Taking Lulu seriously: what we can learn from To Sir with Love

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper seeks to examine ways in which the film To Sir with Love illustrates several longstanding issues and tensions related to the sociology of education. It is also aims to show how this film (and, by implication, other popular films) can be used to advance understanding among students of educational leadership, organization theory, and the sociology of education.

Design/methodology/approach – Approaching its 40th anniversary, To Sir with Love is generally considered to be a classic portrayal of a teacher’s struggle to engage a group of disengaged and rebellious students in a working class London school. Yet the film also highlights longstanding issues and tensions peculiar to schooling and teaching. From sociological and social-psychological perspectives, this paper examines this film’s underlying meanings and suggests how it can be used to advance understanding among students of educational leadership, organization theory, and the sociology of education.

Findings – Although the paper focuses on teacher-student-peer social interaction, it largely leaves issues of race and class for others to address.

Practical implications – Implicitly and explicitly, the paper highlights the value of using popular film to promote understanding of problems related to educational policy and leadership.

Originality/value – A lively discussion, an attempt to construct (rather than deconstruct) new meanings from a classic text.

Keywords Teaching, Film, Organizational behaviour, Educational institutions, Ethics

Paper type Conceptual paper

Over years of teaching graduate courses in education, I’ve made it a practice to use popular film to illustrate important concepts and problems surrounding schools as organizations and social systems. Some of these films, such as Stand and Deliver and Lean on Me, portray the struggles of teachers or principals swimming against and struggling to change a school’s cultural current. Other “non-school” films highlight leader decision making during times of great stress. For example, the World War II film Twelve O’clock High powerfully reveals the tensions and connections between “rational” or “task oriented” and “natural” or “relationship oriented” views of organizational leadership. The Caine Mutiny, with its surprise ending, prompts students to consider the meaning and importance of “bottom up” leadership, even in rigid hierarchical settings. Like case study, but with the power of sound and image, film challenges and expands our assumptions about the difficulties and possibilities of educational practice and organizational leadership.

It seems a bit surprising then that relatively little attention has been devoted to film analysis as a way of understanding the connections between educational theory and practice. Though some studies, especially those working from a critical theory
perspective, take aim at the one-dimensional or even “disturbing” images contained in many popular films (see, for example, Smith, 1999; Giroux, 2002), such approaches often suffer from their own ardor to deconstruct and seemingly de-legitimate important ideas and meanings embedded within the targeted films. In contrast, other studies focus on the ways film can be used as a teaching tool to inform and enhance our understanding of educational theory. English and Steffy (1997), for example, highlight the value of having education students analyze and discuss the meaning created by films with respect to leader-follower relationships, ethics and values, and values and actions. Based on an analysis of 48 films portraying school principals and headmasters, Thomas (1998) argues that film offers students “extraordinary insights” and “greater sensitivity” to the daily challenges with which school leaders must grapple. As with case study, but with more room for detail and nuance, film offers a “longitudinal view of a leader and decisions in context” (English and Steffy, 1997, p. 107) and represents a tool that is keenly suited for tying theory to practice.

*To Sir with Love*, soon to celebrate its 40th anniversary, is distinguished precisely by its presentation of a richly detailed longitudinal set of experiences and problems that relate not just to school leadership, but also to the entire sphere of our understanding about schools as organizations – unique organizations with distinctive patterns of formal and informal structure and social interaction. Used as a teaching tool, in courses ranging from sociology of education to educational administration and leadership, the film compels viewers to react, discuss, create meaning, and to compare and contrast their interpretations with established theory.

This article highlights the many ways in which *To Sir with Love* reveals and expands our theoretical understandings about life and work inside schools. Drawing on studies by educational theorists such as Willard Waller, James Coleman, Dan Lortie, and others, the purpose here is to gather meaning from the film and illustrate its value for sparking inquiry about some of the enduring (though often less obvious) challenges facing schools and teachers.

