (Christensen, 2018, p. 176). Because men are seen as engaging in such relationships for sexual gratification whereas women are perceived to engage in them for emotional reasons, their actions are sometimes deemed less harmful (Muniz

& Powers, 2022). Christensen (2018) argues that romanticizing and viewing female perpetrators as less harmful than male perpetrators is problematic. In her study on how female perpetrators in print media are portrayed, she argues that recent pushes to gender equality have likely led to more print reports showing the danger of female perpetrators as opposed to glamorizing the situation. In looking at print media reports from 2012 to 2016, Christensen found fewer "undertones of sympathy" (p. 184) for female teacher perpetrators and characterizations of them as "evil", as "vile", and as digging their "claws into" teenage boys (p. 182). However, the article also cites that "it is indisputable that males make up the majority of child sexual offenders" (p. 177). Christensen's purpose is to show that we still need to be critical of female offenders' actions, but like the participants noted as a rationale for the storylines, this could look like a "*false quality effort*" (Sophie). We also need to remember the point that villainizing female teachers in media reports is not necessarily a new concept at the hands of gender equality, to make them equal to men. Female teachers who cross boundaries have been referred to as dangerous, femme fatale like figures for some time (Cavanagh, 2004; Jagodzinski, 2006; Knoll, 2010). We also need to remember that televised depictions of male teachers in such a role are not as harsh. Even in real life reports, Chiotti (2009) found male offenders were depicted as predatory in only 22% of reports; this was in newspapers, magazines, and on televised news bulletins from 1994 to 2009. This is not a particularly high percentage. There is no denial that "*women do it too*" (Megan), but we must question if these storylines are, as she said, a backlash meant to divert people's attention from the higher percentage of male teacher sexual predators.

Sexualization Leads to Undermining

When it becomes normal to sexualize a female teacher, whether on television or in real life, it undermines her and by extension, the teaching profession. This was of considerable

concern to the participants. To note, in this final section of the chapter, the participants share their thoughts on what they watched in the focus group discussion. However, the quotes themselves are from the individual interviews where the participants were asked how they felt about the focus group discussion. They were also asked to look back at the depictions and express an overall reflection on the clips. These were the first two questions asked in the interview and they served as a segue to the questions about broader topics of female teacher sexuality.

Taylor, who had a lot to say about the teaching profession being consistently de-valued in society noted, "*I wish that we had a very different set up for education and that it was so respected that it wouldn't become the butt of jokes*". She was speaking in a general sense and admitted that she had "*never thought about the sexualization angle of it at all*". To her, this new sexual lens she was looking through "*further corrodes any positive impression of people who go into teaching*" and she concluded that *"It does undercut the profession, right? It is kind of disrespecting, continually, in various different ways*". The sexualization angle was something that shocked Émilie. She reiterated that, "*j'étais vraiment étonnée, vraiment étonnée"* parce que *"[dans les] émissions francophones, je vois pas ça*". She saw this sexualized image as a product of American culture and was discouraged that this one, negative cultural image was so pervasive.

Megan and Sophie were also discouraged by the images they saw, but not surprised by them. Megan felt a "*sense of cynicism*" after watching the clips and explained that "*nothing surprises me to a certain degree in capitalist cultural production*" and that "*we see all the time how low they will stoop*". In using 'they' she was referring to the fact that most of these depictions are curated by men. She continued, calling it a "*formula*" and just "*one more assault, I guess, on women and gender and the, um, attack on female authority. The sexualizing of women*

in that regard, to me, is just an attack on authority". As a position of authority in a child's life, compared to a female relative, a female neighbor, or a female member of the clergy, the female teacher is the "most sexualized" (Muniz & Powers, 2022, p. 553). It is documented that "pop culture and pornography have long sexualized female teachers" (Muniz & Powers, 2022, p. 550) turning what should be considered abuse into a positive sexual experience for a teenage boy. In studies which examine attitudes of sexual relationships between teachers and students, male respondents take little issue when the dyad is made up of a female teacher and male student and are less likely to see these relationships as harmful to the young boy. Female respondents see them as more problematic (Muniz & Powers, 2020; Muniz et al., 2021). This perhaps connects to the fact that many of these popular culture depictions are created by men; as men are less likely to see this relationship as harmful, they have little issue perpetuating it. The cost comes to the detriment of female teachers as these images continue to sexualize and fetishize the profession.

Sophie "*felt a little disgusted and uncomfortable*" after viewing the clips. However, she was also not surprised stating the clips contribute to the idea that "*it's just an accepted part of our culture to have a hot teacher*". She saw this expectation as problematic because "*when you sexualize someone, you have power over them and you're brining something into the equation that should never be part of the equation*". It creates the "*perception that, oh this hot teacher can't be taken as seriously as other you know, even male teachers or less attractive older female teachers*" and that "*we're adding that layer of 'you're sexy and thus I can't listen to anything you say'* ". Female teachers are undermined yet again because of "ingrained prevailing stereotypes that suggest that one cannot be a woman (sexual) and a professional (intellectual) at the same time" (Mitchell & Weber, 1999, p. 152). Whether surprised or not surprised, the

participants clearly took issue with these depictions and the negative implications they have on the teaching profession and on female high school teachers specifically.

Cultural depictions have made the concept of the 'hot teacher' into a tangible, concrete identity. We see this identity presented as an extreme, just like in the "Hot for Teacher" music video (Van Halen, 1984) and in countless memes on the internet. She is even a Halloween costume. One such hot female teacher costume on Amazon Canada (2023) looks like pinstripe lingerie and comes with glasses and a neck-tie to, according to the product description, make the wearer look more like a teacher (see Appendix E, Photo 4). Items such as glasses and briefcases are traditionally seen as male-teacher items and when a female teacher is using such items they become "borrowed symbols" (Mitchell & Weber, 1999, p. 151) which intend to give her power she does not inherently hold. The six storylines used some elements of a typical hot teacher look; there was the manipulation of eyeglasses as a sexy accessory, we saw more than one short skirt, and we did see lingerie-type attire. We saw the clear use of a leather bag/briefcase as a borrowed item for Rachel in *Gossip Girl.* The item was a great hindrance to her as she could not open a door because of it; because it blocks her movement, it comes across as borrowed or as something that she should not be using. If it was a teacher item meant to be naturally hers, she would move freely with it. These images are not the extremes we see in a music video or as a Halloween costume, but they contribute to the hot teacher stereotype and the overall message that an attractive woman in front of the classroom does not have as much to offer and needs stereotypically intellectual accessories to identify as a teacher.

Given this pervasive hot teacher image, it is not surprising that female teachers find themselves up against stereotypes. After viewing the clips, Lynn seemed exasperated when she explained, "*is that all we are? We're so much more than that, you know. We're professionals*".

She felt that she and other female teachers were "*always up against these stereotypes that don't even really exist, I think. In extreme cases they might, but by and large, no*". These sexualized depictions undermine teachers and reduce them to a stereotype that does not reflect reality, except in extreme cases. These extreme cases are, as Dora reflected, "*important to explore in literature and film*", but she felt the clips did a poor job at this. In her reflection on how the clips made her feel, she explained that the focus group discussion left her thinking about the creation of the storylines and the thought-process behind them. She felt the seriousness of the abuse was not acknowledged. She brought up some key questions to express this such as, "*If it's supposed to be serious and if it's supposed to be realistic, then how does it get treated?*" and "*How do you do those things responsibly so that they're not, you're not, um, reinforcing certain problematic stereotypes?*" and finally, "*Does that make it feel like it's more prevalent than it is in a way, if it keeps coming up in the media?*". Although teacher sexual misconduct is a serious problem, it is less prevalent at the hands of female teachers (Christensen, 2018) but one might think otherwise considering the storylines. Overall, Dora felt that "*I don't really feel like a lot of the shows are presenting it as a serious issue, they're presenting it, like, jokingly and lightly*". In that sense, these storylines are not being handled responsibly, thus presenting an inaccurate and unrealistic image of female high school teachers. These representations undermine the profession and continuously diminish the integrity and competence of female high school teachers in real life.

To conclude Phase 2, Section 1, we can observe that the teacher participants negatively responded to the fictional representations of female teacher sexuality. There was little praise to be found for the fictional teachers; they were seen as unrealistic, powerless figures who do not face adequate repercussions for their actions. From the participants' perspectives, the lack of surprise at some of the sexualized images shows how pervasive the hot teacher image is; it is an

ideal that is then condemned in reality. Moreover, sexualizing the female teacher seems to distract from the realities of male teacher sexual abuse. Finally, the sexualized depictions serve to undermine the realities and seriousness of the profession. Using Phase 2, Section 1 as a springboard, the final section of this study sought more personal insight into the participant teachers' lives.

Chapter 6: Individual Interview Results and Discussion

Phase 2, Section 2: Binaries of Female Teacher Sexuality and the Lived Experiences of Real Teachers

This final section of the study explored how the teacher participants felt about the binaries concerning female teacher sexuality and how these relate to their own lived experience as a female teacher.

Recapitulation of the Individual Interview Structure

All 10 participants took part in an individual interview after their focus group discussion. These took place throughout the month of November and first couple of days of December 2022. They were scheduled no more than 10 days after the focus group discussion. The gap between the focus group discussion and the interview was kept as short as possible as one goal of the interview was to discuss how the participants felt coming out of the focus group discussion. In the interview we discussed further reactions to the clips and links between the clips and the teachers' identity; we also discussed the binaries that are used to define female teachers (see Appendix B). The interviews varied between 25-40 minutes. Six of the interviews were in-person and four took place on Zoom as that was more convenient for the participants. All of the interviews were audio recorded, with the Zoom interviews being both audio and video recorded (however, only the audio recording was used for transcription purposes). I had a notepad with me

to take potential field notes, but found myself not relying on it. My role as a researcher is also intertwined with my identity as a high school teacher. Having this insider perspective, the interviews were not simply a question-answer format. The participants took the lead on the discussion, but as a fellow teacher, and thus a peer, the interview was in many ways more of a conversation and sharing experience. To take notes in that role was more of a hinderance and felt unnatural. Moreover, much of the participants' emotions were in their words, their intonation, and their strong exhales; it was all in their voice which the audio recordings captured perfectly.

Data Coding Procedures for the Individual Interview Data

Similar to the focus group discussions, all of the individual interviews were transcribed by me by listening and typing out the transcript. For Émilie's interview, which was predominantly in French, I did run it through an automatic transcription, but again, only used this as a guide while listening and typing out her words as the automatic transcript was not accurate. Other participants also occasionally spoke French in the interview, but I was able to transcribe their words without the aid of any automatic transcription. For my first level coding, I used in-vivo coding (Saldaña, 2021). Just as I did for the focus group transcripts, my first step in this was to go through a hard copy of each interview transcript and underline key words and phrases. On an electronic copy, I kept the transcript on the left and used a text box on the right side of each interview to note all the codes; each code was numbered (see Appendix F). With all 10 interviews combined, I ended up with 2307 first-level in-vivo codes. In my next step, for each interview, I listed all the in-vivo codes on a document. I then began the process of second level coding; I used pattern coding to combine all my first cycle codes into more meaningful groupings (Saldaña, 2021, p. 322). While pattern coding, I wrote analytic memos; these memos noted my observations, what I found thought-provoking, and the connections I was beginning to

see as I moved through pattern coding each interview (see Appendix G). From the original 2307 in-vivo codes, I ended up with 166 preliminary categories with my pattern coding. I applied a second level of pattern coding to narrow these categories down even more. For each participant, I grouped together the preliminary categories that related to each other. From this I ended up with 49 categories. Next, I repeated the process of grouping together the categories that related to each other to further narrow them down, but across the 10 participants. From this process, four categories emerged. Once I decided on my four categories, I went back to my transcripts and isolated all the quotes that pertained to each one for each participant. This helped me to find the most salient and impactful statements which belonged to each category. These four categories were turned into narratives created from the combined voices of the participants and myself. A more detailed explanation of how I put my stories together follows.

