

THESIS

CHEERLEADERS, JOCKS, NERDS AND “THE MAN”: POPULAR REPRESENTATIONS  
OF SCHOOLING IN MODERN TELEVISION

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## ABSTRACT

### CHEERLEADERS, JOCKS, NERDS AND “THE MAN”: POPULAR REPRESENTATIONS OF SCHOOLING IN MODERN TELEVISION

In recent years, the availability of media has increased and adolescents are engaged with some type of media for most of the day. However, television remains one of the most popular mediums in America, despite increases in time spent on other forms of electronic media. Scholars have studied movies and their potential as “equipment for living,” a central theme in Burke’s *Philosophy of Literary Form* that asserts that fictional works inform our values, experiences, and expectations. This study aims to prove that television is also equipment for living for adolescents, and that they learn school-specific lessons from programs depicting a schooling environment. By analyzing three popular and current television programs and looking for school-specific character archetypes within those narratives, this study aims to determine what lessons secondary students learn about the purpose of school and the schooling experience. The results show that current television programs reflect broad cultural views about education and include fears about bullying and school shootings, as well as assumptions that secondary schools do not meet the needs of all of their students. The study also revealed cultural perceptions on school staff as uninterested in serving student needs. However, some programs challenge stereotypes and present more realistic representations of students, teachers, and administration in secondary schools.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

After a particularly difficult semester teaching at a middle school in Aurora, Colorado, a semester where over a hundred suspensions were issued for fighting, I attended a professional development class taught by a friend and colleague of mine. She raised the question: do we know what our students are watching on television? She stated that one of the most popular television programs at the time was a program called *Love and Hip Hop* and that many of our students were watching it. She cued up a clip from VH1's website, and what we saw was an all too familiar scene; profanities, raised voices, a scene that eventually devolved into physical violence. My colleague suggested that these shows were *teaching* our students how to behave. I couldn't stop thinking about whether or not this was true, so I decided to ask my students what their favorite television program was. The results surprised me. None of them mentioned *Love and Hip Hop*, but my middle school students were deeply engrossed in programs like *Criminal Minds* and *American Horror Story*, programs I didn't feel were age appropriate either. I wondered what my students learn from these programs. Eventually, I began to wonder what adolescents might learn about school from programs that take place in educational environments, whether these programs were intended for adolescent audiences or not.

As a teacher who watches television, I have found it difficult to reconcile depictions of schooling in movies and in television with the actual schooling experience. These representations have felt overwhelmingly negative, and because students now engage with these forms of media more than ever before, I continue to be interested in the portrayal of the experience of education, and what lessons students might learn from these representations.

Teens' use of media has only increased in recent years. According to a study done by Common Sense Media, a non-profit organization designed to help parents and teachers engage in productive conversations with adolescents about media use, television remains one of the most popular forms of media, despite growing use of internet media, (i.e. social media and YouTube). The report states that, "almost all young people spend some time watching television" (27), and teens spend almost nine hours *per day* using some form of media, not including any media time spent required by schoolwork (Rideout 13-14). Not only do teens use media of some kind for most of the day, but popular programs are becoming a part of adolescents' lives in new ways, as internet media have brought popular television programs into the social media sphere. As Amanda Lotz and Jonathan Gray state, "[a] great deal of content on YouTube is repurposed from television; an increasing amount of television is watched on DVD, streamed over the internet, and otherwise downloaded; Tweets, Facebook status updates, and the more active internet forums often respond to television" (3). Although considerable cultural influences rooted in social media and computer media exist, television still has the largest outreach of any other type of media, with 75% of Americans viewing television on a daily basis and viewing, on average, 238 minutes of television programming per day ("Average time spent").

These statistics raise questions regarding how Americans, including adolescent audiences, are processing the content they view on television. While parents and teachers have often expressed concern over how media use influences adolescents, especially in the area of academic performance, little research has been done thus far on how schooling experiences are actually portrayed in the media, particularly in television. This study is thus based on the following questions:

- What do popular television programs depicting secondary educational experiences teach adolescents about the purpose of school and the schooling experience?
- How might these depictions reflect cultural attitudes about secondary education?
- What might teachers gain from viewing television depictions of education, and
- How might an awareness of these representations be used as a teaching tool?

## Chapter 2: Review of Literature

### **Studying Television as Equipment for Living**

Kenneth Burke calls literature “equipment for living” (293-304), suggesting that fiction can influence everyday life. Television may serve a similar purpose, in that like readers of literature, television audiences are not only entertained by television, but may learn from it. Children especially latch on to certain ideas in the media they consume, and television has the potential to shape their values, beliefs, and expectations. If this is the case, television operates as a different form of “equipment for living,” and students watching programs set in an educational environment on television are likely to learn what to expect from their experiences in school and their interactions with peers, teachers, and school staff.

Other scholars assert the potential for media to be “equipment for living.” In his essay, “Movies as Equipment for Living: A Developmental Analysis of the Importance of Film in Everyday Life,” Stephen Dine Young applies Burke’s notion of “literature as equipment for living” to media criticism by providing some examples for how viewers apply their interpretations of films to their everyday lives. One such example from a participant in Young’s study explains how he and his friend became obsessed with money and power after viewing *The Godfather* as children (457). Another participant describes how his fraternity based their activities off of scenes in *Animal House* (457). Along with Young, communications scholar Brummet cites Burke’s “representative anecdote” (59-60, 323-325), summarizing it as “the dramatic *sense* of a story, a tale” [emphasis added] (162). In other words, just as in literature, the dramatic content of films (e.g., a specific event, relationship, or plot line) furnishes viewers with “representative anecdotes” that give them a way to engage with topics like war, death, love, etc.,

and the archetypes embedded within them. For example, Brummet asserts that the 1978 film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* can be described as a “xeroxing anecdote.” Thus even though it is a horror movie about alien invaders on the surface, the film really describes broader cultural fears about automation, cloning and foreign affairs in the 1970s.

Brummett expounds on this concept at length in his article, “Burke’s Representative Anecdote as a Method in Media Criticism.” Brummet states, “To identify a representative anecdote as immanent within a number of media discourses is to sum up the essence of a culture’s values, concerns, and interests in regard to some real-life issues or problems” (164). He continues, “Other fears and hopes confront society, and people turn to mass media for the symbolic means to encompass those situations. The media are equipment for living because they recast this world, its hopes and fears, into anecdotal form--and thus, an anecdotal method can help reveal that form” (Brummett 174). If this is the case, then by searching for the representative anecdotes related to education that are present in popular television, we may gain insight into cultural values on education and educators.

Because film criticism is a valuable way to understand how American culture feels about a variety of topics, it is particularly useful in investigating cultural attitudes about education. In their introduction to *American Education in Popular Media: From the Blackboard to the Silver Screen*, Terzian and Ryan write, “By their very nature, mass magazines, radio, television, and film shape people’s perceptions about the world around them. At the same time, popular media portrayals of schooling are inherently normative. They suggest what students and educators are typically like--and how they ought to be” (9). More research on feature length films exists than on television, especially when examining the topic of education. However, the work of several

film researchers is also useful to criticism of television programs, given the narrative similarities between the two media.

John Hartley makes a case for the importance of studying television in his 2003 Preface to the second edition of *Reading Television*: “It seeks to make the tacit, implicit knowledge that everyone has as a part of the audience, and their general curiosity about contemporary media, into explicit, formal knowledge (xiv). Hartley argues that broadcast television is a “principal mechanism by which a culture could communicate with its collective self” (xvi), a new idea from a culture of academics that has historically viewed television negatively. In their book *How to Watch Television*, Ethan Thompson and Justin Mittell review four common methods used in television studies: television aesthetics, television as a site of cultural representation, the political functions of television, and industry issues in television (Thompson and Mittell 8). Despite this array of approaches, Thompson and Mittell claim that all methods of analysis share the same basic assumptions: the complicated nature of television lends itself to differing interpretations. These interpretations cannot be understood in isolation, but must only be reached by actually watching television. Finally, criticism of television is not the same thing as evaluation (6). By applying these broader film criticism methods to education-specific programming, television’s potential to highlight aspects of American culture can be explored.

### **Historical and Cultural Contexts of Education in Television**

Representations of schooling in the media are historically relevant, and such representations act as cultural artifacts. In other words, television programs both shape and reflect the culture they come from. Much of the research in this area focuses on how teacher characters are represented in the media. In their book *Teacher TV: Sixty Years of Teachers on Television*, media scholars Mary M. Dalton and Laura L. Linder provide an analysis of how each

decade's history helped shape the teacher characters featured on television during a particular point in time. Early media portrayals of teachers in the 1920s reflect a culture that expected proper and domestic behavior from women. In her article, "'A Touch of Risquity': Teachers, Perception, and Popular Culture in the Progressive Era," Michelle Morgan writes, "A teacher could not participate in any social activities without being severely criticized for her dress and many of her actions by the people who still cling to their old ideas" (37). Morgan claims that teachers pushed the boundaries of these expectations in the early 20th century by making themselves visible in public life, thus beginning a period of fascination of teachers in popular media.

While the public was fascinated by the private life of teachers, media representations of teachers became more common. The 1950s were characterized by a huge growth in television ownership; 10,000 families owned television sets in 1945 and almost 60 million owned television sets by 1960 (Dalton and Linder 17). As television programming expanded and writers and producers created new genres, programs like *Mister Peepers* and *Our Miss Brooks*, which featured popular teacher title characters, delivered different messages about cultural expectations for teachers. *Mister Peepers* was afforded the luxury of having a personal life, while *Miss Brooks* was expected to marry and leave the profession; she only keeps her job because she fails to get a man (Dalton and Linder). Patrick A. Ryan echoes this development of gender double standards in his essay, "Chalk it Up to Experience: The Sacrificial Image of the Teacher in Popular Media, 1945-1959." He writes, "Her [Miss Brooks'] professional sphere is sacrificed for the domestic sphere in wanting to marry Mr. Boynton, as she has internalized the postwar message of a woman's happiness being achieved as a wife and mother" (89). *Mister Peepers*, on the other hand, marries and keeps his career. In addition to this problematic gender representation, Ryan

points out how teachers in this era were expected to make financial, personal, and professional sacrifices in order to gain their students' (and, by extension, the American public's) admiration. Similarly, teachers in real life were expected to behave properly (i.e., to dress conservatively, remain chaste, etc.) in the public sphere because they were seen as role models.