**Background and synopsis**

Written, produced, and directed by James Clavell, *To Sir with Love* is a film adaptation of E.R. Braithwaite’s novel depicting his own experience as an African born teacher working in a London school. On first viewing, one may fall into the trap of perceiving its plot as relatively trite or unrealistic, e.g. a story of teacher Mark Thackeray’s struggle and eventual success at winning the respect and affection of a class of rebellious working class senior students in a rundown east side London school. But while this description fits in a nutshell, it obscures the fact that the film is really a cluster of stories and meanings that emerge and interact over the course of the film.

To begin with, Thackeray (“Sir”) doesn’t really want to be a teacher; for him it’s a temporary gig that puts food on his table while he searches for the elusive engineering job for which he has been trained. For another thing, it’s clear that his first efforts at teaching, far from resembling any effort to win over (i.e. “persuade”) students, look a lot like a regiment of strict custodial pupil control. Though he’s been told that any sort of corporal punishment is forbidden, this doesn’t prevent him from using ridicule and physical intimidation, nor from brandishing the large hunk of wood that had been a desk leg, up to the point that his students surreptitiously and maliciously sawed it off. Finally, it’s also clear that his students are attempting to win over (i.e. “defeat”)
Thackeray in similar fashion, using the tools at their command; disrespect, ridicule, brinkmanship, and general resistance. It is against this backdrop that Thackeray is compelled to make decisions, not so much aimed at becoming a more effective teacher, but at simply protecting his mental health. As a more experienced female colleague tells him, “They’re good kids, mostly. But if you don’t solve ‘em, they’ll break you”.

At the point in the film where the students have nearly “broken” him, at the point where he realizes that they’ve turned him into a dark, ugly, and untenable classroom figure, Thackeray decides to abandon textbook lessons and replace them with a strategy of simply allowing students to ask or talk about any topic they choose. Though Thackeray understands that students would likely choose topics dealing with life, love, marriage, sex, and popular culture, he may not have imagined that their questions would often be thrown down as a challenge to his own authority. In opening this door and allowing these questions to be raised, however, Thackeray gradually realizes a quality of interaction with and influence over these students that was previously denied him. His problems are not over by any means, but for the time being his problems have shifted away from his own survival toward that of his soon-to-be working adult citizen students.

What ideas and messages, then, are we to glean from this 40-year-old film? Though many students find the film as entertaining and inspiring as I do, part of my challenge as their professor has been to move them beyond surface reactions to dress and language differences and beyond an initial tendency to find the story “corny”, “trite”, or “unrealistic”. The next several sections of this article tackle this problem by pointing to examples where deeper meanings can be found.

The power of student culture
In his classic work, *The Sociology of Teaching* (Waller, 1932), Willard Waller described school culture as a “curious mélange of the work of young artisans making culture for themselves and old artisans making culture for the young”. Though we expect the “old artisan” teachers to convey strong social and intellectual meanings and messages to students, we sometimes forget that students have meanings and messages of their own. In many instances, in fact, the young artisans actually manufacture culture for the old. Their power to do so flows from their number, their interests, their energy, and from the fact that “school” represents their primary arena of social activity. As Bidwell (1965) suggests, while school is a “way of life” and a place of total personal involvement for students, teachers experience it in a partial or segmental fashion, often oblivious to or blindsided by the ways in which student culture shapes and reshapes daily school life for students and teachers alike.

In his study of high school social structure, for example, Gordon (1957) found that teachers were highly sensitive to status differences among students, responding more positively and “affectively” to higher status students. Just four years later and working a similar vein, Coleman (1961) reported the capacity for an engaged student sub-culture to steer the focus of school activity away from academic achievement, leading to a tendency for teachers to award higher grades to lower ability students. Several more recent studies reveal teachers’ willingness to negotiate academic standards and adjust lessons and expectations to accommodate “indifferent, disengaged, and defiant students” (Sedlak et al., 1986; see also Powell et al., 1985; Sizer, 1984).
In *To Sir with Love*, the students at North Quay Secondary School certainly seem “indifferent, disengaged, and defiant”. But this is really just a teacher or adult perspective. In fact, most of the students are totally involved in school, but their most salient involvement is only marginally under the control of teachers. It is revealed through a language of music, dance, fun, and defiance; the products of their trade. Their interaction with adults occurs largely in forms ranging from benign passivity to master brinkmanship. Student life at North Quay, as it is at many American schools today, is rich with activity and energy but largely enigmatic and “unsolvable” to adults.

