

My Thoughts on the movie *Dangerous Minds* which was (very very loosely) adapted from my book *My Posse Don't Do Homework*.

This was written in June 2007 in response to an email from a grad student:

Thank you for contacting me for input instead of just using what you find on the Internet or other resources.

Let me be clear: I think *Dangerous Minds* has its good points – it inspired a lot of kids to stay in school, it inspired many people to pursue their dreams of becoming teachers, and it inspired the brilliant song, “Gangsta’s Paradise.” I just wish that people would realize it’s a movie and not real life when they write about me.

I had very little input to the movie and much of it is fiction, at times so far removed from fact as to be ridiculous. My students never called me "white bread" for example - I had only one rule in my classroom and that was: respect yourself and the others in this room. I didn't disrespect my students and they didn't disrespect me. The producers couldn't believe it could be so simple -- that if you treat kids with genuine respect, they may not love you immediately, but they will learn to respect you. I used rap lyrics to initiate lessons about poetry (not a Dylan-Dylan contest). Instead of a silly contest, we learned to write and analyze various forms of poetry, beginning with songs and ending with Shakespearean sonnets. Yep, they actually liked them, too. I never threw candy bars at my students to motivate them -- I encouraged them to eat healthy foods. I didn't fight with my administrators all the time -- it was my principal who gave me the support and encouragement I needed to become an effective teacher. So, I would simply ask that you view the movie as a movie and not as a reflection of my personality, teaching techniques, teaching philosophy, and definitely not as a reflection of my attitude toward students. I didn't teach for one semester and then try to quit -- I taught in the at-risk program for five years, starting as a part-time teacher and ending as a full-time teacher and department chair -- and then I went back to grad school.

I agree with Bulman's contention that the movie industry seems to think that white middle-class people can walk into a ghetto and 'save the children.' That's a very very simplified version of his theory. But I would argue that whether the maverick teacher is middle-class, white or black, male or female -- the key is in that person's motivation. If you believe you are superior to somebody and you are going to save them, they will resist you, even if they are drowning, if they didn't ask for your help. But if you truly respect and accept other people as they are, and your motivation is to encourage them to develop their talents and skills to pursue whatever goals THEY have set (or encourage them to set goals if they have none), then they will be interested in what you have to say. People focus far too much on race, gender and money when they should focus on heart, soul and intention. It's been my experience that when you have self-destructive or apathetic students, instead of trying to teach them lessons, you will make much more progress if you try to find out what they think of themselves. And when they have negative perceptions, you tell them what you see -- a new perspective that they can't see themselves. If this is an honest communication, it will change the way they think of themselves. Instead of thinking of themselves as hopeless, powerless, stupid, lazy, or whatever they have been taught or told to

think -- they begin to see themselves as human beings, separate from the school system labels, human beings with talents and abilities that will be valued by the world, if they can just survive school.

That's enough. I'm writing you a book! Sorry for being so long-winded.

Oh, wait, I take that back. One more thing. I don't think the Hollywood film makers are intentionally perpetuating stereotypes and simplistic plot lines. I think in some cases they genuinely believe their stories, in some cases they are trying to create a feel-good story to attract an audience, and in some cases they just don't have a clue because they never attended public schools and their worlds are so insulated that they believe whatever expert they have hired. I was told, for example, when I protested the racial stereotypes in *Dangerous Minds* (all black kids are raised by crackhead single moms, all Hispanic teens are gangsters because their parents don't care, black parents resent effective white teachers), I was told in a very haughty voice that the "gangologist" on their staff assured them that their movie was an accurate depiction. I laughed myself silly before I cried.