Scholars have also analyzed representations of schooling to demonstrate how media portrayals highlight or reinforce social problems. Dalton and Linder look at each decade since the 1960s, examining specifically how television portrays educational experiences. In the 1960s, television programs reflected ideals rather than historical reality, especially regarding race; while in reality, the country was in turmoil with Vietnam and the Civil Rights movement, inside the realm of television, "African Americans and Whites work and go to school together harmoniously" (41). Likewise, 1970s' television similarly minimized class issues, and the 1980s perpetuated the meritocracy myth that an education was the key to escape working class backgrounds.

In the '90s and 2000s, the medium matured considerably and started to feature more realistic programs, characters and situations, which portrayed teachers in positive and realistic terms. In *Boston Public*, a program centered on a fictional high school in Boston, Massachusetts, scholars disagree, however, about the portrayal of Principal Steven Harper. Dalton and Linder observe that Harper comes across from as a flawed, but ultimately strong and respected leader. However, Kate Rousmaniere argues that he is "portrayed as an indecisive leader who struggles with problems of his employees and students and [is] unsure of his own responsibilities" and describes him as an "ineffective leader who cannot maintain control" (210). In their analysis of the 2000s as a whole, Dalton and Linder conclude that American television is making great strides towards portraying teachers and education in increasingly positive ways.

However, Dalton and Linder's book *Teacher TV* went to press in 2008 and thus does not address how representations of teachers in television have become increasingly negative in recent years. Media scholar Mary M. Dalton follows up on recent trends in her blog *On Media* in a post titled, "Teachers on TV," posted in July 2016. She writes:

It used to be that good teachers were idealized and bad teachers were presented as a contrast to them to reinforce the idealization. Increasingly, as I noted in a recent interview with a journalist from *The Washington Post*, representations in mainstream media, especially television, have begun to depict educators as incompetent, corrupt, disengaged, crude, and worse. (Dalton par 3)

Later in her post, Dalton cites the program *Vice Principals* specifically, and says that she is looking forward to a "path forward to something better" (par 5). Kate Rousmaniere also argues that administrators are very rarely portrayed positively in her article, "Looking at the Man in the Principal's Office." Rousmaniere claims that principals in television generally fall into two categories: men are depicted as "incompetent, unethical, and unmasculine" and "weak and humiliated by children," and both male and female principals function as "bullies and tyrants, personally unstable, possibly insane, and usually driven to such behavior by the crisis state of American education" (212). Given these representations, Rousmaniere expresses surprise that there is any support for public education at all. Most of these sources analyze media portrayals of teachers and students situated on a historical timeline, and they provide important and varied interpretations on the purpose of education.

Andrew L. Grunzke also interprets programs in the late 20th century as sending the message that the purpose of school is to attain "important life and social skills" (160) or to avoid scorn from educated friends and family. He analyzes the archetypal "fool" character who goes back to school either because their job requires it or because they are mocked for being uneducated. In both cases, the attainment of a degree is stressed over the actual learning of

content. As previously mentioned, Dalton and Linder, on the other hand, emphasize public opinion that school might be used to break out of a lower socioeconomic status, despite the existence of meritocracy being largely a myth (100). Both of these purposes are based on television programs from different time periods (the late 1990s and early 2000s and the 1980s, respectively). Though scholars are currently researching how television programs are sites of cultural representation, as previously described in the essays in *How to Watch Television*, no research is currently available on how modern television programs inform American culture's broad views of education or the purpose of schooling. In this study, therefore, I aim to establish how representative modern television programs portray educational experiences and what these experiences say about opinions on the purpose of education, especially in regard to secondary education. To do so, I will analyze three popular television programs that depict teenagers in school settings. I will then draw on this analysis by considering how teachers might utilize cultural representations of schooling as a teaching tool.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### **Data Collection: Selection of Current Television Programs**

To determine which programs to study within the scope of this research, I established the following selection criteria. The programs:

- Must have been released between 2010 and 2017
- Must take place, at least in part, at a secondary school (thus eliminating programs taking place in elementary schools or at colleges and universities)
- Must be fictional (thus eliminating reality television and news stations)
- May be intended for adult or adolescent audiences
- Must be made for American television audiences

I included streaming services in my definition of television, as Gray and Lotz noted the growing popularity of these mediums, as well as how streaming services have enlarged television audiences. Due to the scope of my study, I only considered the first season of each program. However, this criteria still left me with too many options, so I had to limit this list further. To that end, I determined to select programs that were representative of several genres and audiences and that were popular with their intended audience. Thus, I ultimately chose *13 Reasons Why*, *Young Sheldon*, and *Stranger Things*.

All three programs take place partially in a school; *13 Reasons Why* and *Young Sheldon* take place primarily in a high school setting, and a middle school serves as a backdrop setting in *Stranger Things*. All three programs feature adolescent characters, but *Young Sheldon* is unique in that it features an elementary-aged student of unusual intelligence going to high school for the first time. *Young Sheldon* is a spinoff program of CBS's most popular primetime television

program *The Big Bang Theory* (“Television Industry”), while *13 Reasons Why* is based off a popular adolescent literature novel by Jay Asher. *Stranger Things* was written specifically for streamed television, though it is clearly inspired by popular science fiction movies from the 1980’s, like *E.T.*. I chose these programs in particular because of their popularity, connections to other cultural works, and because they are all different genres that may give a more complete picture of American attitudes about education.

Previously conducted research in television studies utilize close textual analysis. *How to Watch Television* features over forty chapters analyzing specific programs for a variety of purposes. While Thompson and Mittell say that there is no single method used by the authors in their volume, they argue that “most essays can be described as examples of *textual analysis*” [emphasis in original] and that this shared approach “assumes that there is something to be discovered by carefully examining a cultural work” (4). Lotz and Gray argue that textual analysis is the most common methodology for television studies, and that “textual analysis, while not requiring of an audience, industry and contextual analysis to be of value, can nevertheless benefit from a multipronged approach” (53). Jason Mittell concurs in his essay, “A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory.” As such, I do not view my chosen programs in isolation, but consider them to be viewed by adolescents, and thus as potential “equipment for living” for secondary students.

I use the textual analysis approach primarily by analyzing character archetypes. Archetypes are often studied as literary elements. In Joseph Campbell’s “Hero’s Journey,” for instance, archetypal characters like the “Mentor” and the “Hero” can be traced back to early oral traditions. One such example is *The Iliad* by Homer. Like the Greek epics, modern television

programs showcase the values of the culture that produces it, and analyzing current archetypes may bring these values to the fore.

In order to study how a culture views education, some scholars in media studies have also looked for patterns, such as character archetypes, as these are specific to representations of schooling. For instance, although he does not focus explicitly on education, Timothy Shary's work in his book *Generation Multiplex* is useful for his analysis of youth in the cinema. Starting with the year 1980, Shary analyzes how the image of youth is developed in films and how these representations of youth were indicative of "larger issues of youth representation" (295). In the chapter "Youth in School," Shary notes that there are five basic characters seen in school films: the delinquent, the rebel, the athlete, the popular girl, and the nerd (34-35). Such character archetypes are also present in television programs featuring adolescent characters, especially those targeting adolescent audiences.

Similarly, Mary M. Dalton identifies a teacher archetype in cinema that she calls "the Hollywood Model"; Dalton and Linder likewise use this trope to analyze how teachers are portrayed in television. The "Hollywood Model" of the "Good Teacher" is characterized by six criteria: the teacher character is an outsider, is personally involved with students, learns from students, has problems with administrators, personalizes the curriculum for his/her students, and has a sense of humor (Dalton and Linder 8-13). In *The Hollywood Curriculum*, Dalton also identifies several other character archetypes, including the "Bad Teacher," who is the antithesis of the "Good Teacher" (61), as well as administrator archetypes, such as the "Principal as Buffoon" (126), "Principal as Bureaucrat" (129), "Principal as Autocrat" (130) and "Principal as Caring Pragmatist" (133). Shary's student archetypes and Dalton's teacher/administrator archetypes offer a foundation for studying patterns in television representations of schooling.

As I allude to in the previous paragraphs, scholars have addressed cultural portrayals of education in movies (Bulman, Dalton, and Shary); yet current scholarship has not focused on the cultural impact of specific programs, even though television studies is an established field. Additionally, work done by scholars regarding portrayals of education is sparse, especially in the medium of television. Mary M. Dalton and Linda R. Linder have published several books studying how teachers are portrayed in television programs, but their perspectives are largely historical and do not take into account new and popular television series. Linder and Dalton also only analyze teacher character types and not students.

Therefore, in addition to using teacher archetypes established by Dalton and Linder to inform my data analysis, I will also draw on the work of Timothy Shary and Robert C. Bulman, two scholars who have studied movies, education, and their cultural representations. Shary's book *Generation Multiplex* identifies the school film as its own subgenre and focuses on films with adolescent characters. In *Hollywood Goes to High School*, Bulman, a sociologist, studies the differences between urban, suburban and private school films. Shary identifies several common student archetypes, while Bulman identifies both student and teacher archetypes. Dalton and Linder discovered that the "Hollywood Model" of the Good Teacher archetypes are also present in television. I use Shary's student archetypes, Bulman's administration archetype, and Dalton's administration and teacher archetypes as lenses to analyze my data set.

### **Limitations**

The assumptions this research approach implies are that television archetypes are parallel to character archetypes previously identified in film. An issue with this assumption is that feature-length film and television are not the same and may feature different character archetypes. My show selection also limited the archetypes I am able to study. For example,

Bulman places a lot of importance on the differences between teacher archetypes in films set in urban and suburban schools. Although the three programs I have selected represent a range of characters from economic backgrounds, the majority of the characters in all three programs are white and attend suburban schools, eliminating some of Bulman's archetypes. I have selected the archetypes that I believe are relevant to the programs I've chosen, which means that I've privileged previously existing chosen archetypes, though other equally valid archetypes may exist.

Show selection also presented some unique challenges because I initially only considered shows that I like and have already seen. I chose *Young Sheldon* somewhat begrudgingly after acknowledging that it meets my criteria almost perfectly, especially given my own personal interest in looking at how the "nerd" character (one who does well in and enjoys school) is portrayed in television. However, both *13 Reasons Why* and *Stranger Things* are programs that I watched before I had any intention of studying them. While the potential exists for me to exhibit bias when I look at the shows that I enjoy versus programs I didn't necessarily enjoy, I sought to develop coding schemes in order to provide a lens of objectivity to guide my data analysis.

