

Teaching the Class with *The Class*

Debunking the Need for Heroes

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Introduction

For about eight years now, I have had my preservice teacher candidates complete my multicultural social foundations class with a paper that analyzes the French film *Entre Les Murs* (“The Class”) and its depictions of classroom and school environment and teaching style and choices, using understandings gleaned from the semester’s discussions and materials.

The Class is a somewhat unusual film in its portrayal of a Parisian working class school and its protagonist, Mr. Marin, who attempts to teach an unruly class of young and very diverse teenagers. Unlike the instructors in popular Hollywood films such as *Dangerous Minds*, *Precious*, *Good Will Hunting*, *Mr. Holland’s Opus*, and the most inspirational of all, *Freedom Writers*, Marin frequently finds himself at his wits’ end as he attempts to help his students—who never miss a chance to challenge his authority—master formal French grammar and writing. Viewers are left unsettled, to say the least, when a student who has been largely mute throughout the school year confesses to Marin at the end of the film that she has not learned anything at all.

Preservice teachers (and probably the general public) tend to create images of what a teacher looks and acts like through their own experience as students (Shulte, 2008). This is what Lortie (1975) calls an “apprenticeship of observation” and Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann (1983) label the “familiarity pitfall”—teacher candidates’ limited understanding of diversity along with their sense that the way they experienced school is the way their future students will experience school.

The popular media’s presentation of

educators factors into these perceptions as well. In particular, it has become very appealing to believe that with the right combination of love and stamina, a determined teacher can break through the resistance of “urban” youth (generally minority and lower income students) and help them overcome all manner of obstacles to triumph in a world that does not take them seriously (Ayers, 2001).

This “hero” portrayal—“super-teachers who go above and beyond the normal expectations of their jobs, or to describe savior-teachers who rescue their students from administrative cruelty, gangs, poverty, or ignorance” (Goldstein, p. 12, 2005)—is a compelling one for teacher candidates. Of course, when new teachers get out into a real classroom and find that their students, who are becoming more diverse all the time in terms of ethnicity, language, social class, and religion (Suits, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2015, 2016), are not always so accommodating, they are often disappointed, angry, and frustrated (Gay, 2000).

The capacity of teacher education programs to prepare candidates to teach in diverse classrooms varies widely (Cochran, et. al, 2015; Hollins & Guzman, 2005). As Hollins and Guzman (2005, p. 512) noted, “... program evaluation research suggests that universities are at different points in their preparedness for addressing issues of cultural and linguistic diversity.”

Candidates are often at different points as well, and preparation programs may or may not address their varied stages of development effectively. While one class—let alone one film—cannot change the trajectory of a candidate’s thinking (Cochran-Smith, 2000; Sleeter, 2001), film can be a creative and meaningful option for teacher educators who seek to challenge the unrealistic perceptions and expectations of teacher candidates, especially, but not only, when those candidates have little experience with diversity. As Grant and Sleeter (2012) note:

Much dissatisfaction with teaching can be curtailed if teachers have a greater understanding of life in different schools, their teaching self, and how their students’ identities and their own identity—including identities rooted in race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or disability—influence teaching and classroom life. (p. 7)

Nothing can change the reality that clinical placements, those in particular with face to face contact, are the most important experience for teacher candidates in preparing them to be effective in diverse classrooms. My teacher candidates are a few years away from their student teaching assignments; this class is one of the first they take as education majors. As a result, it is impossible to say with certainty if the insights they display in discussion and in writing will stay with them.

Having said that, I believe that early in a teacher education program, a thoughtfully crafted and realistic film like “The Class” can be helpful in opening the door to “develop[ing] proficiencies in specific aspects of diversity” (CAEP, 2013a, p. 21), particularly if options for other diversity experiences are limited. Many teacher films present depictions of teaching and learning that result in a Hollywoodized “happy ending.” *The Class* does not, and as a result, I find it a valuable option for inviting my candidates to observe a more realistic classroom, albeit cinematic, to explore their reactions to students who are exotic, challenging, bright, and frequently profane, and to challenge their own ideas about what kind of teacher they believe they need to be.

This article explores the ways I have used the film *The Class* as a culminating class project for my largely White, primarily Christian, rural/suburban teacher candidates. It describes how the film offers provocative and compelling examples of pedagogical and curricular struggles and classroom and school cultures for examination, discussion, and critique—examples

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that can illustrate how a classroom does not need a hero teacher to be a good place for students to be. I also offer a few reflections from students' final papers, which highlight some of their insights and, I believe, reflect the potential value of this experience. First, however, it is useful to explore the concept of "unrealistic optimism," as this belief can be a significant factor in reinforcing the hero teacher persona.