How, then, are we to interpret Sir’s mid-film revelation that his problem stems from having treated his students “like kids” instead of adults; that the solution to his problem lies in teaching students “about life” rather than the dreary material of books and chalkboards? Will we say that he has solved the class, or that they have solved him? Will we conclude that he has devised a more effective set of activities and expectations, or that he has watered down or shifted his goals to suit his own needs?

The power of psychic rewards

Another sharp observation delivered by Waller (1932) dealt with the tension with which teachers must grapple in order to remain loyal to the academic norms and standards of colleagues, while still having to compete with colleagues for the favor of students. For Waller, loyalty was manifest in “wounds inflicted on the enemy”, while student favor was obtained by “relaxing academic standards” (Waller, 1932, p. 358). Bidwell (1965) advanced this idea, noting that although teachers are expected to treat students in a bureaucratic and universalistic fashion, the day-to-day realities of classroom life compel them to forge relationships with students that are affective and personalistic.

Making this balancing act more difficult is the parallel tendency for teachers to need and pursue what Lortie (1975) coined as the “psychic rewards” of teaching. As Lortie pointed out, compared to monetary and ancillary rewards, psychic rewards are not only more emotionally salient, but are also more directly related to teacher behavior. When psychic rewards become increasingly scarce, Lortie argued that teachers would become willing to accept “indicators of partial effectiveness”, to change or lower their classroom goals.

But what kinds of teacher behavior can we expect when psychic rewards become replaced by “psychic punishments”? Most of us who have taught, especially in secondary schools, know well the anguished emotional and physical effects that accompany the real or imagined perception that our students hate us. The anguish is even greater in the absence of strong collegial or institutional norms that help sanction and reinforce a clearly defined course of teacher action. In *To Sir with Love*, the only rules of thumb seem to be, keep students under control – without any sort of corporal punishment – and “teach them whatever you can”. Given this weak and uncertain normative and technical backdrop, it’s no wonder Sir lays awake at night worrying over just how to accomplish these tasks.

Nor is it surprising that Sir’s eventual solution rests in a sort of cultural exchange with his students, an attempt to attract them to himself, his ideas, and to his world by venturing into theirs. Though so many teachers over the decades have told their classes, “I’m not running a popularity contest!” their effectiveness is based to a
substantial degree on persuading students to “like” or at least “appreciate” them and
the goods they are trying to sell. As Lortie (1975) reported, teachers’ professional
reputations among their peers are often expressed in terms of how many students
“love” them or “respect” them. But the pursuit of good rapport can be a very risky
enterprise, as Lortie also noted how teachers frown on their peers who obtain it
unfairly (e.g. by being “too easy”). There are other risks as well. Even a
well-intentioned teacher may, for example, wind up in trouble for meeting with
students outside of school. Consider also the teacher in Blackboard Jungle who reaches
out to students by means of music, only to witness his beloved jazz records (and, with
them, his own persona) being smashed about his classroom.

Educational therapy and goal displacement
At this point it seems reasonable to ask whether To Sir with Love is a film about a
courageous teacher’s inspirational struggle to win over the hearts and minds of
rebellious students, or about his decision to largely abandon academic goals in favor of
meeting his students’ social needs. It can be viewed both ways, of course, but the
tension between the two interpretations seems quite striking. Sir’s students appear to
have a plethora of social needs. They are rude and unkempt. They know little about
taking care of themselves in the adult world. Their best hopes appear to lie in menial
work and fractured marriages. They’re angry with their families, their lives, and with
their world, but have virtually no idea as to how to cope other than by flashing anger at
the adults around them. One way for these students to overcome this problem is to
acquire the knowledge and skill needed for further schooling or for obtaining work
beyond the level of their parents. Although this solution is known to many teachers, it
can be viewed as so obscure, arduous, and distasteful by disaffected teens that teachers
may search for less daunting, more psychically rewarding alternatives.