### **The Archetypes**

I designed three coding schemes to guide my collection and analysis of data. Each table below contains an archetype previously identified in relevant literature (Bulman, Dalton, Linder and Shary). During the coding process, I took detailed notes of all events occurring in each episode, making special note of any scene taking place inside a school, or featuring teacher characters. I also made notes in the table when I noticed an archetype. All three of the programs I studied feature adolescent characters as the main characters, so I also made more general notes about main character personalities and how their characteristics define them or don't define them

as one of the student archetypes. For example, Sheldon’s character (*Young Sheldon*) is very clearly a “Boy Nerd”--not only in scenes taking place at school, but in other contexts as well, so I did not find it necessary to make a comment under “Boy Nerd” every time Sheldon did something that matched Shary’s description.

Taking notes in addition to filling out the tables of pre-established archetypes not only allowed me to identify new archetypes previously unmentioned in the literature, but also gave me the ability to challenge some of the archetypes as they are currently described in the literature or that were absent from the television programs I studied. Table 1 and Table 2 detail the pre-established archetypes for both students and school staff that I looked for during data collection and include the name of the archetype as well as a paraphrased description of their “actions and attributes” (for further description of the “actions and attributes” approach to coding data, see Will Penman and Doug Cloud’s ongoing work in which they code the actions and attributes of Donald Trump into several character archetypes).

Table 1: Student Archetypal Characters	
Archetype (Author)	Actions and attributes
The Boy Nerd (Shary 38-45)	Excel at academics and are “ostracized, ridiculed, physically and socially inept and desexualized.” Expected to “transform” through some abandonment of academics in order to gain social acceptance. Can be taken advantage of for their skills.
Girl Nerd (Shary 46-50)	“Smart, comely, talented, caring” and “resilient”, but again are expected to “transform,” usually physically, in order to gain the attention of a non-nerd male. Worth is judged by whether or not they have a boyfriend that others view as socially acceptable (usually a sensitive athlete).

Juvenile Delinquent (Shary 50-60)	“Used to demonstrate that crime is not a proper means of acceptance,” must reform to gain acceptance (or they die before this is possible). Teachers are often the “target of their anger,” and they are often people of color and/or people of low socioeconomic status.
The Rebel (Shary 60-73)	Best defined by their desire to avoid conforming -- experience “angst generated by the social or physical tensions of being in school.” Rebels are usually white.
Popular girl (Shary 75-82)	“Pretty, well-dressed” and wealthy. Their popularity must be maintained, and is usually threatened by “some mishap or misunderstanding” before the popular girl realizes that popularity is a “liability, rather than an asset.”
Popular Boy - Sensitive Athlete (Shary 82-96)	May be first stereotyped as the dumb and possibly mean jock--but proves to be “ambitious, determined, and sometimes smart.”
Popular Athlete/Jock (Shary 82-96)	Only positive attribute seems to be athletic skill; they are dumb and/or mean. Usually only supporting characters rather than main characters.

Table 2: School Staff Archetypal Characters

Archetype (Author)	Actions and attributes
Administration: Inept Bureaucrats (Bulman 39 and Dalton 129-130)	“Uncaring, cynical, and incompetent.” Part of a narrative that shows the school as “a selfish, inept, wasteful, and uncaring bureaucracy.”
Principal as Buffoon (Dalton 126-129)	“Foolish” and “Bumbling” “clueless” and “hopelessly out of touch.” Easily manipulated and seen as pushovers.
Principal as Autocrat (Dalton 130-133)	“Authoritarian and almost dictatorial.” Seen by students as “sinister” and sometimes “evil.” They do whatever they can to establish

	and maintain control.
Principal as Caring Pragmatist (Dalton 133-134)	Competent and kind; “gets the job done but feels tensions between budgets and administrative supervisors.” Concerned about the needs of teachers and students.
The Good Teacher - Hollywood Model (Dalton 26-41)	Outsider who is personally involved with students, learns from their students, personalizes their curriculum, and experiences tension with their administration.
The Bad Teacher - Hollywood Model (Dalton 62-80)	The antithesis of the good teacher--seen as “embedded deeply” into the school structure. Bad teachers are “bored by students, afraid of students, or eager to dominate students.” Fits into “administration plans to control students,” and “follow a standardized curriculum in order to avoid personal contact with students.”

Table 3 provides an example of how I took notes of archetypes during coding. After the initial note-taking process, I went through all of the coding and made notes of how many times specific characteristics of the archetypes were being met. The example in table 3 is from the first episode of *13 Reasons Why*.

Table 3: Coding Example		
Archetype	Actions and Attributes	Notes
The Boy Nerd (Shary 38-45)	Excel at academics and are “ostracized, ridiculed, physically and socially inept and desexualized.” Expected to “transform” through some abandonment of academics in order to gain social acceptance. Can be taken advantage of for their skills.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Clay makes a Star Wars reference and Hannah says, “Wow, you’re an actual nerd, aren’t you?”</li> <li>- Hannah’s friend Kat makes a Star Wars reference and Hannah says, “Wow, you’re both nerds” (second</li> </ul>

		<p>time this label is applied to Clay)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Hannah asks to borrow Clay's French notes (taken advantage of for his skills)</li> </ul>
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In the following section, I provide the findings that emerged after applying the previously described coding scheme above to each program, *13 Reasons Why*, *Young Sheldon*, and *Stranger Things*. Before analyzing the student and staff archetypes for each program, I provide a brief context describing release information for the program, an overview of the plot and main characters, as well as information about the school featured in the program.

## Chapter 4: Findings

### **Sensationalizing Schooling: *13 Reasons Why***

An adaptation of Jay Asher's young adult novel by the same name, *13 Reasons Why* released all of its episodes on Netflix on March 31, 2017. Netflix has not released any numbers on just how many people watched the program, but its popularity on social media is undeniable; the program was the most tweeted-about program in 2017 (Wagmeister). The story revolves around the recent suicide of Hannah Baker, who left behind pre-recorded tapes detailing the thirteen reasons why she killed herself. Although Hannah recorded her message on cassette tapes, the program takes place in 2017. Hannah uses the outdated cassette tapes presumably because she wanted to make the subjects of the tape work in order to listen to her message. The program has been a source of controversy for its decision to show not only rape, but also for its depictions of suicide. Many of the program's thirteen episodes take place in the fictional Liberty High School, and one of its major plot points is a lawsuit brought against the school by Hannah Baker's parents. They allege that Hannah was bullied and that the school knew and chose not to act. Meanwhile, the tapes are in circulation and contain pertinent evidence the Bakers could use in their lawsuit, but, fearing the consequences, the students who heard the tapes go to great lengths to prevent anyone else from finding out. The program's main character, Clay Jensen, is the only person on the tapes who initially believes Hannah's story and wants to expose the rest of the students. His mother is also the lawyer in charge of defending the school against the Baker's lawsuit. At the end of the season, the students on the tapes receive subpoenas to testify in the lawsuit, and the tapes are finally copied and given to the Bakers. Meanwhile, one of the students plans a school shooting and another is in the hospital for attempted suicide.

The school itself is often portrayed as a negative place. Characters frequently make comments to the effect of, “this school sucks” and the teenage characters are often critical of any attempts the school makes to improve the climate. For example, when an athlete dies in a car crash, the school puts up posters telling students not to drink and drive. And when Hannah commits suicide, the school replaces the drinking and driving ads with posters that focus on suicide prevention. These posters are noted by the characters as pathetic, passive attempts by the school to avoid liability for tragedies, rather than efforts to solve the school’s actual problems.

### *Student Archetypes*

Not only do many of the main characters of *13 Reasons Why* fit cleanly into Shary’s student archetypes, but the characters often even use the same words to describe each other and themselves. In order to establish character traits, main character Clay Jensen is immediately identified as a nerd. Hannah also uses the word “nerd” twice in the first episode to describe Clay, both times after references to *Star Wars*. Clay is also taken advantage of by other students, including Hannah, who asks for his French notes in the first episode. Later in the season, Clay helps a cheerleader with an English essay, and throughout the season Clay tutors athlete Jeff Atkins. In one scene, Jeff insists that Clay needs to change his answers to a Valentine’s Day survey because his interest in video games and staying home would never help him get a girl. Jeff’s relationship to Clay seems to be all about helping him “transform,” the concept that Shary explains in *Generation Multiplex* where “Boy Nerds” need to change in some way in order to get a girlfriend.

Cheerleader characters also fit Shary’s description of “Popular Girls,” and the athlete characters fit Shary’s description of the “Popular Boys.” Jessica, one of the cheerleaders, feels the pressure of maintaining her popularity and is shown drunk at parties, school dances, and even

during the regular school day. She dates the popular Justin Foley, who one character describes as “jock crack” in the first episode. In the same episode, Jessica is visibly upset when Justin does not show up for a pep rally, and she has to dance by herself when his name is called. Jessica is also the victim of a rape that Hannah witnesses and reveals on her tapes. In some ways, Jessica is punished for her pursuit of popularity by Hannah, who essentially claims that none of the bad things that happened would have happened if Hannah and Jessica had remained friends. All of these events reflect Shary’s description of the “Popular Girl,” especially where Shary discusses how the “Popular Girl” feels the pressures of popularity.

The true villains of *13 Reasons Why* are the jocks. Several prominent characters in the program fit into Shary’s description of the “Popular Boy: Athlete/Jock,” and two characters that fit the description of the “Popular Boy: Sensitive Athlete.” The “Sensitive Athletes” are Zach Dempsey, who does something to hurt Hannah but ultimately takes responsibility for his actions, and Jeff Atkins, the boy that Clay tutors. Jeff is tragically killed before the season starts, and his death has already deeply impacted the school community. Throughout the season, characters mention how everyone liked Jeff and felt his absence, especially Clay, who was good friends with Jeff. Clay helped Jeff with his grades, and Jeff with Clay’s love life.