Storied Results

Co-Constructing Narratives through the Interviews

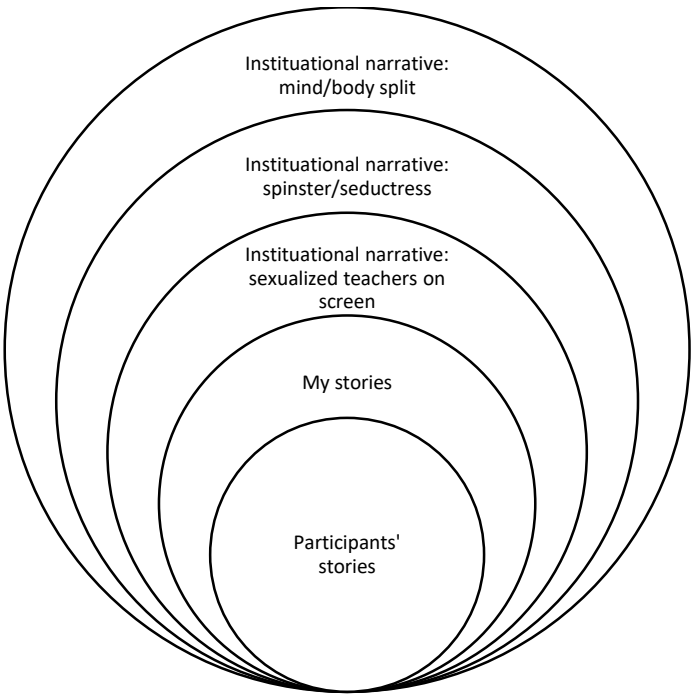
According to Johnson (2005), "One way to understand better the role of teachers' bodies and desires is to listen to each other's narratives…to see how others are experiencing and managing sexual dynamics in their classroom" (p. 146). Narrative inquiry begins with an ontological position and an interest in people's experiences. In focusing on representations and perceptions of female teachers, wanting to dig deeper into teacher experiences, and being a teacher myself, I see my participants as the main contributors to my study, but also see my position as a researcher as one who can contribute as well. As such, my ontological commitment, or my relationship to the reality of my study (Caine, 2013), is a deep one. Narrative inquiry is specifically defined by the "relational engagement" (Caine et al., 2013, p. 577) between researcher and participant. There is an ongoing interaction between the two and this can be a

vulnerable experience of story creation. As a researcher, I do not want to infringe on other teachers' stories, but as a teacher, I cannot listen with complete detachment. As such, the stance that narrative inquiry is a "relational research methodology, and, while it is research, it is also a transaction between people" (Caine et al., 2013, p. 578) resonates with me. The transactional aspect of narrative inquiry is also elaborated on by McAlpine (2016), writing specifically about education research, who states that the interaction between researcher and participant makes them jointly responsible for the stories that emerge in the research process. These stories give a voice to teachers and their experiences. MacIntyre Latta and Kim (2011) concur that narrative inquiry is the most fruitful approach to understanding the complexities of teachers' lives.

I do believe that storytelling holds a lot of my work together. Figure 5 outlines the different stories that were at play during the individual interview process.

Figure 5

The Interaction of Multiple Narratives



I put the participants' stories in the main circle as I wanted to prioritize their voices. My stories came out as well through the interview process as I shared some anecdotes about my own teaching life in the interviews. These personal anecdotes were usually stimulated in response to the participants' stories and in some cases, they were answers to questions the participants asked back to me directly about our topics of discussion (for example, Megan asked me about my own thought process when I got dressed for work in the morning). As discussed earlier in my researcher reflexivity section, I have been continuously reflecting on my own experiences in the context of the sexualization of the female teacher throughout this research process. Finally, the institutional narratives are spread out at the top showing their progressive impact on the views and assumptions of female teachers. These are the dominant narratives of larger organizations that set the stage for the personal stories we tell; they are very influential on us (O'Toole, 2018). The impacts of these institutional narratives were outlined in the literature review. It was a natural instinct to represent these ideas as overlapping and circular as I do feel that one narrative fed another.

With these ideas in mind, I used my individual interview data to write four first-person story reflections. Through these story reflections, I sought to show how the participants' voices and my voice as a researcher work together. As such, I used a process of co-construction, which is an effective means of showing how researcher and participant work together in knowledge creation (Chang-Kredl, 2010). I have decided to call them story reflections as they read more as personal journal entries than stories following a traditional plot structure. I used the first-person purposely to connect all our voices. As I was combing through the data, I could hear the different voices of the participants and also hear how they meshed into one. In the story reflections that follow, all of the words in italics are the words of the participants. For each story, quotes from all

10 participants were incorporated. My own words are in regular font. I sometimes included longer strings of text, either to build context for the story reflections or to add my own voice to them. In other instances I added just a word or two within the participants' text for fluency purposes. A mindful effort was made to keep meaning intact throughout the process. If I had to remove some of the participants' words within a quote to maintain fluency, I made sure that the overall meaning of what the participants said remained true. For example, the following is written in story reflection 1: And everyone knows as a female teacher, *the lower cut shirts become a problem.* The original text stated: "*the lower cut, like the cuts of the shirts and things like that, that becomes a problem*". The integrity of the original passage was still maintained though words were removed.

If I had to change a word, which was signalled with regular font as it was my own word, I also made it a point to respect the overall meaning and context of the participants' words. For example, the following is written in story reflection 1: *And I think that* looking good *also makes people uncomfortable and it makes* my female colleagues*, not scared, but more aware of how they look and then there's a comparison and therefore they shut me down.* In this case, I added the term 'looking good' as the participant was discussing her efforts to dress well for her job and that it is important for her confidence as a teacher to look good. I changed the original word she used, which was 'women', to 'female colleagues' because that is who the participant was speaking about specifically when making her point. On a final note, to maintain the integrity of the participants' voices, I left grammatical inaccuracies as they were as I felt they reflected the naturalness of the words. For example, the following is written in story reflection 2: *I do think there's more expectations.* It was purposely not changed to 'there are'.

As such, what follows are four story reflections co-created through my words and those of my participants. The stories seek to explore how the sexualized image of the female teacher and the binaries concerning female teacher sexuality relate to the teacher participants' own lived experience as a female teacher. The story reflections are as follows: (1) a female teacher getting dressed for work; (2) the binaries that confine me; (3) do fictional teachers reflect my reality?; and (4) who I want the fictional teacher to be.

Story Reflection 1: A Female Teacher Getting Dressed for Work

It's a typical morning and I'm getting myself ready for work. It's not an effortless process, but one influenced by others and by my own self-awareness and self-consciousness. I'd like to believe the decision of what I wear in the classroom is mine alone, that I have sole autonomy and authority in presenting my body a certain way. However, as a female high school teacher, it's difficult to claim my body as my own in the classroom.

I have to be honest, I pay a lot of attention to how I dress. *I definitely care about what I wear, one thousand percent*. *I take pride in looking a certain way* and *it does make me feel good about myself. I don't know if I wanna say* the word *'unfortunately', maybe a little bit, but unfortunately this is what gives me confidence. I feel like I shouldn't get my confidence by how I dress or the way that I look,* but *when I look professional, I feel professional and I feel like I carry that into the classroom. Je pense que la façon que je m'habille, la façon donc je me comporte, ça, ça amène distance entre moi et mes élèves.* To maintain this professionalism and distance, there are a bunch of things I make sure not to wear. *Nothing too revealing* and I *can't wear tight things. You'll never see me in short-shorts. Si je mets une jupe ou quelque chose, je fais attention ben, que, on voit pas mes bobettes.* I showed up to school one day in a skirt and when a colleague confirmed my slight hunch that it was a little short, *I was super paranoid the*

rest of the day. I could have sworn it wasn't too short. Longer skirts also cause issues, *the pencil skirt for example. I loved pencil skirts! I used to wear them in my job outside of education, but you can't wear that kind of thing in school necessarily. Every time you turn around they're looking at you and I got comments from some boys one time.* That's when *I started wearing longer sweaters. A lot of teachers wear those actually, those long cardigans that cover up a lot of the body.* I feel like *pencil skirts with high heels and things like that* have become '*sexy teacher' uniforms.*

I'd say my upper body is my biggest concern. *The boobies have got to be hidden. Your boobies should not be showing, like ever, in that setting. Whether you're 24, or 34, or 44, boobs are not there. And even if you have larger breasts, that's fine, but you have a way to hide them* with carefully selected tops and sweaters. *The cleavage thing is a big thing* and I try to wear things that are *high-cut, never showing any sort of cleavage in any way.* I *always make sure I don't bend down, just so they don't have a peek.* Sometimes *I wear these minimizing, strap 'em down bras that crunch me. I have back pain from* these *bras, but I'm not comfortable going to work and bouncing around in front of teenagers. I try to make sure that I'm locked down in my iron-clad bra.* In addition to the bouncing around, *I* also *have to worry about nipples* and that's why *I had to invest in thicker bras. There was a time I* tried *nipple covers but then I found they started becoming kind of visible through* my *shirts so I gave them up. You know, you don't want to be up there* in front of a bunch of teenagers *with hard nipples. It's not easy* because *even when I'm wearing a turtleneck, my breasts are still there! You can't get rid of them. So even in that sense, I won't wear completely form-fitting stuff. I have high-necked shirts that are a little bit more form-fitting, so I have to* decide *'ok, this is going to be a week-end turtleneck'. It's sad.* As a female teacher, you *figure out pretty soon that lower cut shirts become a problem* and to stick

to *crewnecks or turtlenecks.* Wear *the good old cardigan!* But sometimes, *I hate high necks. This is stupid, but if I have a migraine I'm not gonna wear* a high neck because *it's gonna make me feel worse.* And sometimes *it's really hot.* Like, *appallingly hot. I'm much more comfortable in something lower,* but *a male colleague* once *made a comment about female teachers wearing cleavage, so I'm very conscious of that.*

I mentioned that I make the distinction between, let's say, a *weekend turtleneck* and a *work turtleneck.* When it comes to clothes and how I present myself, *I think that it's important to have a distinction between* my *professional life and my personal life. I allow myself jeans once a week,* but for the most part, *sweat pants or jeans every single day is week-end* wear. I wouldn't wear to work something that I'd wear *on the weekend, slouched in front of the tv. J'arrive pas ici en gougounes, en t-shirt, puis en short, tsé? J'ai quand même un decorum où j'essaie d'être un peu plus propre qu'un samdi après-midi.* I think *a clean outfit* with *a little more structure* is best. It gives *a sense that you're in charge and you have authority and you also care about how you look and thus care about the people around you. I'm not saying that you need to spend a lot of money or* that *you need to buy designer clothing or be stylish (*although *I still wanna be stylish), but I do think there is a line.* We should be in *things that are put together, like dress pants and a shirt.* Ask ourselves, *is* my *shirt ironed?* Am I *taking* some *time with* my *appearance?* I have colleagues *who show up and they're in sliders, sweat pants, Lululemon leggings, or a Habs t-shirt. Others look like they're going clubbing with their short tops and their short skirts. And so, they're just too slutty. I have issues on both sides. If you're* practically *naked, it's completely not appropriate for the work environment or if you look like you slept in your clothes for the past three days and you never wash, that's also, I think, inappropriate. Maybe I'm old fashioned? I'm not somebody who says you should be allowed to wear whatever you want. I do kind of think I'm*

a bit old-fashioned that way. It's just difficult. *C'est très très subjectif. C'est des choses très délicates.* I once heard a colleague say, *'il y a personne qui va me dire comment m'habiller'. Mais, moi, dans ma tête, je suis en train de me dire, pour moi ça c'est inacceptable quand c'est hyper-court. Je me dis qu'on devrait avoir un certain professionnalisme. Even though we like to think that those things don't matter, or like, you know, everyone's welcome* to wear whatever, *the fact is, it does represent not just yourself, but your profession.*

The double-standards compared to male colleagues are tough to digest. Those sliders, sweat pants, and Habs t-shirt I just mentioned? All examples of attire sported by male teachers. Sometimes with male colleagues, *their butt-crack is showing or their underwear is showing, or they, you know, they're talking and their shirts are too short and their stomach is showing. When I see somebody's butt crack, to me that is VERY unprofessional and I do feel that if that were me* and my butt crack was showing*, it wouldn't be accepted. Like, that would be scandalous. When a male teacher does not take care of his appearance, not to be rude but, showing up in sweat pants and raggedy boxers that you can see* through them, *like, that's* seen as *ok. Kids will make fun of it, but it will never be sexualized. They could wear whatever they want. Do you think they have to worry about what they're wearing because their female students* may *want to* flirt with them? *Like, no. We have to* worry *because* with *our bodies, everything shows. I'm slightly resentful of my male colleagues who can wear whatever they want. I feel like it just creates a shame feeling* when there are *assumptions made* about my body and *that it can be used against me. It's the same thing* when *we talk about what* teenage *girls are wearing and 'oh, if they're wearing that then guys will be distracted'. But there shouldn't be any shame in liking something and wanting to wear it. But it's like, as soon as you want to look good, then maybe you're going to get attention. Maybe just one day you wanna dress up nice and you don't wanna be seen as a*

temptress in school. You can't just wear what you wanna wear without other people potentially saying that you are doing so because you know, you're trying to be 'sexy' for young boys or something. It's gross.