One such alternative might be called educational therapy; engaging students on a
social level, inviting their questions, exploring their own interests, needs, hopes, and
fears. This strategy has several benefits for teachers and its use in many urban and
socio-economically challenged schools is not surprising. For one thing, in a classroom
setting, educational therapy helps re-focus student attention toward the teacher,
allowing teachers to at least temporarily regain control of the class by launching an
appeal to students’ interests. For another, it offers the potential to tear down walls of
resistance between adults and students and an opportunity for an exchange of
meaning between their cultures. A third benefit lies in the flow of psychic rewards that
are often generated for teachers and students alike. Yet another benefit lies in the fact
that unlike most academic interaction, where evidence of failure (in the form of test
scores or grades) is sharply quantifiable and manifest, the results of social interaction
are often uncertain, ambiguous, and open to teacher interpretation. Success is always a
possibility and failure need seldom be assumed.

After his apparent shift from academic to social goals, Sir experiences all of these
benefits. Listening and learning, his students seem better off as well. We see cooking
lessons, a successful museum field trip, and the presumptive peer leader, Denham, at
least for the time being, forced to share status and influence with Sir. The situation
appears to belie Robert Hutchins’ (1953) argument that school efforts to respond to the
ever increasing number of student needs and interests are like a drowning man trying
to save himself by drinking a great deal of water. Based on this film, it would seem that
schools and teachers might, in some circumstances, be able to save themselves by riding a wave of student culture. But Hutchins’ remark is on target if schools are unable to steer their students toward understanding and managing the realities of life in adult society. When schools fail at this, students and adults alike will quickly begin to wonder, “what is the point of having this school at all?” For Sir, as for schools and teachers in similar straits today, this is a critical issue (and one to which we will soon return).

**Student change, school effectiveness**

In his autobiography, *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez (1982) argues that especially for “ghetto” youth, education implies alienation from one’s prior way of life. Education, when effective, changes students and separates them from the life they previously enjoyed. It is a “long, unglamorous, even demeaning process – *a nurturing never natural to the person one was before one entered the classroom*” (Rodriguez, 1982, p. 68, original italics). For Rodriguez, the true source of schools’ ineffectiveness lies in their inability or unwillingness to induce this change. If we allow that schools will sometimes shift their emphasis to engaging the social meanings constructed by young student artisans, we must also conclude that this process can only succeed if schools also challenge these meanings and lead students to reject a great many of them. In Sir’s words, as he relates a bit of his life story to his class, “You can even change your speech”.

Of course, Sir is telling his students this after having established with them slightly more than a modicum of currency. This process was neither easy nor gentle. Indeed, it began in an “unglamorous and demeaning” fashion, with Sir challenging the girls (“no man likes a slut for long...”) and boys (“I’ve seen garbage collectors who are cleaner”) alike. Having begun with hard-edged realities, Sir can move toward gentler, subtler ones. In so doing, Sir performs like one who has reversed the story line of the *West Side Story* number, *Gee, Officer Krupke*[1].

“*But what about Mr Weston?*” a student demands, inquiring about a particularly unpleasant and unkempt teacher. “*Mr Weston is not your teacher*”, Sir responds. “I’m the one to criticize if I fail to maintain the standards I ask of you.” Thus begins a new theme within the film, wherein students begin to imitate Sir’s behavior. During the daily noontime dance session, a boy addresses his female classmate familiarly known as “Babs” as “Miss Pegg”. Other boys begin to clean up a bit. Having been persuaded by his students to schedule a museum field trip, on the appointed day Sir jokes that he can’t recognize his clean and neatly dressed students.