In the final episode, a minor character named Kat testifies, “There are decent jocks, you just gotta learn how to find them. Hannah never learned.” The un-decent jocks Kat alludes to are Justin Foley and Bryce Walker. Both characters are celebrated by the school by pep assemblies, awards, and announcements over the school intercom. While these athletes are celebrated at school, they spend their out-of-school time partying. At one party, Justin allows Bryce to rape his unconscious girlfriend, Jessica. At another, Bryce rapes Hannah. The day after her rape, she sees Bryce in the hallway while the loudspeaker is congratulating him specifically for a win with 12

catches and 2 touchdowns. Throughout the series, Bryce says that because he is a star athlete, the rules do not apply to him; he can drink openly at school, buy alcohol from liquor stores despite being clearly underaged, sell weed without fear in the school locker room, and help himself to any girl he wants. Clay confronts him in the twelfth episode for the accusations Hannah makes against him on the tapes, to which he replies, “If that’s rape, then every girl at this school is begging to be raped.” The idea that the jocks run the school runs through several episodes, but is summed up well by Kat in the final episode when she tells the lawyers during her deposition, “You try going to school with a bunch of neanderthals who are told they are the only thing of value at school, and the rest of us are merely here to cheer them on and provide them with whatever support they need.” Kat even suggests in the same scene that not only are the teachers and administrators aware of how the athletes make the other students feel, but they play into it and encourage it.

Because *13 Reasons Why* focuses primarily on the negative impact of the popular crowd on the school, other student archetypes noted by Shary appear less frequently than the jocks and cheerleaders do. For instance, I coded several instances of a rebel character named Sky, who wears black, has tattoos, frequently encourages Clay to break the rules, and must hide her “contraband” when administration comes into a classroom to check backpacks in the ninth episode. However, no other obvious “delinquent” characters were portrayed in the program.

#### *School Staff Archetypes*

The most common staff archetype showing up in *13 Reasons Why* is what both Bulman and Dalton identify as the “Inept Bureaucrat.” I coded counselors as administration rather than teachers, though I see some opportunities for individual archetypes of counselors, as I describe in the conclusion of my study. While the staff of Liberty High School appears to be trying their best

to educate students in a lot of cases, they are portrayed overall as incompetent cogs in a machine. Of the few teacher characters in *13 Reasons Why*, I only coded one as the "Good Teacher." Mrs. Bradley, the communications teacher, adapts her curriculum to her students' needs and has personal connections with students. In one scene in the second episode, she explains to Mr. Porter, the African-American counselor who came from an urban school, how she came across one of Hannah's old essays "and nearly lost it," to which Mr. Porter complains that he has too many students to have that kind of connection. Though Mrs. Bradley is shown as a teacher who cares about her students, however, she does not hold students accountable to her rules. In the first episode, students in her classroom break her "no digital devices" rule, and she only passively corrects them. This is especially problematic at this moment because the students are sharing an inappropriate photograph of Hannah.

Another teacher character in the program who clearly does not take his teaching assignment seriously, and whom I thus coded as the "Bad Teacher," is the coach of the basketball team, who also teaches social studies at the school. Few scenes in *Thirteen Reasons Why* show teachers actually teaching, and scenes in classrooms are really only passing moments. However, these passing moments have special prominence because they may be read as "representative anecdotes" of schooling (Burke 59-60, 323-325). In one scene in the second episode, the coach teacher doesn't even know who Clay is, even though Clay is in his 5th-period history class. In a later episode, the same teacher tells the students to pay attention to a film and not to sleep through it, even though that's exactly what he does. Another student makes a joke about the time he "showed *Gladiator* to teach Roman history," and while the teacher is sleeping, several students are able to get up and leave the classroom unnoticed. I coded these moments as the "Bad Teacher" because this teacher seems bored with students.

Administrators, on the other hand, are prominently featured in *13 Reasons Why*, and I coded them most often as “Inept Bureaucrats” because they are “uncaring, cynical, and incompetent” (Dalton 129). The principal and vice principal are both seen throughout the series trying to control the Baker’s lawsuit. In episode four, Mrs. Baker goes into the bathroom and takes a picture of the stall walls containing hateful messages, she decides to expose them at a parent meeting. Principal Bolen asks Mr. Porter how they didn’t know about the graffiti, and Mr. Porter merely responds by saying that staff members aren't supposed to go in student bathrooms. The principal orders the walls painted over, which appears to be an active attempt to cover up anything that might cost the school a lawsuit. Bolen and his vice principal also frequently bring up budget concerns, specifically in regard to how the lawsuit will affect the budget. Very few conversations are actually focused on helping students or dealing with the bullying problem the Bakers are concerned about in the first place. Instead, as previously mentioned, the school’s response is to put up posters all over the school, encouraging students to seek help when they are feeling suicidal.

Elsewhere in the series, I coded two instances of the “Caring Pragmatist,” both of which refer to a counselor character named Mrs. Antilly. Mrs. Antilly is bubbly and initially seems blissfully ignorant to Hannah and Jessica when she suggests in the second episode that they should be friends simply because they are both new at the school. Both Hannah and Jessica reject this idea at first and poke fun at Mrs. Antilly, who laughs and points out how their senses of humor are similar. The tactic ends up actually working, and Jessica later says “that bitch is good at her job.” As Hannah later notes in a voice-over, however, Mrs. Antilly leaves the school and is replaced by Mr. Porter, the counselor that Hannah eventually lists on the audiotape as the thirteenth reason for her suicide.

In an example of Bulman and Dalton's "Inept Bureaucrat," Mr. Porter reveals himself to be "uncaring, cynical, and incompetent" (Dalton 129). His main objective throughout the program seems to be finding ways to prevent the school from being held liable for Hannah's death. In several episodes, he meets with students to discuss the impact of Hannah's suicide and encourages them to come to him first with any information. The audience is aware that Mr. Porter wants to use any information he learns to protect the school, and presumably, himself. Although Mr. Porter frequently meets with students, the majority of these meetings are frustrating for students. During these meetings, Mr. Porter is clearly trying to come across as a caring adult, but the students are rarely fooled. Tyler, one of the students on Hannah's tapes, is an outcast who is bullied at the school. He goes to speak with Mr. Porter about how the students are teasing him and pulled his pants down in the hall, and Mr. Porter doesn't even know what he's talking about. "Where I came from, kids shot kids. Pantsed? I don't know," he says in the fifth episode. He then goes on to suggest to Tyler that he should think about what he's doing to provoke the bullying, to which Tyler says, "That's convenient. Blame the victim." Mr. Porter appears to be overworked and trying to help students in some scenes, but his inability to actually help students contributes to his categorization as the "Inept Bureaucrat" because he is incompetent.

At the end of the season, Tyler is planning a school shooting when Mr. Porter receives the tapes. The last tape reveals that Hannah recorded the whole meeting when she went to Mr. Porter and explained that she was feeling suicidal because she had been raped. During their meeting, Mr. Porter is distracted by a telephone that continually rings. Mr. Porter ignores his ringing telephone and presses Hannah for the name of her rapist, but she won't give it. He insists that because she can't provide a name, the only thing she can do is "move on." After meeting

with Mr. Porter, Hannah leaves his office upset. She hopes he will come after her, and when he doesn't, says into her recorder, "he's not coming" and immediately leaves school, returns home, and commits suicide. Later, when Clay confronts Mr. Porter about what he heard on the final tape, he asks Mr. Porter what the policy is. Mr. Porter's response makes it clear that he understands his role as a mandatory reporter, but he failed to report Hannah's rape or how she wanted "everything--life" to end. In line with the "Inept Bureaucrat," Mr. Porter comes across in this scene as uncaring.

While many of the students are responsible for Hannah's feelings of hopelessness, *Thirteen Reasons Why* blames her suicide on the school because of Mr. Porter's failure to report. Mr. Porter and the administration he works under, were frequently coded as the "Inept Bureaucrat" due to how they are consistently portrayed as uncaring and incompetent. I observed no "Buffoon" or "Autocrat" archetypes, although Mr. Porter's attempt to control students into reporting first to him (rather than to authorities) might make him a blend of the "Bureaucrat" and "Autocrat."

*13 Reasons Why* ultimately forces a separation between student groups, with particular focus on how the jock characters take advantage of the rest of the students. The school itself is represented as an uncaring bureaucracy headed by staff that serve their own selfish interests over the needs of their students.

In the next section, I move to an analysis of *Young Sheldon*, a program that contrasts sharply with *13 Reasons Why* in its comedic take on schooling.

### **Not Exactly a "Haven of Higher Learning": *Young Sheldon***

*Young Sheldon* is a spinoff of CBS's popular program *The Big Bang Theory*, featuring nine-year-old Sheldon Cooper attending his first year of high school in 1989. Its pilot episode

aired on September 25, 2017, and is still airing at the time of this writing. The program focuses on Sheldon's relationship to his family and his struggles to be understood by his small town Texas community. Sheldon is characterized as a super genius who has skipped four grades to attend high school with his older brother Georgie. Sheldon's family members, who are portrayed as intellectually "average," struggle with how to help Sheldon grow, especially when his growth requires financial investment. Sheldon struggles with being different from everyone else in his community, and tries to learn how to do average things like making friends by asking for advice from those around him. The program is narrated by Jim Parsons, the actor who plays Sheldon on *The Big Bang Theory*, indicating that the show is from Sheldon's perspective, which may explain why every other character in the show is represented as somewhat idiotic.

Sheldon and his older brother Georgie attend Medford High School in the fictional town of Medford, Texas. Sheldon's father, George Senior, works at the school as the head football coach. In the pilot episode, Sheldon's expectations for high school are made clear when he says, "I'm not going to be assaulted. High school is a haven for higher learning," to which his father comically states, "Oh God" under his breath. Despite his early expectations, Sheldon does not fit in with his peers at the high school, and the library becomes a safe space for him. Sheldon finds allies in his friend Tam who shares similar interests, as well as in the librarian. Early in the program, it becomes clear that the curriculum taught at the high school is not advanced enough for Sheldon, and he is sent to a private school that better suits his needs, despite being three hours away. However, Sheldon's family misses him too much and they bring him back to Medford after only one day.

### *Student Archetypes*

As mentioned earlier in the study, Sheldon is the epitome of the “Boy Nerd” as described by Shary in *Generation Multiplex*. He is characterized in the program as a young genius, and viewers of *The Big Bang Theory* will know that Sheldon eventually grows up to become a theoretical physicist after obtaining his first doctorate at the age of sixteen (IMDB). Sheldon’s interests in building rockets and trains, Star Trek, computer programming, comic books, and Dungeons and Dragons are all topics explored by the program. Sheldon is certainly ostracized by both his peers and his teachers for being as different as he is, but in one episode, Sheldon achieves temporary popularity because his skills become useful to the popular crowd.