And I feel like that's exactly how I'm treated when I'm dressed up nice to school, which for me, is how I try to dress every day. *I always feel, since the beginning of my career,* that I'm just *scrutinized on what I wear.* I like to wear skirts and high heels and stay up to date with the latest fashion. Loving clothes and fashion is a big part of my identity, having grown up surrounded by seamstresses, my mother and grandmother included. I feel like I'm punished for it sometimes. *I like having nice clothes,* but the default reaction to a female teacher being well-dressed is to apply the sexy-teacher label. *And I think that* looking good *also makes people uncomfortable and I think it makes* my female colleagues in particular*, not scared, but more aware of how they look and then there's a comparison and therefore they shut me down* simply because I'm well-dressed. I get *comments from male teachers* and *female teachers* about *my weight* and *the way that I dress all the time.* I've had people make comments like, 'look at you, you're so girly', 'wow, you're fancy', *'are you on a runway?'* and *'are you going on a date* after work*?'.* All of these comments were said condescendingly, as if I'm too girly, too fancy, and in general, too dressed up for work. *There's the passive aggressive comments too about the way that I dress,* saying *'I'm dressed like a vice-principal'* because *I was in a suit.* It was said in a manner to imply that I wasn't dressed for my role as a teacher, as if I was almost 'too professional'. Une fois, *j'étais assise* avec une collègue et *j'ai levé les bras, puis mon t-shirt ne touchait plus à ma jupe puis elle a fait* un commentaire. *Puis ça, c'était un commentaire d'une personne que je connaissais la couleur de ses bobettes parce que cette personne là elle s'asseyait toute écartée.* I was once wearing jeans and a male colleague said '*nice jeans' but*

there was a connotation to it and *it had the effect of making me feel that I should police my body.* Another male colleague noticed my jeans and said to me, *'You're wearing jeans!?, That's not like you'. I didn't think he meant it in a negative way, but it's just like, he noticed it. He noticed it.* In a way, it made me feel put on the spot and like I was doing something wrong. I once wore a cream coloured wrap-around shirt to work and was stopped in the hallway by a male colleague who told me I was dressed like Luke Skywalker. I did not necessarily feel sexualized in that moment and there are worse things to be compared to than a Jedi, but it was enough attention to make me never wear that shirt to work again.

So here I am, back in my closet making my selection for the day. As *I don't want there to ever be boundary crossing in a sexual way,* I make a careful choice: a structured long-sleeve white shirt, a tailored mini-skirt, and high heels. Below the surface of this outfit is also a lot of thought: a bra that is thick enough and gives full-coverage, a white tank top over that bra as a back-up layer, underwear that doesn't show, and tights that are thick enough to compensate for the length of my skirt. I make a last-minute decision to throw a scarf in by bag in case I feel the need to cover up a bit more, even though the only skin visible with this outfit is a portion of my neck. I'll probably get a comment about my outfit, likely from a female student, but this *does not feel at all weird* and will just be a *really cute conversation* about clothes. *But then, the worry* and frustration is that there could also be backhanded comments or assumptions from colleagues. *I just don't think people should comment on other people. I don't comment on other people and I see their butt crack, even though I probably should* comment. In the past, *every time I wore heels I was very conscious of how I walked; I would avoid the staff room just to not have comments depending on the outfit that I was wearing. And now, I'm more of a 'sorry, but fuck you and I'm gonna dress the way that I want to and if you don't like it, ça appartient à toi'. I can see why*

somebody would be offended if someone did speak to them about their clothes *and I've never ever done that, but I kind of secretly want to. I've seen other young women around the school and I go 'ughhhh'. But not only to women to be honest.* I want to say something *to the men as well.*

And there continues the back-and-forth in my head regarding what should be a simple task of getting ready in the morning. This is all *so tricky* and maybe *I am a bit judgemental.* At the end of the day I make it a point to put thought and consideration into my clothing because the reality is *we can still respect a man who is teaching well, but is dressed poorly, but we cannot afford the same latitude for women.*

Story Reflection 2: The Binaries that Confine Me

I think, overall in society, the way that single females are viewed is still so much about sexual availability. And it just, it kind of feels like a betrayal. Being betrayed by society, in like, having to walk around carrying some kind of assumption about being a single woman. You know, like as if you would welcome certain kinds of attention. I think the female teacher experiences this kind of *betrayal* or *assumption* in a particular way. In viewing the clips, *it's not like me exactly seeing myself in there, but seeing certain interactions that feel very familiar, you know? You know, like* whispers from teenage boys saying *'who's that?'* when a female teacher walks by. I connected in the sense that I saw this *general attitude towards women* portrayed on screen. It seemed to reinforce this *'well that's what happens'* when you're a woman. *When you go to a bar, that's what's gonna happen and when you're in the workforce, this is what's gonna happen. It's just something that happens.* There's this sense of *that's just the way it is* and *I think it's really problematic.* This viewing of female teachers based on sexual availability connects to

the *very serious spinster teacher stereotype* that's *out there* as well as the *Betty Boop-ish figure* of the seductress teacher.

Meditations on the Single Female Teacher. As a female teacher, *if you're single, you're perceived as having no life, right?* You are *dédiée à ton travail* and that's it. *This is all you do,* teaching *is like 'your thing', right? And people seem to find that sad. It's sad that you would put so much effort into your job, especially if it's teaching. It's fine if you're like, a lawyer, or you're like, I don't know, you make a lot of money. It's fine if that's your life, but it's not ok if it's teaching for some reason. It's expected that you put in a lot of work* if you're single. It's expected that this is where you'll *make a big contribution, put a certain type of energy,* be the *workhorse woman holding up the schools.* It's expected, *but it's not respected that you're putting in a lot of work. If you're single, you're perceived as having no life and then you're asked to do all this extra shit. You don't have kids and you don't have a partner so* people think *what else are you going to do? You clean the staff room, you take the notes* in meetings*, you organize the Christmas party, you do all the shit.*

I do think there's more expectations to contribute when you don't have kids. *I've heard people say, 'well, yeah, you don't have kids'* in the sense that I automatically have time to do tasks or organize activities that teachers with kids don't want to do. And *that affects me.* I feel that people think *teachers who have children also have much more credibility than those who don't have children and who are not married. And why? You could have much more experience in the classroom, you could have higher degrees; and yet someone with kids and who is married* is said *to know more. I think that's wrong. They believe it too, the people with children,* that they are more credible*. There's a certain experience there for sure, but it does not make you an expert.*

As for the word 'spinster', *I mean, it's such a reductive way of viewing a woman. I hate that word. It's, like, so stupid and it's also really sexist and crappy for women who maybe just didn't want to be with a man. It makes me rage* when I hear it. *It's a misogynistic term* and *I cannot stand it. This whole idea of being relegated to your marital status and age, I mean, what does that serve exactly? There's all this judgement about women who don't get married that really bothers me.* It's presented as that stereotype woman in the family that everyone pities, *the person you talk about* saying in a pitiful voice, *'oh, so and so doesn't have anybody'. They portray it as this, like, sad woman who, you know, 'never got herself a man' and I hate that. I know so many women that are single BY CHOICE. But* society thinks *we don't do that by choice, right? We think spinsters are* women who *always wanted somebody but never got 'lucky enough' to find somebody. But, it's like, that's not always the case. I know a lot of women who are single and are very happy to be single because they're working on their fucking careers. There definitely is that perception* that *unmarried women, we're problematic. People are afraid of what we might do. What are they afraid of? I have no idea.* That *we might go into politics? There's an idea. That's a very good idea. We should go into politics.*

I perceive the concept of the spinster as *a fusion of ageism and sexism.* I hear the word and *what I see first is a grizzled, old woman,* with *lots of cats, like probably one good eye*. *One milky eye and one good eye.* I think she's typically seen as a *de-sexualized older woman,* maybe *not married or maybe doesn't have a romantic partner and so I think, stereotypically, is probably not engaging in any sexual activity, right? Somebody who is single, living on their own and, um, a bit closed off. Not looking for somebody to date. Someone who doesn't come off as a particularly sensual person, doesn't give off that vibe at all. I think the term is associated with negative aggression,* a woman who is *not very understanding, not very accommodating,*

extremely rigid, and this is *probably because of their lack of contact with any sexuality. Unhappy, miserable, angry with the world around them and then, therefore, they don't make the world around them a very happy place for the people they interact with. Where is all this coming from? Is it from storybooks from childhood? I don't know where* I'm getting this *from.*

It's funny that my de-facto definition of a spinster which *probably comes from pop culture,* is very negative. And *I hate the 'term' spinster, une vieille fille,* old maid, whatever you want to call it, *but to me I see* the single woman *as a positive. I know that society sees it as a negative. An older* male *colleague called me a spinster* once*;* ironically this was when I was about a decade younger than I am now. *I was doing my master's at the time and he was like '*getting *married and having kids is the whole purpose of life'.* As if my master's and all the other things I was accomplishing paled in comparison. *We kind of joked around about it, but I was offended because I felt like my body was the thing that mattered* most. *But I think that like, if somebody said, 'you're a spinster'* today*, I'd* confidently declare *'yes I am'! These people persevered when they had no titles and money. Like, I'll* gladly *be a spinster.*

The Bewildering Seductress. I have a harder time defining the seductress. As a teacher, *if you're anywhere near that territory, then you're in this very icky, icky place.* The *seductress teacher would make me much, much, much more uncomfortable than the spinster.* As far as defining her, the *teacher as seductress might be something closer to what we've seen in schools for real, in the newspapers. Someone who might be portraying themselves as a little bit more naïve, right? Or a little bit more vulnerable as a human.* One who *takes care of themselves, but it's more in a sneaky sense. It's not all out there for everyone to see, it's more like to lure them in.*

I'm really not sure though. Compared to the spinster, the seductress is*, like, a harder one for me* to define *cuz I find that one's almost made up* by popular culture *or it's like, I've seen it rarely in schools, right? It's hard for me to even define her because it's like she's a figment of people's imagination. It's a real grey area* and *I'm conflicted with it because if I look at the clips we saw, that's what I would define it as. Like* with *Geraldine, I think it's the glasses for me that does it. When you see, like, 'sexy' teachers, there's always the bun with the pen and the glasses.* It's *a little nerdy look, but very sexual.* Maybe she is *very forward and showy, very obvious about* how she looks. On television, whenever we see *une relation entre une prof et un élève, la fille, elle a toujours des souliers à talons hauts, les petits pantalons serrés, les cheveux long, elle est très très mince. Puis elle est super belle.* So my conflict comes from the fact that I wear heels, I wear fitted pants, and I have long hair. *I would see her dressed like me, but I don't consider myself a seductress. So, I have a hard time saying it* –that she's like me in that sense– *because I don't consider myself that way.*

Even though it is something I have come across rarely and I don't see the teacher seductress on television as being rooted as much in reality as these shows make her out to be, in defining the seductress my mind automatically goes to a female teacher who is younger and attractive. *I guess* she's *somebody who's physically attractive, more than likely they're younger, but they don't have to be necessarily. I guess it's more of a physical attractiveness that is important, I suppose. And that's how you would be judged if you're a good-looking teacher. I'm reminded of when I was in elementary school. There was a teacher and she was beautiful, absolutely beautiful and probably in her 20s. She got accused of so many things and she probably didn't do any of that. It was just because she was so young and pretty. Even with other teachers that I've known that are very pretty, they do tend to be picked on, even by*

administration. Um, not taken seriously all the time. Do they act on anything? No, they do not. I am sure there are women who are, when they're really young and attractive, they must get some kind of gratification from being noticed by students. *I would imagine that does exist because it's human, you know what I mean? There must be people who are gratified by attention that they're getting for their attractiveness, right? I can imagine that you're not completely unaware of grade 11 boys being attracted to you. But to actually act on* it? That wouldn't be something that happens often. *I imagine we have a range of human behaviours and I guess* the seductress would be a young teacher who doesn't have *a strong sense of 'I have to make boundaries really clear'.*

Defining female teachers through binaries is problematic. *You almost feel like we walk in with a bit of a persona as teachers and just in society in general. It's like, these are my choices,* the spinster image or the seductress image and *I feel cornered sometimes by society that way. I mean, it's just pigeon-holing people into categories which make absolutely no sense and* which *I think are old ideas, these really old ideas. I love [sarcasm] how these are our only two options. We only have two things, like god forbid, we can't find something in the middle, right? It's awful whenever you look at two polar opposites. Either you're the virgin or the whore. It's kinda similar* to *seductress or spinster. Both of those terms are loaded and neither of them are beneficial. I feel like everybody is missing if women are narrowed down into these two categories. It doesn't give weight to any sort of nuance. It's not real life, it's not guiding principles that you can align yourself with. It doesn't leave much room for individuality or anything else. You feel like you have to put on a mask and this is my room of masks and these are my two options.* However, I'm *a person who is complex. It's* just *really hard to get* away from these binaries because, unfortunately, *people just see tropes in their heads. So, yeah, the*

seductress or the spinster, that's interesting. And if you're neither? Which is, like, all the female staff members…

Story Reflection 3: Do Fictional Teachers Reflect my Reality?