Having failed, perhaps, as a strong academic role model, Sir gradually gains success as a life model for his students. This process remains uneasy and uncomfortable for students, however, as evidenced when during one of Sir’s kitchen lessons a puzzled boy tells him, “*Oh, I don’t understand you a bit, Sir. I mean, you’re a toff and you ain’t!*” A girl tries to explain: “*Sir, what he means is, well, blimey, well, I can’t sort of put it into words or anything, but...*”

“*Well, Sir*”, interrupts Miss Pegg. “*You’re like us, but you ain’t, I mean you’re not. It’s kind of scary, but nice. You know what I mean, don’t you?*”

Hesitating for a moment, Sir responds, “*Well, uh, I don’t know how to answer you except to say that I teach you truths. My truths. Yeah, and it is kind of scary, dealing...*
with the truth. Scary and dangerous. Now, have you ever had a salad with almonds and grapes and tomatoes and lettuce and pineapple?"

**The authenticity of moral learning**

More than fruit and life skill, Sir is tossing something else in his salad, and that’s the scary and dangerous part. As Durkheim and other theorists on moral education have recognized, part of “making culture for the young” involves a process of transmitting and transplanting moral principles across generations. But the more alienated the younger generation grows from the older, the scarier and more dangerous this task becomes – as much for teachers (who sometimes avoid it) as for students. In less fragile settings, schools can occasionally repeat and reinforce moral rules learned at home. But to the extent the rules have been poorly taught or learned at home, schools may need to devote more energy to the task. Teachers will be increasingly called on to act as moral agents and to assume what Bryk and Driscoll (1988) called an “extended role” in the lives of students. For Durkheim, this involved not simply invoking moral rules, but also explaining them, applying them, and allowing students to sometimes wrestle with them. Here lies the risky irony. This kind of untethered moral learning calls on schools to permit a certain degree of authentic moral drama to occur in daily school life (Shouse, 1996, 2004). To the degree schools seek to remove it from the scene (for example, through excessively rigid rule enforcement, “zero tolerance”, etc.) they lose their chance to explain, grapple, and teach in any sort of enduring fashion.

In the latter half of *To Sir with Love* we see several instances of loosely controlled moral drama. By positioning himself within these events, Sir discovers tremendous opportunities to teach. The first instance occurs when a student (Potter) threatens to beat a bullying physical education teacher (Mr Bell) with a broken bench leg. It is to Sir’s credit that another student, instead of simply waiting for the fun to begin, has the wherewithal to race through the hall to summon his help. Sir arrives just in time to save the unsavory gym teacher. In a scene shortly thereafter, Sir returns to his classroom and sharply rebukes Potter, announcing in front of the entire class, “I can’t think of anything that could excuse your behavior!”

This produces shouts of protest from the other students and leads Potter to challenge Sir, exclaiming how Mr Bell’s bullying had led to his action. “I’m not concerned with Mr Bell’s behavior, but with yours”, Sir responds. “Suppose instead of a piece of wood a gun or a knife had been handy, eh? What then?” Denham jumps in to challenge Sir. “That bleeder was wrong and you bloody well know it!”

The students are not aware that Sir “knows it” and has already upbraided Mr Bell over his behavior. “You’re missing the point, Denham. You all are”, he continues. “In a few weeks you will be going out into the world. Are you going to use a weapon every time someone makes you angry?” When Sir tells Potter he owes Mr Bell an apology, the class erupts again with Denham leading the fray. “Why should he apologize just because Bell’s a bleedin’ teacher, eh?”