The fifth episode begins with Sheldon telling his family that football teams have better odds at scoring if they go for the touchdown on the fourth down rather than kicking a field goal, a calculation he does in his head while he watches football with his family. Sheldon’s football coach father decides to apply Sheldon’s suggestion during a game which results in a win for Medford High School. When the football team continues to win games, Sheldon’s popularity grows. He is even hugged by a cheerleader, an act that Sheldon does not appreciate due to his fear of germs. Sheldon’s friend Tam tries to ride on Sheldon’s popularity by getting them into a party. As a result, Sheldon is tired at school the next day and gets a B+ on a math quiz because he forgot to show his work. Realizing that his new popularity is affecting his grades, Sheldon “snitches” on everyone involved, which provides him the out he needs to stop helping the football team. This particular episode demonstrates Shary’s archetype by showing how “Boy Nerds” are taken advantage of for their skills, but are otherwise ostracized. Predictably, Sheldon’s popularity is fleeting and he goes back to being outcast. Perhaps because of his age,

Sheldon is not expected to transform for a girl and seems uninterested in girls in general, which is the only part of Shary's archetype that Sheldon does not embody.

Sheldon's older brother Georgie serves as a foil for Sheldon and fits Shary's description of the "Popular Athlete/Jock." Georgie plays on the Medford football team and is portrayed as an idiot throughout the program. His only two character traits seem to be that he is an athlete and that he is stupid. For instance, in the ninth episode, he cheats on a math test by writing formulas on his shoes in order to maintain his eligibility to play football. Sheldon and Georgie have a strained relationship; Georgie bullies Sheldon, and Sheldon mocks Georgie's intelligence.

Shary's other student archetypes are also present in *Young Sheldon*, but only in passing. In the pilot episode, many stereotypical high school cliques are evident as Sheldon makes his way through the hallways on his first day of school. We see groups of popular girls, a group in all black that may be either delinquents or rebels, and groups of athletes. However, these representations of Shary's archetypes are so fleeting they provide few points for analysis.

### *School Staff Archetypes*

Teachers in *Young Sheldon* provide contrast between the expectations that students and teachers have for high school and Sheldon's experience as an exceptional student. At first, the teachers are welcoming of Sheldon. However, in line with Dalton's archetype of the "Bad Teacher," all of Sheldon's teachers are threatened by him. In her description of the "Bad Teacher" Dalton explains that this archetype is seen by student characters as "deeply embedded" in the school structure. As is the case in the pilot episode of *Young Sheldon*, the first scene that includes a teacher shows Mrs. MacElroy, Sheldon's English teacher, telling her students that she has been at the school for long enough that she even taught some of their parents. Later in the same episode, all of Sheldon's teachers descend on the principal, complaining that Sheldon

offended them in some way: he told one that she had a mustache, and she nervously tries to hide her upper lip while reporting this fact to the principal. Another teacher complains that Sheldon told him that he (the teacher) was not meeting hygiene standards. The math teacher also claims that Sheldon questioned her credentials within five minutes of being in class. All of these teachers argue that Sheldon does not belong at the school, further illustrating Dalton's "Bad Teacher" archetype by depicting teachers as scared of their students. Such portrayals continue throughout the series, confirming additional characteristics of Dalton's description.

Sheldon's teachers also fit Dalton's archetype of the "Bad Teacher" by avoiding personal contact with students. In the second episode, Sheldon attempts to make friends by following the principles in *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Sheldon's sister suggests that he look in the inside cover, ascertaining that those who checked out the book would be just as desperate for friends as Sheldon. Sheldon finds that all of the people who checked out the book are teachers. Each teacher that Sheldon approaches after his discovery ignores or avoids him, exhibiting Dalton's "Bad Teacher" archetype by showing a lack of personal connection between teachers and students. In addition to dismissing this opportunity to connect with Sheldon, the teachers instead rant about their personal lives before telling Sheldon to go outside. Later in the same episode, Sheldon tells his mother that he thinks his teachers need a Prozac.

More examples of the "Bad Teacher" emerge in the tenth episode when Sheldon goes away to a private school. The audience learns that his teachers wrote him glowing recommendations, even though the program has already established that Sheldon's teachers do not like him. The audience knows in this moment that the letters of recommendation are a transparent attempt to get rid of Sheldon. Later in the same episode, Sheldon's teachers sit in the staff lounge drinking whiskey and complaining that Sheldon is returning to the school. They tell

stories about how Sheldon has offended them and share strategies they have used to get rid of him. Sheldon's math teacher says, "Why did I ever become a teacher? He knows what I'm going to say before I say it, or I say it and I look like a dumbbell." The principal walks in as this conversation is occurring, and admonishes his teachers for drinking in the morning, which makes them laugh. This event thus serves as another example of the "Bad Teacher," showing teachers as frustrated with students that they cannot control.

The principal in *Young Sheldon*, although often misguided, is Dalton's "Principal as Caring Pragmatist." Even when the teachers are behaving like children, the principal listens to their concerns and takes them seriously. He meets with Sheldon's parents several times in the first season, communicating to them in the gentlest way possible that Sheldon is rude to his teachers. In an effort to support the teachers, the principal is the one that suggests that Sheldon might have a better experience at a private school. The principal in *Young Sheldon* does not only advocate for his teachers, he advocates for Sheldon's right to an appropriate education as well. Although the principal is not portrayed as smart, he is one of the only school staff characters that is not portrayed as incompetent and inept.

Although she does not fit into any of the established archetypes, the librarian is a character worth noting because she is an ally to Sheldon. Similar to the principal, she is intellectually average. Because the show is from Sheldon's perspective, the librarian and principal are characters that Sheldon likes or feels neutral about, whereas the teachers and other students may inspire fear and/or anger.

Like *13 Reasons Why*, *Young Sheldon* continues to place students in stereotypical groups, but is more comical in its depiction of these and how they interact. School staff are portrayed as

incompetent in *Young Sheldon*, but these representations are much less sinister than they are in *13 Reasons Why*.

In the next section, I analyze *Stranger Things*, a program that provides more nuanced portrayals of both Shary and Dalton's archetypes.

### **School at the Center of the Community: *Stranger Things***

Like *13 Reasons Why*, the program *Stranger Things* is a streaming program released on Netflix in July of 2016.. The program takes place in 1983 in small town Hawkins, Indiana, and begins when Will Byers, a middle school student, mysteriously disappears. Will's best friends, Mike, Lucas, and Dustin begin to look for him,, but instead they find a young girl with a shaved head and telekinetic powers, named Eleven, who has escaped from the secretive Hawkins Lab where the federal government is conducting morally questionable, confidential research. The program also features several high school aged characters, most prominently, Mike's older sister Nancy and Will's older brother Jonathan. When Nancy's best friend also mysteriously disappears, Nancy also becomes involved in the search for both missing children. A mysterious man finds a body that the government claims is Will, which actually turns out to be a fake, but the unknowing town still holds a funeral for Will. It turns out that both Will and Barb were taken into an alternative dimension, referred to by the kids as the "Upside Down," after a gate to this dimension is opened up by the telekinetic Eleven when the government's research on her goes horribly wrong. With the help of their science teacher and Eleven, the boys are able to discover the gate to the "Upside Down" and rescue Will, but are unfortunately too late to save Barb.

The school featured most prominently in *Stranger Things* is Hawkins Middle School, which Will and his friends attend, while the older students attend Hawkins High School. Both schools are situated as part of a small and close-knit suburban community. When Will goes

missing, the school holds an evening event to show its support for his family, as well as a school assembly after Will's "body" is found. Later in the season, the characters need to build a sensory deprivation tank in which to immerse Eleven so that she can use her telekinetic powers to locate Will in the "Upside Down." The police chief immediately recognizes the school as the best place to go, given its availability of resources. The school not only has the ice melt salt they need, but chocolate pudding needed to help Eleven "recharge" her powers. The school functions as a safe place for its characters until the government arrives to retrieve Eleven, sparking the season's epic final battle within the school.

### *Student Archetypes*

Like *13 Reasons Why*, the adolescent characters in *Stranger Things* represent many of the student archetypes identified by Shary in *Generation Multiplex*. However, as previously stated, the characters in *Stranger Things* are more complex than the ones in *13 Reasons Why* and *Young Sheldon*. Some characters even resist categorization. For example, Eleven defies any of the archetypes because she has not been brought up in the same culture as the rest of the characters. But even the mainstream characters who have, like Jonathan Byers and Nancy Wheeler, resist being placed in any one category.

Mike, Dustin, Lucas, and Will, the middle school boys in *Stranger Things*, are the most straightforward representations of Shary's "Boy Nerd." They are bullied at school and are interested in activities that are traditionally accepted as nerdy: Dungeons and Dragons, Star Wars, science, and technology. They are fiercely loyal to each other and refer to their group as "the Party." Throughout the first season, they are tormented by two school bullies, Troy and James. Troy and James use words like "freaks" to describe the Party in the first episode, and call Dustin, Mike, and Lucas by the nicknames of Toothless, Frog Face, and Midnight. In the fourth

episode, Eleven uses her telekinetic powers to force Troy to wet his pants. In a later episode, Troy confronts the Party saying, “I know you did something to me, some nerdy science shit to make me do that,” further supporting the Party’s categorization as nerds. The only way the Party does not fulfill Shary’s description of the “Boy Nerd” is that none of them are expected to “transform” or abandon their academics/hobbies in order to gain the attention of a girl, even though a few comments are made about how girls generally find the boys “gross.” Will, however, was expected to transform to please his father Lonny, as his mother suggests in “Chapter One.” This idea is reinforced by a flashback of Jonathan explaining to Will that he doesn’t have to pretend to like “normal things” to please their father in the second episode.

At the beginning of the season, Nancy Wheeler and her friend Barb likewise fit Shary’s description of the “Girl Nerd.” In the first episode, Nancy is consistently portrayed as a motivated student whose main priority is maintaining good grades. She has recently begun a relationship with a “Popular Boy,” Steve Harrington, who says she is a cliché with her “good grades and band practice,” even though Nancy isn’t in band. She begins to undergo a transformation process to become a “Popular Girl” in the first few episodes. In the first episode, Barb tells Nancy that because she’s dating Steve, that she is going to be “so cool now, it’s ridiculous.” Yet when Nancy and Barb attend a party at Steve’s house in the second episode, Barb becomes angry with Nancy over her behavior and says, “this isn’t you,” highlighting how drinking and trying to impress boys is not how Nancy normally behaves. After Barb is taken into the “Upside Down,” however, Nancy’s behavior further evolves. She becomes far less focused on her relationship with Steve and more focused on finding out what happened to Barb and Will by teaming up with Will’s brother Jonathan Byers. Nancy may even be considered a “Rebel” by the end of the season, as she no longer displays any regard for her grades or the rules, but she is

also not seen in the schooling environment in any of the later episodes. By creating characters that do not fit neatly into known archetypes, *Stranger Things* acknowledges that adolescents are more complex than the usual cultural stereotypes.