When Helpful Turns to Sexual. When comparing female high school teachers on television to myself, I have to say that *I don't really feel myself connected to the representations, not even the tiniest bit. I didn't bunch us together.* The female teacher on screen *just didn't feel like a teacher*, but more like a *bizarre caricature* and *I couldn't recognize myself in that at all. Je trouvais qu'il y avait beaucoup de clichés qui, pour moi, ne reflètent pas la réalité.* And in comparing my students to the teenage boys on screen, *j'ai pas d'élèves qui ressemblent à ça. Moi, là, mes élèves sont des petits gars. Ils ont pas cette assurance.* These shows *représentent pas ce qu'on vit, pas du tout.* Even when looking at the younger teachers on screen, like Rachel from 'Gossip Girl', *I can remember feeling young and, like, not fitting in,* but *I NEVER would have talked to a student about it* like the character does, *you know? If you're a young teacher feeling alone, you try to talk to other teachers, you know? The kids calling her by her first name* and *all these coffee shop meetings, it didn't make sense to me and all of these things like that, so much of it was inappropriate.* Overall, these portrayals are *definitely not me.*

Despite the overall lack of connection, there is one aspect in which I could see myself loosely linked to the representations and that involved the scenes where the teacher was helping the student. I am someone who is *always looking to help and you know, like, in 'A Teacher',* Claire is *looking to help him. My door is always open and maybe it does open a door to misinterpretation,* but *my intentions are always innocent. There were some nice things about* Claire, *right? Like, she seemed caring, she was smart. Not that I would do what she did, but you could be like 'oh, that could be my friend'. That's someone I could have been* teacher *friends*

with and they could have done this, right, because she seemed most like *un prof ordinaire.* I connected to her in the sense that *she initially offered genuine help for the student and support,* and *in that sense, I do see myself as someone who, regardless of gender, I would want to offer a lot of my free time to help support a student who's struggling, right?* But *then when I was seeing it in that light, I could see how that offer of support or help could be misconstrued. Even though maybe she had done it in such a way in order for it to lead to something,* which I wouldn't do, *but yes, it did resonate a little bit with me.*

In 'A Teacher' the helpful interaction revolves around the child admitting they can't pay for their meal, so the teacher helping him in that moment and making sure he had enough to eat *made some sense to me. I can understand it as a kind of compassionate response to a student. How it evolves later on* with her offer to tutor him*,* that *I don't understand and, like, there's nothing romantic about SAT tutoring.* It's just discouraging that I feel a connection to these teachers in the sense of being helpful because *I think just that idea of wanting to help is looked at, the way it's portrayed, is always like you're overstepping your boundaries. Yes, I would go that extra mile, never turning it into* something inappropriate. *I know where the line can't be crossed. It's, in my opinion, ok to be that open. Does that make me, ugh, a bad teacher? Does that make me seductive? I don't know, but that's not the intention* behind my helpful nature. *In these shows and these movies, it's like the second that you open that door to help, it's like you have ulterior motives.* It's just a shame because when I see a helpful teacher on screen, *my brain is programmed to think 'obviously this is going to lead to that' when* in real life *it doesn't have to and it doesn't. It's just the rare cases where it does.* This seems to extend beyond being a female teacher to being a woman in general. I take issue with these portrayals because *being nice or*

being approachable or being friendly is *interpreted as, like, a sexual advance. And it seems like so often a woman's behaviour is interpreted that way.*

The Sexy English Teacher Stereotype. Memory is a paradox as it can be especially sharp in some cases and fail us in others. I have a particular memory that embodies this paradoxical nature. It's a memory I have of going to the movies over a decade ago with a group of people, some fellow teachers and some not. What I don't remember is the exact name of the movie or the details of the joke in particular, despite recent attempts to track it down. What I do remember was that the joke was exceptionally crass, that it was about having sex with a female English teacher, and that those I was with pointed at me and laughed and nodded in agreement. I also keenly remember feeling embarrassed that I was being laughed at and linked to this joke.

A lot of the time, the sexy female teacher on television is an English literature teacher. This is something *that irks me to no end. Every. Single. Time.* It's *ALWAYS the English teacher! I remember once I was watching an old 'Law and Order' episode and again the premise was the teacher who was having sex with multiple males and guess what? She was the English teacher. What a cliché. They walk in an arrest her while she was, like, performing Shakespeare. And I'm, like, why? Why? I'm wondering is that because, like, in terms of the nature of our work and how we do have the opportunity to get really personal with our students?* Perhaps *there are certain subjects where kids are taking risks and exposing themselves and expressing themselves in a way that could open up a closer relationship, either through writing or performance.* I guess English is one of those subjects.

I think maybe because English teachers *talk about feelings, and relationships and romance and things like that through literature, you know the kids have a tighter connection with* us*. We're teaching dramatic scenarios* and *I find, as an English teacher, I have more access to*

their emotional states than a lot of other teachers might. And I find out about things that are going on in their lives or I have to go to guidance counsellors because of something they've written in *their journals.* So, *even if they're not telling me* directly*, they're telling me through other ways.* And I'll acknowledge that *literature is obviously a powerful way of communicating all kinds of ideas, but, ugh, you know, I'm not taking those super romantic angles and I don't even think I would consider doing that* when I teach. *That's just not how I,* the average English teacher, *engage with literature. I'm not choosing heavy romance for the most part and even something like Romeo and Juliet,* which we saw being 'taught' by one of the teachers in the clips. She says, *'hey guys, it's the forbidden fruit. Like, no, not really.*

Although it could be true that English class could open a door to sharing more feelings and getting to know students on a personal level, it is frustrating to see the *connection between some kind of subjectivity and sensitivity* get so easily manipulated on screen. This idea that the teenage male student *has some kind of original sensibility and that draws the teacher in*, causing her to cross a sexual boundary almost immediately, is not realistic. *The writers of the shows are invested in this trope of, like, the romance of literature* and that's just *a cliché* . They frustratingly place the teacher as this figure who is *kind of using that access* to a child's emotions *to manipulate.* When a child submits good work or improves, *it's good to read the work and it's just like, 'wow, this kid has done great!'. You think of it as like, this is a child in development and they've done something really successfully* and that's *great, great news.* It is something that makes us proud of our students, not something that sparks romantic interest.

I don't know what it is with the English teacher, but *it's always the English teacher. I guess cuz math isn't sexy.* I'll repeat, *math isn't sexy. Sorry math teachers,* but *math, science, that's not sexy. You know what's sexy? English teachers are sexy. We do have that power*

through words whereas with math, *it's a machine and I think there's more of a wall between maybe math and science as opposed to talking about a story that maybe the kids get emotional with or they're invested in the story.* Or maybe the explanation is the simple fact that we *don't think of math teachers as female.*

Story Reflection 4: Who I Want the Fictional Teacher to Be

I remember sitting on the couch a couple of years ago sifting through suggestions for something new to watch, having grown tired of watching classic re-runs of *Friends*. I'm drawn to a new show based on the Archie comics, *Riverdale,* but I'm immediately disturbed with the opening episode which depicts Miss Grundy as a young music teacher sleeping with Archie. This is definitely not the Archie of my youth. Disgusted and discouraged, I only make it through a few episodes before giving up on the show entirely. Jumping ahead to a couple of summers later, I come across online buzz for a new show called *A Teacher* which is entirely about an illicit, sexual relationship between a female teacher and male student. Being much more serious and better written than *Riverdale,* I do make it through the whole 10-episode series, but the feelings of disgust and discouragement are still there. I'm now in a memory of driving on the highway last fall, noticing a billboard advertising a new French language show called, *Chouchou.* The billboard is fairly sparse: on a black background we see a teenage-looking boy, a blond woman who looks to be in her thirties standing in front of him, and the title of the show written in white font. The billboard is quite dark and apart from the characters' faces being illuminated, you can't see much else. I don't know what it was –maybe the characters' facial expressions and obvious age-gap– but despite the fact that I drove by this quickly on the highway, something told me this show would also be about an illicit teacher-student relationship. I was correct. It's impossible to notice while driving, but if you look at the show's billboard image online, you see that the

teacher is standing in a darkened classroom, and the boy is looking into the classroom through a window on the other side of the door. The show's unrealistically graphic content being too much for me to sit through, I only made it through two episodes.

So, there it is again. The infamous storyline of a female teacher sleeping with a male student. I feel like this is all I see when female teachers are represented on television. I ask, *where do they get these ideas on television? I didn't even realize* television writers *were that simple in their thinking when they're creating a story.* I think about myself and the female teachers I work with and I wonder, *how are a bunch of flat characters appropriate in any story? If you've ever taught storytelling, you know that that's not what you should be doing, right? And yet, there it is in popular entertainment.* How could female teachers be better represented? If I saw a female teacher on screen, what would I want her to be like? It's *a tricky question,* but there are a few things I can think of.

I want to see *somebody who is very smart, who is organized, who* is *really articulate and intelligent. Teachers are incredibly intelligent and they're some of the smartest people out there and they need to be portrayed that way.* There were no smart teachers in the depictions we watched. We saw *air-heads* and *sappy people* who *end up fumbling their way into becoming sexual predators. It was like women aren't even given credit for being cunning predators.* All of it is just *so flawed.* In addition to being smart, I want to see teachers who are *beautiful in their own way* and *dressed the way they want to dress.* I think of a colleague of mine. Elle *est impliqée face à tous les élèves, puis moi je la trouve super sexy, super belle et tout. C'est une prof qui est accueillante puis qu'il y a rien d'ambigu. Il y a plein de profs comme ça. Il y a des histoires intéressantes à faire autour de ça.* I would also want her to be *confident and show-offy.* On screen, the teachers were *dumb, and needy, and desperate* and this *reinforces that maybe clever*

people aren't going into education. I'm comfortable having strong characteristics, at the same time being a straight, cis-gender female. That role in the classroom is something I'm very comfortable with so I think there should be teachers like that. I'm also *a bit goofy, I like making jokes and stuff, I'm kinda a little bit of a performer* and we do not really see any of that with fictional female teachers. I work with beautiful and, dare I say, sexy female teachers daily. Sexy teachers who do not *use that to* their *advantage.* They are also smart, confident, funny, and maintain boundaries. Why can't we see this as interesting enough to be turned into a story? It seems like lines always need to be crossed on screen to portray the teaching field as interesting.

To me, the teacher-student sex storyline does not capture the realistic *drama of teaching.* If I were a writer, *I would probably end up writing someone who has similar concerns to me.* Someone experiencing *the struggle to feel adequate and good at your job, the struggle to help kids without taking too much ownership of their difficulties.* Someone doing all that *without burning* themselves *out. That's the drama of teaching. That's what's interesting. It's someone who is maybe struggling to give enough room for her personal life and that could take different shapes, whether it's family life or just a single teacher navigating the horrors of dating.* If the teacher was little older, *I would probably try to write them the same way that I would write interactions between parents and their teenage kids, as like authoritarian, but at the same time understanding and kind of guiding by the side. Trying to help* young *people figure out who they are. Like, there's no seductress* in that relationship. There's no *spinster either because if there's a show about parents, the mothers have a sex life with their partners or whoever they're dating.*

I want to see teachers who are doing real-life things like *managing the daily stresses, because you never know what's going to go on. Is there a lock-down drill? Is there a kid who's gonna have a melt down? All of those kinds of things. It would not occur to me to make that kind*

of plot where we see a female teacher crossing boundaries so easily. *At most I might want to explore an uncomfortable experience I had with a student who seemed to be breaking boundaries on his side and how I tried to navigate that and get support from the guidance department.* That happened to me once. *I ended up brining* the situation to the guidance department *because there was a letter* written to me by the student, *you know, the whole deal. It was very awkward and my first instinct wasn't to pursue this. I was like, no, this* is a situation *that needs to be resolved and I needed help and so that's what I did.* I'd like to see *an actual show that shows the ramifications of this.*

In the end, I want to see *just a normal person.* I want to see *normal relationships that don't involve sex. It's possible for people* –like teachers and students– *to have relationships with each other that don't involve sex, you know?* Would it be so far-fetched to see someone who is *just like me?*

Discussion and Implications

The individual interviews sought to examine how the binaries concerning female teacher sexuality relate to the lived experiences of the female teacher participants. The binaries connect back to the two institutional narratives that impact female teacher identities: the mind/body split and the female teacher as a spinster or seductress. The four story-reflections that were constructed using the participants' and my words, reflect the influence of these binaries in our daily teaching lives; in our discussion of the binaries, further reflections were made on the fictional teachers. For the most part, binaries were found to be reductive and restrictive.

