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Northumbria University Child Psychologist gives insight into Hollywood psychodrama

A Northumbria University academic and child psychologist has given his expert opinion on a new psychodrama film starring Maggie Gyllenhaal, which sees her form an obsessive and predatory relationship with a kindergarten student.

The Tyneside Cinema is currently screening "The Kindergarten Teacher" which was released this month and has had screenings at Sundance and Toronto International Film Festivals.

Academy Award nominated Gyllenhaal, from the acclaimed family of filmmakers and entertainers of the same name, stars as Lisa Spinelli, a kindergarten teacher and aspiring-poet fed up with her career, her oblivious husband and teenage kids who largely ignore her. When she discovers that a five-year-old in her class may be a poetic prodigy, Lisa becomes fascinated by him and as such tries to protect him from what she believes are neglectful parents. She soon finds herself risking her career and family to nurture, or acquire, his talent.

Dr Markku Wood, who was invited by the promoters of the film, Bird's Eye View, to give his expert opinion on its themes, is a Senior Lecturer and Consultant Clinical Child Psychologist at Northumbria, and leads the University's Children and Young People's Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (CYP-IAPT) project. The scheme is developing and upskilling mental health practitioners who give mental health support to children and young people in schools, the NHS and voluntary sector.

Dr Wood, who works within Northumbria's Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, joined an expert panel staged after the film to share his insight and experience with Tyneside Cinema audiences alongside film critic [Kaleem Aftab](#) and poet [Be Manzini](#).

He said: "I really enjoyed being part of the panel. The film describes the story of a kindergarten teacher who becomes obsessed with a student who she believes is a child poet genius. She continually violates boundaries and ethics by becoming too close to the child. These boundary violations are small at first, but then progress to the point where the teacher dissociates from her duty of care and loses insight into what she is doing. It shows how, within the human condition, when you become obsessed with something you can lose contact with the reality of what is happening from an outsider's perspective."

The panel was organised by Bird's Eye View, an agency that campaigns for gender equality in the film industry, as part of their Reclaim The Frame project, which aims to grow audiences for films told from the female point of view. As well as starring Gyllenhaal the film is directed by Sara Colangelo.

Dr Wood added: "The implication in the film is this could happen to anyone, it was the 'perfect storm' for the teacher. She is unsatisfied with her job, her career and herself as a poetic hopeful. She's already vulnerable and in the midst having a midlife crisis, There are gradual tipping points that take her behaviour beyond what is expected of her in a position of trust."

He believes the five-year-old boy in the film may have had an autistic spectrum condition or could have been neglected, although this was never addressed as part of the film's narrative.

"The child shows almost no emotion during the film. I wonder if the film makers were implying that his genius might have been part of an autistic spectrum condition or whether the child had indeed been neglected. Lack of socially appropriate emotional expression can be present in both circumstances.

"Hollywood often portrays individuals on the autistic spectrum in a very stereotypical manner such as in the 1988 American drama Rain Man, however the presentation of the condition is often a lot more subtle."

The Kindergarten Teacher is showing at the Tyneside Cinema until the end of March. Bird's Eye View returns to the cinema in April with another female-directed film yet to be confirmed.

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