Another character that is easily categorized at first but later defies stereotypes is Steve Harrington. Steve initially seems to be a “Popular Boy: Jock,” even though there is no evidence in the program that Steve plays sports. Early in the season, Steve seems to fit the profile of the “Jock” because he is depicted as unintelligent and cruel. Steve jokes about his bad grades and hangs out with people who are cruel to other students. He destroys Jonathan Byers’ camera after they discover he took pictures of their party, and he vandalizes a local movie theater by spray painting comments like “Wheeler the slut” on the marquee when he sees Nancy and Jonathan together. However, later in the first season, Steve later rejects his friends, offers to help clean up the graffiti, and returns to apologize to Nancy. When he sees that Nancy is involved in something much bigger than a high school love triangle, he bravely joins her and Jonathan in a fight against the interdimensional monster. Steve may or may not be an athlete, but he fits the other qualifications of Shary’s “Sensitive Athlete” near the end of the season.

Steve’s two friends, Carol and Tommy, fit Shary’s “Rebels” archetype. They mock Nancy when she’s hesitant to go out on a Tuesday night and they engage in risky behaviors like drinking, vandalism, and disrespecting teachers. In the third episode, Carol announces, “So I told Mr. Mundy, the solution of  $10 + y =$  blow me,” a comment that earns her detention. She and Tommy joke about the math teacher some more, stating that they think he is probably a virgin and Tommy suggests, “You should blow him, Carol,” implying that doing so may improve her grade. Steve eventually tells both of them off for being unkind about Nancy, and presumably they end their friendship.

The only student archetype not found in *Stranger Things* is the juvenile delinquent, who was also absent from *13 Reasons Why* and *Young Sheldon*.

### *School Staff Archetypes*

Fewer teacher and administrator archetypes appear in *Stranger Things* than they do in *13 Reasons Why* and *Young Sheldon*. Hawkins middle school's principal is seen a few times, and as mentioned above, a high school math teacher is mentioned in passing. There is only one character playing a major role that is employed by either Hawkins Middle or Hawkins High School, and that is science teacher Scott Clark.

Mr. Clark's first appearance shows him assigning homework to a class that does not seem to be paying attention, so he at first appears to fit the archetype of Dalton's "Bad Teacher." Even while he is explaining that this information will be on the test, many of the students file out of the classroom. However, Mike, Lucas and Dustin are waiting at Mr. Clark's desk as he finishes, eager to see a new radio Mr. Clark has obtained for the AV Club. Clearly, Mr. Clark and the boys have a strong relationship. For example, he scolds Lucas for saying a bad word, but then smiles when the boys look away. When Will goes missing, Mr. Clark joins the search party, sharing with Police Chief Hopper that Will is a good student. Mr. Clark also attends Will's "funeral" later in the series. Mr. Clark is not just a teacher in *Stranger Things*, he is an active member of the Hawkins community. In one scene, he is even seen watching a movie with a date on a Saturday night, a rare depiction of a teacher with a life outside of school.

Given his close personal relationship with Mike, Dustin, Lucas, and Will, I coded Mr. Clark as Dalton's "Good Teacher." In line with Dalton's archetype, Mr. Clark personalizes the curriculum for the boys and feels tensions with administration, another characteristic of the "Good Teacher." Mr. Clark is not, however, an outsider, meaning he does not meet all of

Dalton's criteria for the "Good Teacher." Rather, he meets basic expectations for how a middle school science teacher should look and behave, (he wears a sweater vest and is generally soft spoken and nerdy). He is decidedly average, but the program never implies that this is a positive or negative characterization. He seems to be an average teacher, who is only made special because his students like and respect him.

Although he does not meet all of Dalton's criteria, Mr. Clark is categorized as the "Good Teacher because of the strength of his relationship to his students. Though Mr. Clark is never in the center of the action, his expertise and positive connections with his students enable the other main characters to find and save Will. After a mysterious man finds the "body," Mr. Clark and the boys talk at Will's "funeral." The boys ask Mr. Clark to explain the concept of alternative dimensions. He uses a metaphor for a tight-rope walker and a flea, explaining that the human can only walk on the rope, where the flea can walk on any side of the rope. He then uses a paper plate to demonstrate how another dimension could be accessed through a gate, and also how that gate might be formed. From this information, the boys are able to figure out where the gate to the "Upside Down" is by using pocket compasses and following them north. They only know to do this because of Mr. Clark's explanation that the opening of a gate to another dimension would disrupt gravity and effect magnets. In "Chapter Seven," the boys need to build a sensory deprivation tank, so they call Mr. Clark, who as previously mentioned, is with a date. He tells the boys they can talk about it on Monday, to which Dustin says, "You always say we should never stop being curious, to always open any curiosity door we find." Mr. Clark is persuaded, and tells them exactly how to build the tank, which they are able to do successfully because of Mr. Clark's instructions. Although this is not official middle school curriculum, Mr. Clark is

“personalizing” scientific content for the Party, further supporting his categorization as the “Good Teacher.”

Administrators are only seen briefly in *Stranger Things*. Like Mr. Clark, they seem like average people who do their jobs appropriately. The principal sits by as the police chief interviews Mike, Lucas, and Dustin after Will’s disappearance. He holds an assembly when Will’s “body” is found and gives a speech about how Will’s loss is felt by the community. Portrayals such as these are fairly neutral, so none of Shary’s administration archetypes were evident.

*Stranger Things*, although still using common character archetypes, goes beyond these simple categorizations and develops more realistic student and teacher characters, and presents the school as central to a functioning community, rather than just a site of social conflict.

In the next section, I look across all three programs to examine emergent archetypes that were not identified in the literature I reviewed for this study.

#### *Emerging Archetypes in All Three Television Series*

I saw opportunities to code additional archetypes that were not identified by either Bulman, Dalton, or Shary. Since the archetypes I used were first identified in feature length films, the archetypes identified below may be unique to television, or they may be emerging in feature-length films as well.

In programs with younger main characters, a generic “bully” character emerged. Both *Young Sheldon* and *Stranger Things* feature younger characters who are harassed or tormented by fairly one-dimensional, mean, stupid characters with a reputation for abusing others. In *13 Reasons Why* this role was attributed to the jocks, but the bully character seen in both *Young Sheldon* and *Stranger Things* were not associated with sports. Both *Young Sheldon* and *Stranger*

*Things* also had some sort of scene where a primary character triumphs in some way over their bully. In *Young Sheldon*, Sheldon seems to gain the respect of his bully, Billy. In *Stranger Things*, Eleven breaks the bully's arm, effectively scaring him off.

All three series that I selected featured "Boy Nerds" as the main characters, and although Shary's archetype suggests that nerds are expected to "transform" in order to get a girlfriend, none of the nerd characters in any of the three shows underwent this type of transformation. As previously mentioned, the scene where "Sensitive Athlete" Jeff tries to change Clay's Valentine's Day survey is an attempted "transformation" to get Clay a girlfriend, but it does not work. In fact, the program implies that if Clay was honest about liking video games, he would have matched with Hannah. Because the "Nerd" characters in these television shows are not expected to change in order to get the attention of their peers, these shifts might be indicative of the culture's growing acceptance of nerds.

Scenes with the bully character archetype, on the other hand, come across as cautionary tales. Although Nerds are the heroes in all three series, they are still depicted as outsiders who are either ostracized or taken advantage of for their skills. If such depictions send adolescent television viewers a message about the purpose of schooling, that message might be that enjoying school means sacrificing social life. All three programs, *13 Reasons Why*, *Young Sheldon*, and *Stranger Things* imply that the schooling experience may be rough for nerds, but that they may enjoy success and happiness later in life. There is even a scene in *13 Reasons Why* where Clay's father shares this exact message seated on the stoop in front of their house when he tells Clay about his experience in school. Clay's father explains that he too was ridiculed for being a nerd, but that he now enjoys his job as a professor at a local university, and is happy to

have a loving wife and child. Therefore, Shary's "Boy Nerd" archetype might be expanded to reflect these changes.

Another archetype that emerged from the data set was what I call the "Loner with a Camera." This character, like the nerd, is ostracized by the rest of the school population but shares no other characteristics. The main nerd characters in each program often had friends, usually other nerds. However, the "Loner with a Camera" is just that--often alone, and often with a camera. A character meeting this description is present in both *13 Reasons Why* and *Stranger Things*.

In charge of getting photos for the yearbook, Tyler Down in *13 Reasons Why* is often appears in scenes where he is taking photos of all of the goings-on at Liberty High School. He does not have any friends, and even when all of the students on Hannah's tapes meet up, Tyler is not welcome to join their meetings. Throughout the series, other students torment Tyler. Hannah puts Tyler on her tapes because he took pictures of her through her window at night. When Tyler is exposed by Hannah's tape, the other students on the tapes begin to treat Tyler poorly in addition to the students who already regularly bully him. As mentioned earlier in the section on *13 Reasons Why*, at the end of the series, Tyler obtains an arsenal of guns and ammo, supposedly to prepare for a school shooting.

In *Stranger Things*, Jonathan Byers, Will's brother, is portrayed as a loner and also carries a camera. He also gets in trouble with his peers for taking photos of Nancy without her knowledge. Other students' comments throughout the first season imply that Jonathan is creepy, and some of them even suspect him of killing his brother, Will.