The firm hold of the mind/body split was evident in the reflections on clothing choices and the influence that a female teacher's physical appearance has in the classroom. As demonstrated in the literature, female teacher bodies are censored and used against them; as

such, many female teachers make deliberate efforts to hide their bodies (Fisanick, 2007; Kestere & Kalke, 2018; Johnson, 2005). In addition, female teachers take on different teacher identities through their clothing (Atkinson, 2008). It is evident through story reflection 1 that clothing choices are deliberate and the teachers were very much aware that their bodies were not entirely in their control. Clothing is used to enhance the teacher identity as the participants purposely dressed to get confidence, to maintain a sense of distance from their students, and to convey a sense of professionalism. In all of this, controlling any attempts to be sexualized was a clear motivator in clothing choices. The extensive commentary on breasts and finding ways to hide them shows attempts to not be sexualized. We can see some conflict when the teachers made direct statements about how breasts need to be hidden, but at the same time frustration because no matter what they wear, their breasts are still there and visible. The teachers expressed the need to control this part of their body, but sometimes this is uncontrollable. Therefore, teachers find ways to mask their breasts, even though this could lead to their own physical discomfort. They wear uncomfortable bras to avoid having their breasts move in front of teenagers and they wear higher neck tops to mask cleavage at the expense of dealing with headaches and the unpredictable heat in schools. This contributes to the female teachers' resentment about having to be constantly mindful of their physical appearance.

To the teachers, putting thought into their appearance helped to uphold a sense of professionalism and distance. Many participants shared stories of having learned from past clothing choices which lead them to be unexpectedly sexualized; these experiences clearly stuck with the participants. We can see the story of the pencil skirt as one such example. This does reflect a discouraging reality as the participant clarified that she loved pencil skirts. Despite the fact that the pencil skirt is professional business attire, the fact that it hugs the body makes it a

problematic item for a female teacher. Again, we see a conflict created. An item such as a pencil skirt is professional and formal and thus creates a distance between teacher and student. Although it helps create the image teachers want to make through their clothing, because it is fitted and enhances the body, it is problematic. The pencil skirt was not the only item used to express this conflict; the teachers also mentioned tighter fitting tops and fitted pants. The teachers expressed that they felt a sense of shame when assumptions were made about their bodies through comments about their clothing choices. This happens primarily at the hands of male colleagues, but from some fellow female colleagues as well. From male colleagues they were subjected to comments with sexual undertones, such as the teacher who explained that once she wore jeans and a male colleague complimented them, but to her it was clear from his tone that in saying her jeans were nice, he was complimenting her buttocks in the jeans. Apprehensions about cleavage also stemmed from memories of male colleagues making comments. At the same time, the participants frustration was palpable when they expressed that, to them, male colleagues could dress sloppily and inappropriately show body parts (such as stomachs and butt-cracks), but they are not subjected to the same scrutiny as the women are.

Although dressing as a female teacher is a conflicting process, hints of resistance from the participants could be seen as well. This came out primarily because of the awareness of the double-standard that men are not judged for their clothing choices, even though a lot of their choices were described as sloppy, dirty, and unprofessional. Some of the female teachers explained that they were done with what Atkinson (2008) would describe as the bland uniformer look. This is a teacher uniform composed of bland clothing (such as beige-colored clothing) which permits the teacher to blend into a crowd and downplays her body and sexuality. It is seen as a safe option for teachers. Some teachers expressed that they were ready to embrace their

more stylish clothing because they knew it was still professional. Unfortunately, most of the participants seemed resigned to the fact that they need to defend their clothing choices and use clothing as armour to shield their bodies from continuous scrutiny.

We see further conflict in examining the spinster/seductress binary and its effect on real teachers. The participants did feel the actual word 'spinster' was an archaic term and although a handful of them admitted that it is not a term they necessarily link to teachers today, there is still *a serious spinster teacher stereotype out there*. It seems a negative impression of single female teachers still exists and this leads them to being treated unfairly. A handful of participants discussed the unfair burden that is put on single female teachers. They are viewed as having no social life outside of school because they have no significant other and no children; therefore, they are expected to take on more at school. The participants who were single expressed resentment at this reality. This resentment comes from being asked to do more because of the assumption that they have more time and that they have nothing else to do with this time. The single teachers discussed being put in positions of feeling like they were less credible because they do not have children. The participants who were married, some with children and some without, demonstrated awareness and disapproval of this unfair burden. Whether married or single, with children or no children, it was expressed that, in general, more is asked of female teachers. Even though the teachers agree that the word is archaic, assumptions about the single teacher, that all she has is her work (which is viewed as pathetic) is an unfair assumption made about them, just as it was a century ago when the term spinster was more commonly used.

There were a lot of strong feelings against the word 'spinster' (for example: *I hate that term* and *it makes me rage*) and participants noted that their stereotypical descriptors of a spinster (as an old lady) likely come from popular culture and storybooks from childhood. This is not

surprising as we know popular culture depicts single women quite negatively. What is interesting is that even though the participants brought in negative stereotypes in their descriptions of what they thought of when they heard the word, there was still reverence shown towards spinsters and singlehood. The participants saw the negative assumptions of the spinster as problematic and showed awareness of the fact that some women are single by choice and have very fulfilling lives. Two participants, both who are actually married and have children, said they would gladly be spinsters. This is because they understand the strength and independence spinsters of the past exuded. We see some tension between the disapproval of the word and the assumptions that come with it and the willingness to embrace the spinster identity.

Although some participants would gladly embrace being a spinster teacher, the seductress teacher was much more problematic to define and to understand. There was some consensus that the image of the seductress is typically a teacher who is younger and attractive. Some participants admitted that they have seen young and attractive teachers be automatically placed in a seductress category and also be treated less seriously and unfairly by school staff. The issue with the seductress goes back to the arguments made about the female teacher body and clothing. What the seductress wears seems to be a key trait used to define her as such. According to the participants, the typical fictional seductress on screen would usually be wearing items like fitted pants, pencil skirts, and high heels. This proved problematic for some of the participants because they felt like the seductress was being described as they would dress, but at the same time they do not see themselves as the seductress at all. It is *icky* territory that they want to keep away from. This connects to the tension female teachers feel in what some might call a simple act of getting dressed in the morning. One of the reasons it is not simple is because female teachers are consistently debating if their clothing choices open a door to being sexualized and considered a

seductress. All of this seems quite unfair for the female teacher as if she is young and attractive (and chooses not to wear frumpy, ill-fitting clothing) she almost automatically falls into this problematic category.

As the female teachers on screen were seductresses, it was difficult for the female teacher participants to see themselves in them. Even the two areas in which a connection could be made, albeit a tenuous one, were fraught with resentment. These two areas were the helpful teacher and the English teacher. As far as a helpful figure goes, women are often defined as caring maternal figures and this aspect of being a motherly figure intertwines with how we see female teachers (Tamboukou, 2000). The aspect of the motherly and caring teacher came out in the depictions of the fictional teachers as helpful. Many of the participants described themselves as helpful as well. They defined themselves as teachers who were willing, regardless of gender, to offer extra help and time to students and as teachers whose door is always open. They were discouraged when noticing this connection in the clips because the image of the helpful teacher was manipulated. She either helps for her own selfish and sexual gains, such as Natalie in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and Geraldine in *Riverdale.* Or she demonstrates weakness and poor judgment when helping a student in that she is easily drawn into a sexual relationship when her help proves effective. What should be seen as simple pride in seeing a student improve is turned into physical attraction to the student. We see this explicitly in the *Dawson's Creek, Gossip Girl,* and *A Teacher* storylines; it is implied in the *Friends'* storyline as well. These depictions do have an impact which we see in the participants questioning if their helpfulness is being misconstrued for being seductive. These images made one teacher, who described herself as one who is open with her students and always willing to help, ask if this made her a bad teacher. She questioned if this is read as her being seductive. As another participant described, she would like to see teachers on

television dealing with realistic teaching problems, such as the struggle to feel good at our jobs. This is a true struggle of teaching. Therefore, a television trope which leads a teacher to think she is a bad teacher because she is helpful is quite discouraging. If we look at this helpful aspect and add it to other 'typical' seductress traits such as dressing in clothes that hug the body, we might start to wonder how is it possible for a female teacher to disassociate from this category completely. It almost seems impossible.

Considering that six of the 10 participants have some experience teaching English Language Arts, there were some strong opinions about the depictions relying on the trope of the sexy English teacher. The participants do acknowledge that, as a subject, English literature is a powerful way to get to a student's emotions; that it is a subject which may allow a student to get more in touch with their feelings. Even one of the participants, who has a math and science background, acknowledged that it is more difficult for her to build a connection with students through her subject matter as it is so black and white, and that this might be more realistic in an English class. Despite this, the English teachers in the study do not intentionally seek out romantic angles to explore with their students and romance is not a genre typically taught in high school. Sharing of feelings and building connections were described as something that comes out naturally in the subject matter. In the storylines, we almost see it as an intentional act on the female teacher's part to use romantic angles to get some kind of reaction from students. The Romeo and Juliet example from *Dawson's Creek* demonstrated this. It was seen as manipulating the image of the English teacher as the seductive teacher. One participant, who has experience teaching the actual play, explained that she would never approach it as an example of the forbidden fruit. It was obvious to the participants that this was written (by men) in such a way to make it look like the English teacher had the clear intention to highlight the sexual undertones of

that phrase. The teacher character speaks in a coy manner to get the students' attention when saying this line. In her work on sexual tension in high school classrooms, Johnson (2004) writes:

> I believe the intensity and self-exploration associated with a language arts classroom –in which students read and discuss literature that engages them in real-life issues and make personal connections through writing– create an environment where mind-body distinctions and teacher-student relationships are more easily blurred than in other subject areas. (p. 6)

Johnson's (2004) overarching point is that "teaching *sans* sexuality is impossible (p. 6). Although I do not discount that sexual tensions do exist in the classroom, I do not agree that isolating English literature as a domain where boundary crossing is more likely is fair or accurate. The participant teachers acknowledged the openness of the subject matter as a potential reasoning for persistently classifying the fictional teacher seductress as an English literature teacher. However, it was clear that those with experience teaching the subject were irritated at this persistent image and saw it used as an excuse to showcase inappropriate boundary crossing. The images did not match up with how they engaged with and taught literature.

A damaging aspect of the sexy (and helpful) English teacher trope is that it clearly implies the female English teacher is weak because she is so easily and quickly manipulated the instant the teenage boy shows some original thought in the subject; that is, the minute he shows his intellect. We see this happen in *Dawson's Creek, Gossip Girl,* and *A Teacher*. We can argue that a similar motif is also shown in *Riverdale;* in this case the subject is music, but we can say that music has the same subjective component to it. In depictions of the teacher-student relationship, if the teacher is a man we often see the woman being taken in by the man's

intellectual prowess. This fits with the man's association to the mind and intellect when considering the mind/body split. For example, getting involved with a male teacher gives the young female student access to the intellectual power he possesses. This is considered part of what makes the man appealing to the young woman. This does not work in the reverse; it is problematic for the boy to have less power than his teacher (Maher, 2004). Whether in the role of teacher or student, it is always the man who has the power. In questioning why we have so many English teachers, one of the participants joked that we do not think of math and science teachers as female. Despite this being a joke, there is probably some truth behind it. We perhaps do not think of female teachers being competent enough to teach the hard sciences. Perhaps English can only be seen as a prestigious and serious subject when taught by a man. When the English teacher is female and she teaches in high school, she is often portrayed as weak and powerless against her young male students' creative endeavors.