“You better answer that, Potter”, answers Sir. “Do you think you behaved like an adult?” Potter, disarmed by the question and its inevitable answer, still angry but head lowered, will apologize. But the confrontation has shaken much of the goodwill previously established between Sir and his students. Though we as viewers can’t be sure the damage is repairable at this point, we can think about whether it would have been much worse had Potter been immediately expelled or handed over to the police.
This drama continues. While filling in for the boys’ physical education teacher, Sir is cleverly coaxed by the boys into “putting on the gloves” and going a round with Denham. Caught off guard, Sir reluctantly agrees. A refusal could damage his now shaky credibility and thus threaten everything he’s tried to accomplish. Though Sir’s maturity and experience ensure his eventual victory, he must somehow best Denham without defeating him. After taking a few good punches, Sir’s one quick blow to Denham’s belly doubles him up like a folding chair. After tending to the boy, Sir exits to tend to his own bloody lip, making sure that all the boys have seen it. The scene ends with the boys surrounding Denham, patting his back and telling him what a great job he did. In the next scene Denham confronts Sir in a stairwell, not in anger but in amazement that Sir hadn’t finished him off more quickly. For the first time, we see evidence of mutual respect, highlighted by Denham pressing Sir to admit he was wrong about Potter:

“From his point of view, at his age, I was”, says Sir.

“What other point is there, eh?”, Denham exclaims.

“You’re gonna have to figure that one out for yourself, Denham”, he responds.

It may seem like a pat movie resolution and the viewer may find a student-teacher boxing match as totally outside the realities of modern teaching. But the entire incident is best viewed symbolically. Students must view their teachers as able not simply to lay down, explain, or even simply enforce rules, but also to overcome challenges to their authority. In many school situations, moreover, to the degree possible, teachers may yet need to use physical or otherwise highly intrusive means to do so, for example, to break up a fight or remove an abusive student from a classroom. This is necessary not just to restore order but to also restore a sense of justice among other students. It is a way of teaching “truth”, one that will always be “scary and dangerous”. It is a method that will always demand teachers with strength, character, moxie, and an unwillingness to rely on bureaucratic or legalistic measures.

The clash between academic and social goals
Several of the themes to this point have highlighted the circumstances under and the process by which students’ collective norms and needs may pull teachers away from focusing on academic matters. This is a recurring and often studied tension at both micro and macro levels of American education (Shouse, 1996). It also serves as part of the impetus behind recent standards based educational reforms, the logic being that teachers will be less inclined to dilute or stray from academic goals once performance standards are imposed from the outside (Coleman, 1996). But while it is tempting and even compelling to argue that teachers and schools need to develop attitudes, cultures, and structures to help insulate their academic mission (and help insulate themselves from the demands of distracted or disengaged students), this may be unrealistic or counterproductive in many settings.

For example, consider a comparison between the actions of Mark Thackeray and those of Jaime Escalante in *Stand and Deliver*. Unlike Escalante, Thackeray either lacks or is unwilling to use the power to reject or eject students from his classroom. Indeed, a good deal of Escalante’s prowess as a math teacher stems from his determination to view his classroom as his “domain”, from which any slacker student
might be removed at any time. Had Thackeray been able to do the same at the
beginning of his term, that is, to eject Denham, Potter, and maybe one or two others,
there might not have been a story to tell at all. A serious trade off seems to exist;
teachers may advance their mission at the cost of higher student attrition.

But this is, perhaps, a one-dimensional view. Escalante’s value lies largely in
his ability to infuse school culture with a new more academically oriented set of
norms and values, a goal that in his view might even merit the short-term
sacrifice of some students. Thackeray’s value lies more in his ability to overcome
(not eliminate) student resistance and to open the mind of even the most
recalcitrant student to a world of new possibilities. Of course, Thackeray is also
contributing to a new school culture by lending some inspiration to his fellow
teachers. Even the once jaded and disheveled teacher, Mr Weston, seems hopeful
and redeemable by the end of the film.