In both series, the portrayals of the creepy "Loner with a Camera" characters Tyler may reflect cultural fears of voyeurism, where individuals are photographed or watched without the

subject's consent. Even though Tyler and Jonathan are both friendless and estranged by their peers, they are immensely different characters; Tyler seems to crave the attention of his peers while Jonathan is happy to isolate himself. Also, Jonathan is sensitive and kind toward his mother and his brother Will, and in one scene, he even recalls crying as a child when his father made him kill a bunny. Tyler, on the other hand, is angry at his school for not protecting him from his tormentors, and displays the potential for extreme violence though whether or not he takes out these aggressions on others remains to be seen. Although both shows came out in 2016, *Stranger Things* takes place in 1983. Thus, as I will later describe in my Discussion, the differences between these characters could be based on perceptions of how schooling has changed since the 1980s by representing how modern students may fear a loner character as fitting the profile of a school shooter.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

Viewing *13 Reasons Why*, *Young Sheldon*, and *Stranger Things* as “equipment for living” requires consideration of how their messages may be read by their audiences. Due to the popularity of all three programs, and given the prominence of adolescent television viewership cited earlier in the study, it can be reasonably assumed that a portion of these program’s audiences are adolescents. If as Brummet and Young suggests, Burke’s “literature as equipment for living” extends to film, I assert that the same is true of television. If this is the case, the analysis I have provided of my data provides some preliminary insight into my primary research question regarding what popular television programs may teach adolescents about the purpose of schooling and the schooling experience.

### **The Purpose of Schooling and the Schooling Experience**

In all three shows, *13 Reasons Why*, *Young Sheldon*, and *Stranger Things*, characters are rarely in a classroom setting where students are actually learning. In *13 Reasons Why*, several scenes take place in classrooms, but these scenes almost always feature students engaged deeply in whatever adolescent drama is relevant at the time. During class, sometimes students talk face to face, and other times they are communicating via cell phone or by passing notes. Even when a teacher notices these instances are occurring, they do nothing to stop the students or re-engage them in the lesson at hand. In *Young Sheldon*, teachers are frequently teaching content, but they seem bored or annoyed while doing so, and they are almost always interrupted by Sheldon. *Stranger Things* featured only one scene within a classroom environment, the one where Mr. Clark rambles on about an upcoming test as students file out, uninterested. Such scenes indicate that schools do not meet the range of needs of their students or that students are deeply

uninterested in learning. Of those who are naturally curious, the “Boy Nerds” who are the main characters in all three shows seem to do the majority of their learning outside of classes. Sheldon is too smart to learn anything new, and Mike, Lucas, and Dustin are merely waiting for their regular class to end so that they can play with new AV equipment. Clay, on the other hand, seems determined to do well in school until he sees the school as complicit in Hannah’s suicide, at which point his behavior at school rapidly changes and he begins challenging teachers and ditching classes.

Attitudes towards school are much more negative for the rest of the student character archetypes, except for “Popular Boys: Athletes/Jocks,” but even their schooling experience is primarily focused on sports rather than academic learning. *13 Reasons Why* in particular places significant focus on the honor and glory of being an athlete and highlights how the school celebrates an athlete’s triumphs and ignores their failings. In *Young Sheldon*, Medford High School places similar importance on its football team, as seen when Sheldon is accepted by his peers only when he helps the football team win games. Extracurricular activities are an undoubtedly important aspect of the schooling experience, even for the “less athletic types,” as noted by the principal in the fifth episode of *Stranger Things*.

Thus when taken together all three series suggest that the purpose of schooling seems to be less about academic learning and most about socializing and engaging in extracurriculars, whether those are sports or clubs. All three programs place little importance on classroom learning and instead focus on school as a social site. The schooling experience, to that end, is portrayed by these programs as a battle for popularity that some students choose to engage in and others do not. While all of the main characters in each program participate in some type of

school activity, which activity they choose seems to dictate how they are perceived by peers, and ultimately, how well they are treated by other students and sometimes even staff members.

All three series, however, do not designate participation in different activities as the sole factor that peer groups are divided. For example, athletes are often portrayed as inherently different from nerds, thus suggesting that these differences put necessarily put these groups at odds with each other. This implied understanding is further complicated by the fact that the main characters in all three programs are “Boy Nerds,” which may skew the audience’s understanding of the schooling experience for other student groups. In other words, these programs may be totally unfair to athletes, portraying them often as bullies and idiots. Such representations may harm athletes or invalidate their experiences. Although perpetuating group stereotypes such as the Nerd and the Athlete may be necessary to create dramatic conflict in some cases, if television is equipment for living, then these representations may be normative for adolescents.

### **Cultural Attitudes on Secondary Education**

While television programming has the potential to teach adolescents about the purpose of schooling and the schooling experience, it also may reflect and communicate broad cultural views on education. Television writers are not adolescents anymore, but they presumably attended a school like the ones they write about. Attending a traditional public school is a common experience, with roughly 90% of the population attending public school over the last two decades (Jennings). Thus, depictions of public school in the media reinforce the population’s attitudes about education and may continue to shape their understanding of public education even after they have left school. While these television series may inform students understanding of the purpose of school, they also describe how American culture views education.

As previously discussed, Dalton and Linder's book *Teacher TV* tracks teacher portrayals on television since the 1950s and establishes how cultural circumstances helped shape how teachers were portrayed on television. *Teacher TV* covers television programs up through 2008, stating that programs in the 2000s focused on embracing multiculturalism. The same trend continues with *13 Reasons Why* in particular, because the show features characters of varying races. The program makes efforts to include a diverse cast by including African American and Asian students and teachers. However, none of the *main* characters in *13 Reasons Why* are people of color. People of color are not absent from *Young Sheldon* and *Stranger Things*, either, though perhaps because both series take place in the '80s, fewer examples of multiculturalism exist in those particular programs, as each only features one character that is not white. In terms of gender diversity, *13 Reasons Why* features several homosexual characters, and such characters are becoming increasingly visible in modern television. However, the main characters in all three series featured in this study are straight white males. These programs reflect more than just a push towards diversity in television, however, as they also represent America's current problems and fears and thus serve as "representative anecdotes" (Burke 59-60, 323-325).

One such "representative anecdote" is demonstrated by references to gun violence in *13 Reasons Why*, which takes place in 2017 and came out on Netflix in 2016. The program is not shy about tackling controversial issues and uses the lens of public education to reflect a culture that is becoming more candid about the issues of consent and sexual assault, bullying, and the culture of the mass shooting. As of this writing, there have been 11 "rampage school shootings" and 25 fatal school shootings since the massacre at Columbine High School in April 1999, affecting more than 150,000 students (Cox and Rich). A "rampage school shooting" is defined by Katherine Newman as 1) taking place on a "school related public stage before an audience 2)

involve multiple victims, some of whom are shot simply for their symbolic significance or at random and 3) involve one or more shooters who are students or former students of the school” (50). The news media covers such events for days and even weeks after the shooting, creating a basis for heated public debate. Schools now train for active shooter scenarios and have plans in place should a shooting occur. In the last episode of *13 Reasons Why*, Tyler, whom I previously referred to as the Loner with a Camera, appears to be planning one of these attacks, as we see him buying a gun off someone in a street and packing his arsenal into a hidden compartment in a chest in his room. In one scene, Tyler even hangs photographs he took of other students in the dark room, perhaps representing a hit list. Notably, this incident does not occur in Jay Asher’s young adult novel *Thirteen Reasons Why*; the television program added Tyler’s mysterious procurement of guns, as well as a suicide attempt by another character: a gunshot wound to the head. The 2007 book did not include any gun violence at all. The fact that the show added these references to guns reflects the ongoing conversations about guns in America, especially where they relate to schools and adolescents.

After every rampage school shooting, lawmakers and citizens engage in a gun control debate. One criticism of American gun laws is that guns and ammunition are too easy for teens to purchase. Though unrelated to school shootings, the teens in *Stranger Things* also buy a variety of dangerous items from a pawn shop including ammunition for a gun and a bear trap. The man working at the counter asks them what they plan to do with these items, to which they reply honestly: “monster hunting.” The cashier shrugs and sells Nancy and Jonathan the items anyway. Even though *Stranger Things* takes place in the 1980s, its 2016 release means this scene may also be a comment on the perennial ease of access to guns and ammunition in this country. Even

though not a direct political comment, the scene in the pawn shop reflects a culture that actively engages in conversations about teens' access to weapons.

Bullying is another prominent issue that adolescents face in school, one that also shows up in all three television programs studied. According to a study done by the National Center for Education Statistics and Bureau of Justice Statistics, “about 21% of students ages 12-18 experience bullying” (“Frequency of Bullying”). The Centers for Disease Control’s study on cyberbullying estimates 16% of high school students were bullied electronically in the 12 months prior to the 2015 survey (“Frequency of Cyberbullying”). Parents, teachers, the news media, and lawmakers have all engaged in conversations regarding bullying and its effects, as bullying is often blamed for teen suicides and sometimes for rampage school shootings. Although all three programs I studied depicted some bullying, *13 Reasons Why* pays particular attention to the issue. After Hannah’s suicide, her parents pursue a lawsuit against the school because they believe the school knew Hannah was being bullied and did not act.

The news media sometimes draw connections from bullying to attempted suicide, and the CDC reports that bullying victims are two to nine times more likely to consider suicide than those who aren’t bullied (“Suicide Among Youth”). The same CDC report states that suicide is the third leading cause of death in children between the ages of 10 and 24. *13 Reasons Why* depicts both in-person and cyberbullying and effectively communicates to its audience that bullying is the main impetus not only for Hannah’s death, but for Tyler’s supposed school shooting plan. Notably, both students visit the counselor Mr. Porter, previously identified as fitting the “Inept Bureaucrat” archetype. Both students describe how other students have treated them poorly, and in both cases, Mr. Porter fails to help his students. Mr. Porter also implies in both scenes that it is the students’ fault these things have happened to them.

Another theme that emerges from two of the programs I studied may reflect cultural fears that the public schooling system does not effectively serve all of its students. As previously discussed, *13 Reasons Why* focuses particularly on how some student groups are valued over others, especially athletes. In the final episode, one character even says the athletes are “told they are the only thing of value at school, and the rest of us are merely here to cheer them on.” In my previous analysis of *Young Sheldon*, I noted a similar theme. However, beyond the school’s general celebration of athletes in these series, many school staff members behave in ways that suggest that they care little for the students they serve. From the coach who teaches social studies playing movies so that he can nap in *13 Reasons Why*, to the group of teachers discussing how to get a student out of their classroom in *Young Sheldon*, these narratives suggest that teachers and staff in schools care little for the students they serve. Due to the prominence of the “Inept Bureaucrat” and “Bad Teacher” archetypes in both *13 Reasons Why* and *Young Sheldon*, both Liberty High School and Medford High School come across as uncaring and cynical. Only *Stranger Things* offers a counterpoint to this archetype in Mr. Clark, while the overall purpose of the school in *Stranger Things* is its role in the community, rather than as a backdrop for social conflict. *Stranger Things* also shows a teacher who enjoys his job, a feature the other programs are lacking.