What the teachers would hope to see on screen is in stark contrast to popular depictions which were seen as degrading the profession. The depictions were caricatures and they want to see teachers on screen who better represent the drama of teaching. This translates to things like dealing with the unexpected on a daily basis, dealing with personal insecurities and wondering if they taught something effectively, and finding a balance when offering help. Interestingly, the sexual component we saw in the scenarios did come up. More than one teacher shared a story about being put in an uncomfortable situation with a student; all the scenarios were such in which it was clear that the student had developed feelings for them that went beyond the acceptable teacher-student relationship. Each one of the teachers talked about the help they sought and the boundaries they reinforced to navigate that situation. These realistic situations are what the participants want to see on screen. At this point in time, the participants all have a lot of

teaching experience and they know how to navigate these potentially uncomfortable situations. We need to hear their stories and see stories like theirs represented in popular culture; this could perhaps provide guidance to young teachers and reinforce more positive messages to audiences. The sexualized teacher trope has had its moment, whether this be the de-sexualized spinster or the sexy seductress. The participants were tired of seeing this recycled stereotype as it impacts multiple aspects of their daily lives as teachers.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Limitations

Limitations of my study stem primarily from the text selection and homogeneity of my group of participants. Although four criteria were applied to justify my choice of texts, there are still limitations to consider. The four criteria were: using texts depicting a relationship between a female high school teacher and a teenage male student, using clips from television as opposed to film, using contemporary television shows, and taking into account geographical context and language (American shows in English). The fictional teachers were similar. Alice from *Friends* and Rachel from *Gossip Girl*, the oldest and youngest teachers respectively, provided some variety to age. However, the remaining four fictional teachers were all in their early-to-mid thirties. Moreover, all six of the fictional teachers were white, middle-class women. Three of the six, taught the same subject: English literature. All six storylines were American texts and, as one participant, Émilie, discussed, they gave a very Americanized view of education. For these reasons, it can be argued that the teachers depicted in the six storylines lack variety.

Although my participants teach a variety of subjects, they were a fairly homogenous sample. Similar to the fictional teachers, they are all white, middle-class women. Another quality they shared is that they have a substantial amount of teaching experience. Their years of

experience ranged from eight years to 26 years and they had a mean age of 45.8 years. The youngest teacher in my sample was 35. I do think it would have been interesting to have some teachers in their twenties to see how their perspectives compared to those with more experience. However, I still feel the somewhat older average age of my participants was beneficial to the study as the participants' astute insights come from their expertise and experience in the field.

Future Research

In researching and examining the sexualization of female teachers on television and the impact that this has on real female high school teachers, there are other avenues related to this topic which warrant exploration in the future. For starters, and as noted, my sample involved experienced teachers; pre-service teachers were excluded from recruitment for this study, but I would like to work with them in the future. The justification for not including pre-service teachers was twofold. The first reason was they have less experience in front of the classroom. There may have been enough material for pre-service teachers to discuss in the focus groups which centered around the television clips. However, their limited experience may have been an obstacle during the interviews which were meant to explore the lived experiences of teachers. The second reason was to avoid potential power imbalances in the focus groups (i.e. it may have been intimidating for a pre-service teacher to share views about the sexualization of teachers in front of tenured teachers). However, considering their typically younger age, I would like to explore this topic with pre-service teachers who identify as female in the future. I am curious to know if they go into their field experiences with any worry about being sexualized and how they would navigate this terrain. I am also curious to know what kind of advice or guidance (if any) is being given to these young women regarding how they present themselves in the classroom. If I look back on my own experiences and some of the reflection that came out of the interviews for

this project, dressing for the job as a pre-service high school teacher can be a stressor that surfaces differently for student teachers compared to working teachers. I would be curious to explore this with pre-service female teachers.

As the lack of variety in my texts is a limitation, an argument could be made for extending this project to texts selected by participants. Participants were asked on their demographic questionnaire if they had already witnessed this storyline on television and nine of the participants answered 'yes'. There were mentions of some of the shows already included in the study (for example, Evelyn noted *Dawson's Creek* and Carina noted *Gossip Girl*). Some participants noted shows I had not watched (for example, Maeve noted *Boston Public*); and some participants included movies (for example, Betty noted *Booksmart* and Dora and Taylor both noted *Notes on a Scandal*). I think it could be warranted to explore participant-selected texts as these could add more variety to the fictional teacher representations. Moreover, as discussed in the introduction to the study, when I think about the personal impact that the *Riverdale* storyline had on me, it could be valuable to explore the impact of a text a participant chooses themselves as I would imagine it is a text that was memorable to them in some way.

In line with selecting more varied texts, it might also be interesting to compare and contrast the use of female versus male teacher characters in the teacher-student sexual relationship on television. I made an earlier mention of shows which depict male teachers getting involved with female students and how the outcomes are very different (we see this in shows such as *Friends, Gossip Girl, Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* and *Pretty Little Liars*), but it might be worthwhile to examine them more concretely. The male teacher-female student relationship was very prominent in *Pretty Little Liars* and the show was noted on Evelyn's demographic questionnaire and brought up by Taylor during her focus group discussion. It would be

interesting to compare and contrast how female teacher characters and male teacher characters involved in sexual relationships with their students are constructed.

Furthermore, while working on this project I have become very interested in what I would call 'displays of teacher-hood' on online platforms, such as Instagram. I have noticed a trend of teachers creating public profiles on social media which are related to their lives in the classroom. The content in these public profiles vary. Some profiles focus on curriculum and pedagogy, some are business-oriented and sell hand-made teacher supplies, some are a combination of the teacher's professional life and private life, and many focus on teacher outfits. I am especially interested in the clothing profiles, as these relate directly to the image of the teacher. I find these profiles highly intriguing and would like to delve into the messages and uncover the motivations conveyed through them. Considering the profiles are public, I also wonder about the risks and benefits that come with teachers publicly sharing their professional lives.

As a final area of potential research, I was directly asked by one of my participants, Taylor, if I would be interviewing students for this project. Student input was not considered because I feel student perceptions of teachers is its own distinct area of research which did not fall into the scope of this study. However, exploring the student voice could be an interesting research focus as I would be curious to see how it compares to some of the implications that came out of this work. For example, one implication from the focus group discussions was that these depictions undermine the profession. When teenagers see a sexualized image of a female teacher, do they necessarily think of their own teachers? And as a result, do they perhaps think less of them? Comparatively, do I and the participants feel these images diminish the integrity of the profession because we are more attune to the challenges and public perceptions of it? For this

area of future research, I am not necessarily sure I would use television storylines. I would likely use another type of popular culture document, such as memes, to stimulate discussion. I have looked into 'hot teacher memes' as part of my preliminary research for this project and there are many in existence. Controlling for graphic content, which needs to be considered in examining topics related to sexuality, and especially so with students as participants, might be more easily achieved through the use of pre-selected memes. Related to this, perhaps a study with students just out of high school (around 18-20 years old) would be more appropriate considering the sexual nature of the depictions and the ethical issues that could arise in showing such images to minors. At 18-20 years old, they would also still be young enough to reflect on recent memories of past high school teachers.

As such, there are a few areas of research that I feel could be worthy to explore as future extensions of this project. I feel pre-service teachers and students can offer insights that were not possible here. More work could also be done with participant-selected texts and texts using male teachers. Finally, I feel the recent trend of publicly sharing the teacher image on social media is also fascinating.

Summary and Synthesis of Results

Summary of Results

Phase 1, the text analysis using feminist backlash, discussed four themes: the problematic acceptance of the seductress because she fulfills traditional gender roles, the undermining of the female teacher to enhance the appeal of the teenage boy, the disturbing violence inflicted upon the female teacher seductress, and finally, the denigration of the female teacher by women. These themes highlighted the persistent strength of feminist backlash, more specifically in the context of popular television representations of the female high school teacher. As a result, these

popular representations de-value the essential contributions that female teachers make to education. In the preface of the reissue of *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women,* Susan Faludi explains, "Cultural institutions had found plenty of ways of making women miserable in the 1980s…those institutions are still powerful and punitive in their treatment of women [today]" (1991/2020, p. xii). Additionally, the myths propagated by backlashes are "still coming from outside the gates of the women's movement and the community of women" (p. xii). Popular representations on television can be considered cultural institutions and their depictions of female teachers are powerful and punitive. The television storylines discussed in the text analysis were predominantly written and directed by men. This male way of looking at a female teacher is problematic. When "the camera frames [a woman] in a sexualized way, [it] possibly [undermines] her authority" (Cragin, 2015, p. 170). These outside forces depict an image of the female high school teacher which is highly and unnecessarily sexualized, contributing to her having no credibility and no authority as a teacher. In these sexualized depictions, there is no celebration and acknowledgement of the importance of teachers. There is no demonstration of any dedication or worth in society when fictional female teachers are sexualized.

Phase 2, Section 1 used focus group discussions to examine real teachers' responses to the same fictional representations of female teacher sexuality explored in the text analysis. Participants were not impressed by the powerlessness of the female teachers on screen. The depictions reinforced the normalized sexualization of the female teacher by having her engage in a sexual relationship with a male student and subsequently presented unrealistic and inadequate consequences of said relationship. Three implications stemmed from these results. First, the images of the sexualized female high school teacher contradictorily show that female teachers

are expected to be sexy, but then are condemned for being so. Second, the depictions were viewed as a "*false quality effort*" (Sophie) which only masks the real issue that men are more likely to engage in sexual relationships with students. Lastly, sexualized depictions of female teachers undermine the profession. The participants saw themselves as professionals, but felt that the sexualized images undercut this. As Lynn said, *"We're so much more than that"*, 'that' being the sexualized stereotypes female teachers are always up against.

Lastly, Phase 2, Section 2 used individual interviews to explore broader concepts related to the sexualization of female teachers. Four themes were turned into four co-constructed story reflections. The first unearthed the daily conflicts that arise due to the female teacher's connection to the body and how that is carried into the classroom. The second explored the restrictive spinster/seductress binary and how it is used in female teacher identity. The third discussed the failure of popular representations in capturing the authentic drama and struggles of teaching. As they fail to capture reality, the fourth story reflection discussed what the participants would hope to see captured on screen.

Synthesis of Results

We can see some connections between the results and implications that came out of the different phases of the study. To begin, the spinster/seductress binary was viewed as restrictive. The participants felt this binary pigeon-holes female teachers and leaves no room for any sort of nuance. As such, they had a difficult time concretely defining each side of the binary. For example, they showed disapproval of the word 'spinster' but appreciated qualities associated to spinsters, such as dedication and financial independence. The teacher as seductress was an identity the participants did not want to connect with; it was, as they said, "icky territory". However, there was understanding that some female teachers are unfairly put into this category if

they happen to want to dress nice or are younger. In *Friends,* Alice is accepted, despite being a seductress, because she upholds the traditional gender roles of wife and mother. We can see her as encapsulating the interplay between both aspects of the spinster/seductress binary. She blurs the line between a spinster and a seductress as she is stereotypically presented as a spinster through her age, clothing, and dedication to her profession, yet she is overt with her sexuality. We can see the teacher participants' negotiation with the spinster/seductress binary and their difficulty defining it tying in here. As a teacher seductress, it cannot be denied that Alice is a problematic character, but perhaps she shows us how we cannot restrictively categorize female teachers on one side of the binary.

Furthermore, in the text analysis we also saw how the female teacher was made out to be expendable to enhance the status of the teenage boy; she was shamed and disgraced. This reflects the backlash trend of presenting powerless women on screen. In *Dawson's Creek* and *Gossip Girl*, both the teacher characters, Tamara and Rachel, have their power reduced. They are undermined and used as throwaways, while the teenage male characters are enhanced. Tamara and Rachel's weaknesses were not lost on the participants and they took specific issue with these two teacher characters. Both are sexualized English teachers who provide their students with extra help, support, and guidance; however, this commitment to their profession is distorted to having them easily and unrealistically break boundaries. Both Tamara and Rachel fall for their students because of the capabilities the students show in either writing or understanding literature. This weakness was viewed as unrealistic and damaging to the image of the female teacher. The teacher participants felt that the profession is already undermined in so many ways and this sexualization aspect just "*further corrodes any positive impression of people who go into teaching* (Taylor).

Next, the killing of the teacher seductress was a motif that could not be ignored in the text analysis. It mirrored the backlash trend of subjecting women on screen to excessive violence. The female teacher body is heavily emphasized in this case because the body is attacked and destroyed. The female teachers in the popular representations who paid for their sexualization with their lives, Natalie from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and Geraldine from *Riverdale,* are examples of the ultimate condemnation of the teacher seductress. This destruction of the body is an extreme, but it highlights the prevalent point that the female teacher body is focused on in the classroom and possibly used against her; the body is emphasized and represents the female teacher's worth. The teacher participants brought this up in their reflections on dressing the body and the attention that is paid to the body on a daily basis. Preparing the body for the classroom comes not without careful thought and tension. As much as it was important for the participants to dress professionally and present themselves in a certain way in front of the classroom, they also expressed resentment. This resentment comes from being both expected to and judged for dressing up. If a teacher lives up to this expectation of taking time and care to dress the body, even if she is not a seductress, she is unfairly scrutinized and potentially labelled as one.