There is more. Having earlier in this article suggested that Thackeray may have
retreated from his academic mission, a fair bit of evidence in the film suggests that he
has not. In nearly every classroom scene portraying what appears to be non-academic
interaction, we see signs of academic instruction on the chalkboard and bulletin board.
We see algebra problems, science drawing, and references to Edgar Allen Poe, Mark
Twain, and Thomas Malthus. In one scene, as Sir passes out magazines, the
conversation shifts to topics of culture and youth rebellion. Sir tells his students that
they have a duty to change the world, peacefully, but that their dress and hairstyles are
not at all new. In fact, he tells them, “there’s a fine exhibition of costume through the
ages at the Victoria and Albert Museum...”. Suddenly, the students demand a field
trip, which Sir manages to arrange at great difficulty. The result is an academic as well
as a social experience, highlighted in the film by a stirring collage of images of student
exploration. We also see Sir gathering papers at the end of the day – are they student
reports of what they learned at the museum?

The large implication here is that to be academically effective, teachers in
disadvantaged schools must struggle with and blend together a highly complex
mission and message involving both character and intellectual development. Yet, what
is the recipe for this? The one on which Sir eventually stumbles is to work through a
screen of tough love and disinterest while also acting in ways that lead his students to
appreciate him, identify with him, and view him as being something far different from
their previous conception of a “teacher”. To that end, he must engage in a peculiar sort
of trade, offering students something they find valuable in exchange for them to accept
his “truths”. He works like the country doctor Noah Praetorius (in the film People Will
Talk) who describes having had to disguise himself as a butcher in order to give
medical help to his doctor hating customers. Unfortunately, once his customers get
wise to Praetorius’ scheme, they run him out of town, not unlike what nearly happens
to Sir each time one of his “truths” pushes students beyond their comfort zone.

Regardless of what strategy a teacher stumbles on, this difficult and risky mission
blending will inevitably impose on urban teachers a much greater burden than the one
faced by their peers in more advantaged schools who can typically rely on the well of
cultural and social capital running through the communities they serve. Teachers in
disadvantaged communities will thus have much more material to teach and much less
time to devote to pure academic instruction. All students, regardless of background,
have the capacity to learn great things; but student background will tend to limit the
capacity of schools to teach an equal number – or the same kind – of great things over
an equal period of time. This simple observation challenges our understanding of
schools’ ability to serve as institutional mechanisms of social equality. They may
promote equality, but are constrained in their ability to produce it.

The film as leader
Films, like novels, short stories, and case studies, represent compressed experience.
Viewers and readers draw meanings from the experience that may then be woven into
their own. When the meanings are stirring, challenging, or otherwise emotive, they
may lead one to act or think in ways not previously anticipated. Though we tend to
conceive of leadership as a quality of individuals or groups of individuals, it seems fair
to say that “potential leadership” lies within every powerful text or film. From a critical
theory perspective, a film like To Sir with Love could be viewed as “floating signifier”
– a symbol (in this case, a package full of symbols) open to diverse, contradictory, and
contested interpretations (Carlson, 2003). To the extent viewers gather inspirational
meaning from a film, we say they are “moved”, an expression that simply and cleanly
conveys the key idea of leadership.

The final scenes of To Sir with Love present some of the most powerful film images
ever presented, not just among “school films”, but also among films generally. In my
classes, students seem to quickly move beyond an initial impulse to view the action as
contrived or unrealistic, and begin to actually feel what Sir is feeling; an intensity of
emotion, a rush of psychic reward, and a head pounding sense of dilemma. Many
students will have a difficult time approaching the craft of teaching – or theory
building – in quite the same way they did before seeing the film. Teaching and leading,
it has changed their way of thinking.

A final word
The discussion above is in no way meant to summarize all of the ideas and tensions
embedded in To Sir with Love. To the contrary, some readers and viewers may take
issue or even recoil at the interpretations offered here. Left for others to examine are
issues and meanings related to class, sex, race, power, authority, and every
combination of these. This article is offered in the hope that others will find, both
within the film and echoing beyond it, the clashing amalgam of meaning that make To
Sir with Love an ever-fresh and exciting work and an excellent tool for classroom use.

Note
1. Recall that the song begins with a “sympathetic” judge recommending therapy for a juvenile
delinquent, but ends with a “hard-nosed” social worker suggesting “he needs a year in the
pen!”

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