A pervasive cultural attitude about teachers suggests that teachers do not go into the profession because that’s what they really want to do, but because they were not good enough for the profession or field they aspire to, which is exemplified by the idiom, “those who can, do; those who can’t, teach.” The attitude that teachers do not choose to become teachers is reflected especially in *Young Sheldon*. Apart from frequent disparaging comments from teachers, one scene from the sixth episode stands out in particular, where a science teacher introduces his

former college roommate who works for NASA. The science teacher says, “I know what you’re thinking, these guys were roomies. How does one go on to be a fancy scientist at NASA and the other’s teaching freshman science at a public high school?” To which his friend from NASA responds by telling the class, “One of those roomies was busy studying while the other was out chasing high school girls.” The embarrassed science teacher notes that all of the girls were over 18 before giving his friend the floor. This brief moment does nothing to serve the plot, but it sets Sheldon’s science teacher up as a failed scientist, rather than someone who chose the teaching profession. The scene also implies that the teacher may be someone of questionable moral character, given his insistence that the girls in question were of legal age.

In many cases, however, the cynical viewpoints espoused by *13 Reasons Why* and *Young Sheldon* do not reflect what really happens in America’s classrooms. Their depictions of teacher characters do not show the numerous professionals who have dedicated their lives to teaching children, who view their professions as a calling. Only *Stranger Things* depicts a more realistic school with more realistic students, teachers, and staff. As I demonstrated through my analysis, most of the characters in *Stranger Things* fit loosely into established archetypes; yet they fit less cleanly than the characters in other shows because some of the adolescent characters in *Stranger Things* evolve from a standard archetype at the beginning of the series into more complex characters as the episodes progress. For example, Nancy, who I coded as a “Girl Nerd” at the start of the series might be coded as a “Rebel” by the end of the season; however, even then she does not fit Shary’s description perfectly, because she never clashes with the teachers at her school.

Likewise, the middle school boys in *Stranger Things* are certainly classified as “Boy Nerds,” the series focuses far less on how their status as nerds hurts their social life, and far more

on how their interests make them uniquely qualified to assist in finding Will. For example, their expertise in *Dungeons and Dragons* gives them the right background knowledge and vocabulary to understand the "Upside Down" and the monster that lives inside it.

Similarly, their teacher, Scott Clark undoubtedly meets the criteria of the "Good Teacher," but again, he does not fit cleanly into Dalton's archetype either and is portrayed as a more complex character. Although he is an average teacher, he is liked and respected by the main characters, and the combination of his scientific knowledge and the students' curiosity is ultimately what helps the group solve the mystery and rescue Will from the "Upside Down." The representations of students and teachers in *Stranger Things* are not only more realistic, but they send a more positive message to audiences about schools, and the complexity of individual students and teachers. If television indeed serves as "equipment for living" for adolescents, creators of television content might further explore how to push the limits of established archetypes in order to present more realistic representations of students, teachers, and school staff.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

Students in America's classrooms may look to a variety of narratives in order to guide their expectations for schooling, and older Americans may also view the current schooling system through the lens of popular culture. As such, this study has implications for a variety of groups, from the adolescents and adults who watch television programs featuring schools and the television writers and producers who create them. However, because this study is intended primarily for teachers, the following section aims to answer my final two research questions: what might teachers gain from viewing television depictions of education, and how might an awareness of these representations be used as a teaching tool?

### **Implications for Teachers**

The programs in this study represent America's culture in a variety of ways, but their representations of the American schooling system indicate attitudes towards education that may be frustrating for teachers who work hard to teach America's children. While programs like *Stranger Things* push the boundaries of archetypes and present a more holistic view of students and staff in schools, programs like *13 Reasons Why* and *Young Sheldon* continue to enforce stereotypical views regarding separation among peer groups and to portray those working in schools as inept, incompetent, and even cruel. Observations regarding television portrayals of schools, staff, and students could be used in the classroom to start conversations about the nature of these portrayals and their positive and negative consequences.

Teachers might engage students in conversations about media portrayals of schooling situations in both formal and informal ways. For instance, I see an opportunity for the findings of this study to be incorporated into an English class as part of a lesson or unit on archetypal

characters. Students could also discuss whether or not the media has been “equipment for living” in their lives by studying their own media habits and analyzing how the narratives they watch and read have shaped their expectations and behavior. In my personal experience, students use labels to define their peer groups, and this study provides an opportunity to discuss how students apply these labels to themselves and their peers. Such a lesson or unit gives teachers the opportunity to ask their students to challenge stereotypes and may even provide some interesting and engaging prompts for narrative writing. Additionally, methods for teaching students to formally and critically analyze film can easily be applied to television and other media, as John Golden asserts in *Reading in the Dark: Using Film as a Tool in the English Classroom*. Therefore, even if teachers do not have a unit on television study, they can use other methods to foster conversations about the depiction of schools in media, such as Shary’s student archetypes and Dalton’s staff archetypes.

Teachers who do not have immediate curricular opportunities to incorporate lessons on archetypes can have informal conversations with students about what television shows they are watching at home and what those shows say about them as students. These discussions are easily incorporated into shorter activities like warm-ups or “brain breaks.” Of course not every teacher has time or curricular flexibility to fully implement these discussions in their classroom, but every teacher does have opportunities to teach their students to be critical consumers of media by questioning and challenging what they see in television and movies.

### **Further Research**

When I began this project, I noted a lack of research in the area of educational representations in television, and thus had to pull my established archetypes from scholars who primarily studied feature-length films. My study might be used as a springboard to develop a list

of archetypes that are unique to television. As I previously stated, I found that the movie archetypes were mostly applicable to television, but that other emerging archetypes in television, including "the Bully" and the "Loner with a Camera" archetypes I discussed in my findings that have not been mentioned in research on feature films, I also see potential to add a list of archetypes specific to school counselors based on what I saw in *13 Reasons Why* as well as other programs I have watched outside the realm of this study.

Another potential area of future research is an investigation archetypal spaces within the physical school space as well. In my analysis of the three series, I noticed that certain scenes tend to take place in particular places in the school: for example, the bathroom in the school building is often a space of isolation where characters go to avoid peers and teachers. Additionally, I noticed that scenes taking place in school cafeterias frequently feature instances of social rejection. I saw some evidence in all three shows that physical spaces may be archetypal in much the same ways as characters.

Researchers also have opportunities to continue to look at how television represents the culture of education in America. NBC released a program titled *A.P. Bio* on February 1, 2018. According to NBC's website, the program features a "disgraced Harvard philosophy scholar" who is "forced" to return to his hometown and teach Advanced Placement Biology. The description of the show goes on to state that the teacher realizes he can use his students to his advantage, and also alludes to the principal's inability to control this teacher's inappropriate behavior. Based on the description of *A.P. Bio*, its representations of teachers is similar to *Young Sheldon*, further promoting the idea that public school teachers only become teachers because they are "forced" to by their inability to reasonably succeed in their first, more prestigious career choice. The description of the principal in *A.P. Bio* also fits Dalton's "Principal as Buffoon"

archetype that I did not observe in the programs I chose. Programs like *A.P. Bio* provide the potential to expand this study, as they may utilize the same archetypes studied here, expand them, or provide new examples.

Viewers of television, of course, have the opportunity to “vote” for the kind of content they want to see by watching programs that challenge the status quo. In the meantime, we all should become more critical viewers of television by starting conversations with teachers and students about how all of us might more critically use media representations of schooling as “equipment for living.”

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## Appendix

Table A1

Student Archetypal Characters		
Archetype (Author)	Actions and attributes	Notes
The Boy Nerd (Shary 38-45)	Excel at academics and are “ostracized, ridiculed, physically and socially inept and desexualized.” Expected to “transform” through some abandonment of academics in order to gain social acceptance. Can be taken advantage of for their skills.	
Girl Nerd (Shary 46-50)	“Smart, comely, talented, caring” and “resilient”, but again are expected to “transform,” usually physically, in order to gain the attention of a non-nerd male. Worth is judged by whether or not they have a boyfriend that others view as socially acceptable (usually a sensitive athlete)	
Juvenile Delinquent (Shary 50-60)	“Used to demonstrate that crime is not a proper means of acceptance,” must reform to gain acceptance (or they die before this is possible). Teachers are often the “target of their anger,” and they are often people of color and/or people of low socioeconomic status	
The Rebel (Shary 60-73)	Best defined by their desire to avoid conforming --	

	experience “angst generated by the social or physical tensions of being in school.” Rebels are usually white.	
Popular girl (Shary 75-82)	“Pretty, well-dressed” and wealthy. Their popularity must be maintained, and is usually threatened by “some mishap or misunderstanding” before the popular girl realizes that popularity is a “liability, rather than an asset.”	
Popular Boy - Sensitive Athlete (Shary 82-96)	May be first stereotyped as the dumb and possibly mean jock--but proves to be “ambitious, determined, and sometimes smart.”	
Popular Athlete/Jock (Shary 82-96)	Only positive attribute seems to be athletic skill; they are dumb and/or mean. Usually only supporting characters rather than main characters.	

Table A2

School Staff Archetypal Characters		
Archetype (Author)	Actions and attributes	Notes
Administration: Inept Bureaucrats (Bulman 39 and Dalton 129-130)	“Uncaring, cynical, and incompetent.” Part of a narrative that shows the school as “a selfish, inept, wasteful, and uncaring bureaucracy.”	
Principal as Buffoon (Dalton 126-129)	“Foolish” and “Bumbling” “clueless” and “hopelessly out of touch.” Easily manipulated and seen as pushovers.	

Principal as Autocrat (Dalton 130-133)	“Authoritarian and almost dictatorial.” Seen by students as “sinister” and sometimes “evil.” They do whatever they can to establish and maintain control.	
Principal as Caring Pragmatist (Dalton 133-134)	Competent and kind; “gets the job done but feels tensions between budgets and administrative supervisors.” Concerned about the needs of teachers and students.	
The Good Teacher - Hollywood Model (Dalton 26-41)	Outsider who is personally involved with students, learns from their students, personalizes their curriculum, and experiences tension with their administration.	
The Bad Teacher - Hollywood Model (Dalton 62-80)	The antithesis of the good teacher--seen as “embedded deeply” into the school structure. Bad teachers are “bored by students, afraid of students, or eager to dominate students.” Fits into “administration plans to control students,” and “follow a standardized curriculum in order to avoid personal contact with students.”	