Finally, prominent feminists of the second wave contributed to the backlash of the 1980s (Faludi, 1991/2020). The text analysis explored how backlashes can be so influential that women working in television production have been noted to perpetuate them. Although the majority of the fictional storylines were products of male writers and directors, *A Teacher* was not. It was created by a woman and inspired by events perpetrated by a male abuser, but it used a female teacher. We can see a connection to the participants' discussion that the depictions could be seen as a "*false equality effort*" (Sophie). Using a female teacher might be seen as more intriguing to audiences or as "*a novelty*" (Megan). However, when this storyline is perpetuated, it not only

contributes to the problematic hot teacher stereotype, but it detracts from the fact that abuse at the hands of male perpetrators is more pervasive. We cannot deny that female teacher sexual abusers exist in reality, but when we consistently sexualize female teachers in popular representations (and both glamorize the relationship and villainize the female teacher), we ignore some realities of teacher sexual abuse. *A Teacher* contributes to this idea by purposely and unnecessarily using a female teacher-male student dyad.

Implications for Practice

The findings that came out of this study have implications for teacher education, professional development of teachers, and teacher professionalism. I do not remember any discussion about female teacher sexualization in my teacher training. My participants noted the same thing. In my first field experience, I was advised by my male cooperating teacher to never wear shirts that had snaps or zippers as male students would potentially easily open my shirt; regular buttons were the safest option. I am always startled when I think back at the sheer inappropriateness of this comment. Safe spaces need to be created for female teachers to discuss how the sexualization of the female teacher impacts our lived experiences in school. I would hope this starts in teacher education programs and becomes continued professional development for teachers. My participants had a lot of experience and their daily teaching lives were still influenced by this; this shows that continued discussion is needed, beyond teacher training. Looking back, I wish I could go back in time and shift that memory, to have had the confidence to question that advice in the moment. More open discussion and training could perhaps give teachers the understanding and confidence I did not have years ago. Some participants noted that the diminishment of the female teacher through sexualization was something they never gave much thought to in the past despite how pervasive it is in their lives as teachers.

I see the idea of the hot female teacher as having become a part of the cumulative cultural text of teacher, "a vast collection of 'texts' gathered from popular culture, and from the play, writing, interviews, and drawings of children and teachers" (Weber & Mitchell, 1995, p. 19; Mitchell & Weber, 1999). The hot female teacher is an image that is multidimensional as we see it on television, in film, in music videos, and in internet memes; the image can even be purchased as a Halloween costume. The hot female teacher image is also intertextual. In the analyzed storylines we see that bedding the hot teacher has become a distinct experience. We can see this when Pacey describes losing his virginity to a teacher in a "high-level fantasy fashion" (Williamson & Miner, 1998a, 25:10). We also see references to real female teacher sexual abusers brought in to build storylines, such as the reference to the infamous Mary Kay Letourneau in *Gossip Girl* (Schwartz et al., 2009b). The show also compares the teacher to Mrs. Robinson (Queller et al., 2009). We see one popular image "[piggybacking] on another" (Mitchell & Weber, 1999, p. 169). As cumulative cultural texts "have much potential to influence" (Mitchell & Weber, 1999, p. 168), it is important to unpack the image of the hot female teacher as it is a problematic one which affects teachers' professionalism. As such, the professionalism of the teacher, specifically the female teacher, is threatened when sexualized. The popular sexualized depictions might not disappear anytime soon, but with continued scrutiny of them and discussion amongst teachers, perhaps one day they can be less prevalent.

Concluding Remarks

In closing off this project, my mind goes back to my interview with Megan. In summing up her feelings after the focus group discussion she remarked:

> *This is just one more assault, I guess, on women and gender and the, um, attack on female authority. That's kind of how I see it. And the sexualizing*

> *of women in that regard, to me, is just an attack on authority because there is that, you know, that narrative of a sexualized woman [that] can be seduced and can be overpowered. So, in that regard, it's kind of disturbing [emphasized] how that plays out in schools itself. I guess I see the big picture too…and through my career have felt that teaching is very gendered and how men get treated differently than women in the classroom, male authority registers differently…How we're perceived by students, all that kind of stuff has always fascinated and frustrated me to a certain degree. Aging, you know? That is part of the sexualizing of women too because aging de-sexualizes you and also takes away a certain, you know, a certain authority from women…So it's sort of one piece of a huge picture and landscape of problems that we continually have.*

These words stuck with me. I think Megan encapsulates why I felt so strongly about delving into the topic of female teacher sexuality. Teaching is not an easy job and this specific reality of female teachers makes it that much more of a challenge. The popular television portrayals of female teachers do not seem to be doing much to enhance the profession. Megan referred to them as *assaults* and *attacks* on *women and gender* and *female authority.* Some might argue that this is a strong stance, but I feel it is the strong stance we need to start untangling these representations and hopefully lessen their incidence. These popular representations bear little resemblance to all the strong, dedicated, beautiful, and intelligent female teachers I have the privilege to work with. Female teachers give a lot to the profession and it is time that they are fairly and realistically represented so that they can be valued for the work they do.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Discussion Guide

Suggested structure by Hennink et al. (2020)

Introduction to the discussion:

Good afternoon and thank you all for joining us for this focus group discussion today. My name is Daniela A. Colannino and I am a PhD candidate in the Department of Education at Concordia University in Montreal. The purpose of this focus group discussion is to gather data for my doctoral dissertation research which centres on the sexualization of the female high school teacher. I am also a high school teacher and have been teaching for 15 years. With my research, I am looking to explore the sexualization of female teachers on screen and the impact that these depictions have on actual teachers' lived experiences.

I will be taking some brief notes during the discussion, but would also ask your permission to audio record the discussion. It would be impossible for me to get down every important point made; therefore, the recordings would enable me to hear your words exactly. The notes I am taking would be supplementary, related to non-verbal communication (such as gestures) that cannot be captured on tape. I assure you that our discussion will remain confidential and that the audio files will be securely stored and not made available to others. You will have the opportunity to review your discussion transcripts in the near future. **Do I have everyone's permission to record?** Moreover, I ask that you keep the information heard today confidential and not share the contents of our discussion with people outside this group.

Our discussion will be framed around video clips from six television shows that depict a sexual relationship between a female teacher and teenage male student. The clips are from the following shows: *Friends, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Dawson's Creek, Gossip Girl, Riverdale,* and *A Teacher.* The clips have been lumped together into 4 themes. A few clips have been chosen for each theme; we will watch one set of clips at a time, discuss and then repeat the process for the following three themes. I have provided you with two note cards. One lists the characters and shows in case you need them for reference with a list of the 4 themes we'll explore. The second is blank in case you want to jot down observations while viewing (I have extra if you need). If you'd like to submit your notecard at the end of the discussion I would be happy to have it as part of my data, although this is not mandatory.

You are not obligated to have watched these shows in advance. If you are familiar with them and want to add a point that goes beyond the clip in question to expand our discussion, you are free to do so. However, if the discussion veers off course, I may interject to bring it back to the specific topic on our agenda.

I understand that examining the sexualization of female teachers is a sensitive topic. I want this to be a space where you feel comfortable sharing your views. I want to learn from you and I welcome varying opinions on the topic at hand. Should you feel uncomfortable during the discussion, you are free to leave at any point. I have prepared guiding questions for our discussion today, but I will not go around the room and ask you to specifically answer any questions. You are free to contribute to whichever questions you wish and are also encouraged to bring up questions yourselves. You may bring in personal connections inspired by the clips, but are not obligated to and may stick to just the fictional content if that makes you more comfortable.

There is no specific order for speaking. I just ask that you avoid interrupting and speaking over each other. I want everyone to feel heard and included; interruptions and speaking over others may also impact the clarity of the recordings. This discussion should take between 1.5-2 hours.

You have all provided consent to participate in this discussion. Are there any questions before we begin?

Before we begin viewing the clips, let's go around the room and share our first names. You may use the pseudonym you provided in the demographic questionnaire if you prefer. If there are other basic demographic details you would like to share, you are free to do so.

Discussion Questions:

Theme 1: Introduction of the Teacher

The first set of clips look at the introduction of the teacher on the show. This theme includes clips from 5/6 shows.

1. What are your reactions to the clips?
2. What are some of the ways in which the teacher characters are sexualized in their introduction to the show?
3. What are some of the similarities between the teacher characters?
4. What are the differences?
5. The clips included the male students that the teachers will eventually get romantically involved with. How are the male students portrayed?
    a. Note similarities and differences.
6. In terms of sexualizing the women on screen, are there any differences between that characters we know are teachers and those whose profession has yet to be revealed (ex: Tamara)?
7. If there is a clip that went somewhat unacknowledged during the discussion use following prompt: *What about (teacher character) from (show)? Anyone have anything to share about her storyline?*

Theme 2: Private Meeting Between Teacher and Student

The next set of clips will look at private meeting between the teacher and student. This theme has clips from 5/6 shows. As a point of clarification, only in the *Riverdale* clip has a sexual relationship actually started.

1. What are your reactions to the one-on-one interactions?
2. What are the female teacher characters' main traits?
    a. Similarities and differences between the characters.
    b. Does she demonstrate any grooming patterns?
3. What are the male student characters' main traits?
    a. Similarities and differences
4. What are your insights on the realism of the storylines?
    a. If there is a lack of realism, what purpose does it serve?
5. Which characters (can be a teacher or student) have power and how is their power displayed?
6. If there is a clip that went somewhat unacknowledged during the discussion use following prompt: *What about (teacher character) from (show)? Anyone have anything to share about her storyline?*

Theme 3: Sexual Encounter Between Teacher and Student

The next set of clips will look at a sexual encounter between teacher and student. Note that there is one scene from *A Teacher* which is potentially more graphic than the others. We will watch clips from 3 shows; feel free to make references to the *Riverdale* clip from theme 1 as the sexual encounter was included in a brief flashback.

1. What are your reactions to the clips?
2. What similarities and differences did you notice in the clips?
    a. Any *typical patterns?*
3. How do the teacher characters come across? (i.e. threatening, manipulative, innocent)
4. What traits are demonstrated in the male students?
5. How are fictional teacher/student relationships romanticized in the clips?
    a. What are the potential consequences of this on a teenage audience?
6. If there is a clip that went somewhat unacknowledged during the discussion use following prompt: *What about (teacher character) from (show)? Anyone have anything to share about her storyline?*

Theme 4: Consequences Scene

Our final set of video clips portray the various consequences of the sexual relationship. In some clips the relationship has already ended and in some it has not. If you need any clarifying context, I'll provide it.

1. What are your reactions to the clips?
2. How is the teacher treated?
    a. How do you feel about the ways in which she is treated?
    b. What are some of the things said about the teacher?
    c. How can we compare the female teachers?
    d. Are the consequences justified?
3. How is the male student portrayed in the consequence scenes?
    a. How is he treated, compared to the teacher?
4. What messages about the profession are reinforced through these consequence scenes?
5. If there is a clip that went somewhat unacknowledged during the discussion use following prompt: *What about (teacher character) from (show)? Anyone have anything to share about her storyline?*

We are coming to the end of our discussion. Are there any last observations that anyone would like to share?

Thank you for your time, participation, and the valuable contribution you have made to this research project.

Appendix B

Individual Interview Guide

Suggested structure by Hennink et al. (2020)

Introduction:

The purpose of this interview is to gather information on female high school teachers' lived experience in the broader context of the sexualization of female teachers. I am a high school teacher myself and conducting research for my doctoral dissertation at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada; I am looking to understand how the common trend of presenting female teachers on television as sexualized figures impacts female teachers.

Some broader reflection based on reactions to clips from television shows has already taken place in the focus group discussions you took part in. This individual interview gives you the opportunity to expand on anything that came up during the focus groups discussions and to add any new information and/or information you did not want to share in front of the group, but that you may wish to share with me. The information you provide will only be used for this research project and your identity will remain confidential. If there is a particular question you do not want to answer, you may refuse to answer.

I will be taking some brief notes during our interview, but would also ask your permission to audio record the discussion. It would be impossible for me to get down every important point made so the recordings would enable me to hear your words exactly. The notes I am making would be supplementary, related to non-verbal communication (such as hand gestures) that cannot be captured on tape. I assure you that this interview will remain confidential and that the tapes will be securely stored and not made available to others. You will have the opportunity to review your interview transcript. **Do I have your permission to record?**

You have already provided consent to be interviewed. Do you have any questions before we start?

Questions Pertaining to the Focus Group Discussions:

1. Let's begin with a wrap up to our previous focus group discussion. Is there anything that you were unwilling to bring up in front of the group, but would like to bring up individually that you wish to share?
2. This may have come up during the focus group discussion itself, but can you please re-iterate your stance on the sexualized depictions of female teachers? You need not incorporate all of the 6 fictional storylines we viewed.

Questions about embodiment:

1. What attention do you pay to your body when getting ready for work in the morning? If you feel you don't pay attention to your body, why so?
2. What do you think your motives are for this particular attention, or lack of attention?
3. In what ways are you aware or unaware of your body while teaching?
    a. What role(s) do others play in this?
        i. Students
        ii. Colleagues
4. What kind of advice have you been given about managing your body in the classroom?
    a. Who gave you this advice and in what context?
    b. Was this advice warranted?

Questions pertaining to the sexualization of female teachers:

1. How would you describe a spinster?
2. How would you describe a teacher as seductress?
3. Teachers are often defined by the spinster/seductress binary.
    a. How do you feel about defining a broad group with such a binary?
    b. How do you feel this binary applies to your identity as a teacher?

Questions about media influences:

1. What roles do you think fictional representations of teachers play in your identity as a teacher?
    a. If you feel they do not have an impact, please explain why.
    b. Did you see yourself in any of the teacher characters during the focus group discussion and what impact does this have? This does not pertain specifically to teacher sexuality. For example, I see myself in some of them because they are English teachers and I'm one too.

This brings us to the end of our interview. Is there anything else you wish to add or clarify? Thank you once again for your participation and the valuable contribution you have made to this research project.

Appendix C

Demographic Questionnaire

Instructions to Participants: Please complete the questionnaire below. It is divided into two sections, required questions and optional questions, including a space for you to add any additional demographic details of your choosing. The information gathered here will be used to define the participant group as a whole and to identify patterns in the analysis phase of this study. It will **not** be used to identify you specifically. Question 1 for the optional questions asks you for a pseudonym; should you choose not to provide one yourself, one will still be provided for you to ensure confidentiality. You may answer n/a (not applicable) if there is a question that does not pertain to your current job position.

Required questions:

1. Participant's Name:
2. Total number of years teaching:
3. Number of years teaching high school:
4. Number of years teaching elementary and/or higher education:
5. Number of years at your current school:
6. Subject specialization:
7. Current subject(s) teaching:

Optional questions:

1. Pseudonym:
2. Age:
3. Relationship status:
4. Gender:
5. Race, ethnicity:
6. As explained on the consent form, this study seeks to explore the implications of popular representations of sexual relationships between female teachers and male students.
    a. Have you observed such a relationship on a television show before? Circle YES of NO
    b. Which show(s)? _____
    c. In 1-2 sentences, briefly explain how you felt about the depiction?

    _____

_____

_____

If there are any other personal comments and/or facts about yourself that you wish to make known for this project, please include them here:

Appendix D

Sample of Focus Group Data Coding

Focus Group 2 Transcript
Nov. 21st, 2022
Participants 5 and 6

***Montage 1 plays**

Time indicator: 7:33

DC: Ok, so that's montage 1. And I'll just keep it general to start. So just, what are some of your reactions to what we saw? And you can start with whichever show you'd like.

5: [1]I wanna say *blaghhhhh* (makes exaggerated disgusted /vomit sound).

Others: Laugher

5: [2&3]Um, the ones that [4]bothered me the most were when the [5]camera does the once over of the teacher's body and I found that in both those ones they also [6]portrayed the teacher as like sexually predatory, with the like [7]*fixed,* firm eye contact, like really staring these boys down and…

DC: That was Buffy and Dawson's Creek I'm assuming?

5: Yeah, yeah those two in particular. Yeah, well even the Riverdale one, um when [8]she's looking at him in the car and it, I can't remember if I wrote about this on one of the forums or whatever, also the, like in Riverdale in particular, like, [9]that is *not* a teenage boy. That is [10]an adult body that the teacher is looking at. Pacey in Dawson's Creek [11]looks a little more like a teenager and then, but the [12]showed the teacher in a dress that looks like a negligee, so it's, [13]it doesn't feel realistic to me, it feels like the [14]product of a male director's fantasy.

FIRST LEVEL: IN-VIVO AND VALUES (V/A/B) CODING

1: "I WANNA SAY BLAGHHHHH"

2: B: TEACHER PORTRAYED WITH POWER
3: B: TEACHER SEXUALIZED WITH THE CAMERA
4: "BOTHERED ME THE MOST"
5: "CAMERA…ONCE OVER THE TEACHER'S BODY"
6: "PORTRAYED…TEACHER AS…SEXUALLY PREDATORY"
7: "FIXED, FIRM EYE CONTACT…REALLY STARING…BOYS DOWN"

8: "SHE'S LOOKING AT HIM"

9: "THAT IS *NOT* A TEENAGE BOY"
10: "AN ADULT BODY…TEACHER…LOOKING AT"
11: "LOOKS…MORE LIKE A TEENAGER" (PACEY)
12: "SHOWED…TEACHER…DRESS…LIKE A NEGLIGEE"
13: B: DEPICTIONS LACK REALISM
14: "PRODUCT OF A MALE DIRECTOR'S FANTASY"

Appendix E

Photos

Photo 1:

Photo 2:

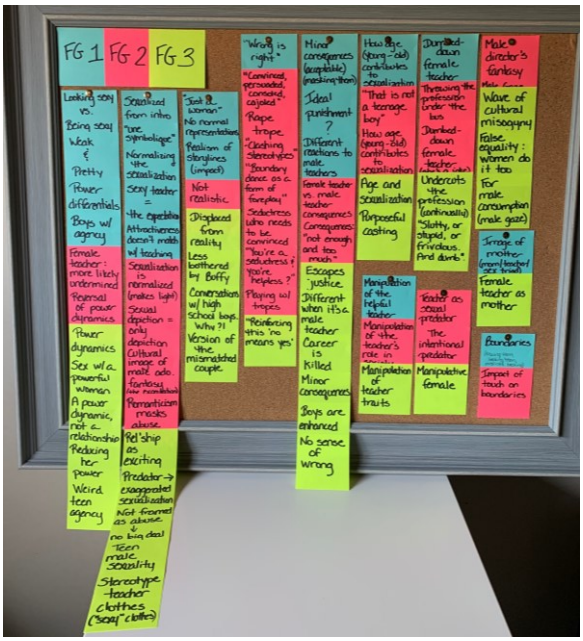
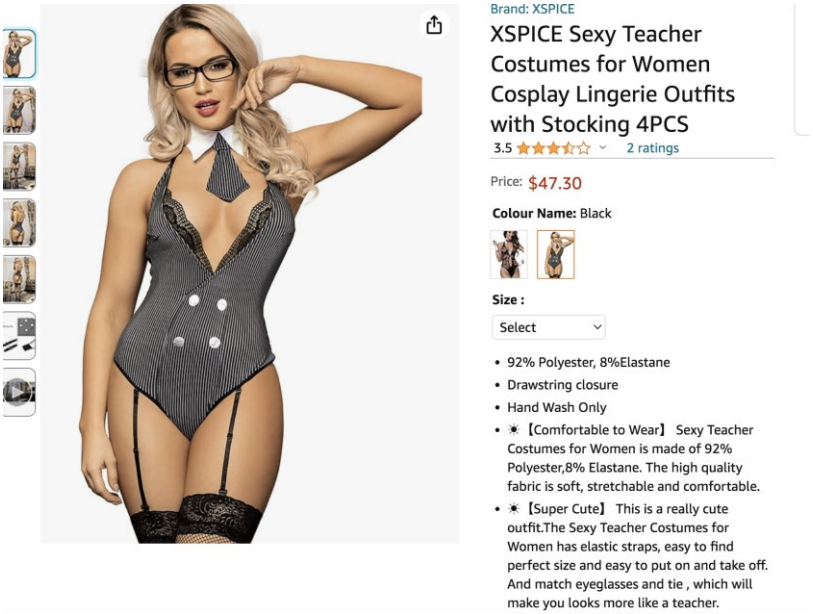


Photo 3:

Photo 4:



Appendix F

Sample of Interview Data Coding

[14]further corrodes any [15]positive impression of people who go into teaching.

DC: Yeah

7: You know, so it's just a bit [16]discouraging. So, I came out kind of [17]discouraged, you know? Because, just, yeah. The [18]bigger picture, just [19]discouraged.

DC: Yeah, and I agree with you. That's part of what bothers me too, I don't think this helps the bigger picture

7: No, it doesn't help. Yes, it kind of made me think of the nurses and the Halloween [20]costume where they were saying can we [21]stop doing the sexy nurses? Because honestly, [22]we're professionals and [23]we're educated and we're [24]intelligent people and we [25]work hard and we're [26]treated like, you know...

DC: And we need them

7: …[26]playthings. Yeah, exactly everyone relies on them. And [27]education's the same thing, like I just, I wish that we had a very [28]different set up for education and that it was a profession that was so [29]respected that it wouldn't become the [30]butt of jokes. And the idea that so few of those women seemed predatory, so they didn't, it was like women [31]aren't even given credit for being cunning predators, they're [32]kind of dumb and [33]needy and [34]desperate in some way, you know? It just, you know, it just kind of [35]reinforced that maybe [36]clever, cunning people aren't going into education. Kind of [37]desperate, [38]sappy people are going into education (laughing) and that they end up [39]fumbling their way into, you know, becoming [40]sexual predators, but really only the praying mantis kind of seemed to be [41]super powerful.

14: "FURTHER CORRODES"
15: "POSITIVE IMPRESSION"

16: "DISCOURAGING"
17: "DISCOURAGED"
18: "BIGGER PICTURE"
19: "DISCOURAGED"

20: "COSTUME"
21: "STOP DOING THE SEXY NURSES"
22: "WE'RE PROFESSIONALS"
23: "WE'RE EDUCATED"
24: "INTELLIGENT PEOPLE"
25: "WORK HARD"
26: "TREATED LIKE…PLAYTHINGS"

27: "EDUCATION'S THE SAME THING"
28: "DIFFERENT SET UP"
29: "RESPECTED"
30: "BUTT OF JOKES"

31: "AREN'T EVEN…CUNNING PREDATORS"
32: "KIND OF DUMB"
33: "NEEDY"
34: "DESPERATE"
35: "REINFORCED"
36: "CLEVER, CUNNING PEOPLE AREN'T GOING INTO EDUCATION"
37: "DESPERATE"
38: "SAPPY PEOPLE"
39: "FUMBLING"
40: "SEXUAL PREDATORS"
41: "SUPER POWERFUL"

Appendix G

Sample of Analytic Memos from Interview Coding

April 5th, 2023: **Derived during 2nd level *focused coding***
Connection note: the maternal aspect is clear. Both participants above are mothers, but how the link to sexy teacher—mother is kind of opposite for both. For 10, motherhood detached her from the sexy teacher. For 1, she questions whether she should be looking more like the mother-teacher and is it wrong that she doesn't.

April 5th, 2023: **Derived during 2nd level *focused coding***
Participant 2: I am seeing a lot of distinctions between the teacher's identity as a young teacher to an older teacher. There is also a lot of emphasis on **boundaries** and the importance of making and maintaining boundaries. She also discussed being blindsided when boundaries were inadvertently crossed (she was nice to a female student and this student developed a crush on her). There was some frustration in being boxed into two female teacher categories of spinster and seductress. One code that is really interesting is 229 in which she assumes she would be the categorized as the seductress teacher when younger even though she was single and could be categorized as a spinster. This is due to her perception that spinsters are older and don't dress as well. Another interesting code is 257 where she notes "all the female staff" meaning the majority don't fall into the s/s binary. This will likely connect to later analysis as many interviewees have questioned where the normal teachers are. She connotes the same ageism as participant 10 in reference to perceptions on spinsters. Also similar to participant 10, she talks about her identity as a teacher being less sexualized due to being seen as/acting more like a mother. Her note about making boundaries and how she was just trying to be nice in the incident where a student developed a crush on her (code 296) links a lot to participant 1 in how being nice and caring unfortunately translates to something sexual. Both 1 and 2 discuss how the fictional representations open these un-openable/never-there-in-the-first-place doors.

April 17th, 2023: **Derived during 2nd level *focused coding***
Participant 3: Portrayals are problematic because of the way they mask the power dynamics (the directorial choices mask this; give boys agency even though it is an abusive relationship). Professional attire is equated to covering up (33, 36). I would maybe omit the section from codes 88-92 as this did not come up organically in the interview; I prompted it from a memory about the participant and I don't think this would have come up without my memory prompt. I like the participants use of describing herself as "two-pronged" (code 102) in trying to determine what a typical seductress is/looks like. It seems to represent a lot of the conflicting and contradicting thoughts brought up by all the participants. Codes 124-126 about pigeon-holing women have some impactful word choices. She has issues with what is perceived as the hidden motive for wanting to dress nice: to appeal to young boys. She finds this overall assumption "gross" (code 138).