Unrealistic Optimism

As it has been documented, teacher candidates who continue to be predominantly White (approximately 80% of those earning degrees or licensure in 2009-10; see AACTE, 2013), often enter the profession believing that their enjoyment of children will carry them through. Elementary educators in particular may feel that caring is more important than subject mastery (Anderson & Holt-Reynolds, 1995; Fajet, Bello, Leftwich, Mesler, & Shaver, 2005). Darling-Hammond (2006) found that teacher candidates believe teaching only requires "a few strategies, skills, and some technical routines" (p. 36).

As a teacher educator, Holt-Reynolds (1995) learned through her research that preservice teachers tended to classify learning as a function of interest and motivation, and assumed that since they themselves were successful and motivated—what Shulte (2008, p. 96) calls the "good student syndrome"—their own students would be similar (Anderson & Holt-Reynolds, 1995). Feiman-Nemser, McDiarmid, Melnick, and Parker (1988) succinctly summed up their own students' attitudes, writing, "To be a teacher, one need only act like a teacher" (p. 9).

These assumptions can be termed "egocentric" (Piaget, 1951), which essentially means that one believes that others see, hear, and experience things as he/she does. It is not unusual for teacher candidates to see teaching through an egocentric lens (Sheridan, 2013; Weinstein, 1988). Schulte (2008) discusses the transition for many from the "good student" to the "good teacher"—personified by the desire to be someone who makes "the" difference or to be the "ultimate force" in their student's life (p. 97).

This is a belief system that falls under the category of "unrealistic optimism" (Weinstein, 1980). Weinstein (1988, p. 33) called such optimism the "tendency to believe that the problems experienced by others 'won't happen to me.'" She found that elementary education teacher can-

didates believed they would experience less difficulty than the "average first-year teacher" on 33 different teaching tasks. In particular, tasks they saw as being within the control of the teacher, such as maintaining discipline and establishing and enforcing class rules and procedures (terrible struggles for the fictional Marin in *The Class*), would be the least troublesome. Later studies confirming candidates' desires to teach in schools similar to the ones they themselves attended (Cooper, 2007; Terrill & Mark, 2000) may well reflect a belief that such schools will contain students who will "do school" as teacher candidates did.

Unrealistic optimism is also referred to as "optimism bias" (Sharot, 2011) and there is little in the literature that links this bias directly to teaching; the theory seems to be explored primarily in social psychology and the health sciences rather than teacher education. Nonetheless this seems to be a reasonable characterization of how teacher candidates might think about their future work, at least before they spend any significant time in the classroom as the educator in charge.

Most of us approach situations carrying with us our past experiences and drawing on those experiences in shaping our initial perceptions, understandings, and expectations (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). In my own class, I often begin the semester by asking candidates to move into the corner of their choice, labeled as strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree, to respond to the prompts "My gender/race/religion/social class might make teaching diverse students challenging for me."

Almost all of them choose disagree or strongly disagree, and when asked why, respond with an ingenuous statement about how such differences really don't matter and if a student truly wants to learn, the teacher's characteristics will not make a difference. It does not seem to occur to these young adults to reflect on what has shaped the optimism reassuring them that, despite their lack of experience, they will be successful in making connections with students and effectively teaching them. For them, it will just happen.

Because popular media can be so powerful in shaping perceptions, many education scholars have examined films in terms of how they portray teachers and teaching (Grant, 2002; Maruri, 2012; Ryan & Townsend, 2012; Trier, 2001) and some have looked at the use of films in teacher education programs to understand and critique teachers' motivations, perceptions,

and expectations (Beyerbach, 2005; Giroux, 1993; Goldstein, 2005; Robertson, 1997). Still others have examined more closely the ways films have presented racial and ethnic tensions and interactions in classrooms (Ayers, 2001; Rorrer & Furr, 2009; Trier, 2005). As Ayers (2001) pointed out:

The movies tell us, to begin with, that schools and teachers are in the business of saving children—saving them from their families, saving them from the purveyors of drugs and violence, saving them from our cities, saving them from themselves, their own pursuits and purposes... The occasional good teacher is a saint—he is anointed. (p. 201)

Wells and Serman (1998), in their review of teacher portrayals in film, found what they called a "great White hope" theme, where "...the heroic teachers are White and most of the students are African-American or Latino" (p. 196). The vast majority of my candidates are, at minimum, familiar with *Freedom Writers* and its portrayal of the young woman who sacrificed so much for her students; some identify this model as the teacher they hope to be. Rosen (2004) found that despite awareness on the part of preservice teachers about the ways that Hollywood chooses to present heroic teachers, they often still felt a desire to be the important and meaningful person—the person who makes the difference when others could not—for their future students.

Because of its power as a film derived from the refusal to present a (White) teacher hero in a room full of diverse students who end up "fixed" despite their deficits, I find *The Class* a valuable resource for raising questions and issues as well as examining teacher practice. Focusing on Mr. Marin allows us to indirectly challenge the unrealistic optimism of teacher candidates in ways that do not come across as dismissive or belittling to those same candidates.

Entre Les Murs / The Class

The Class covers a single academic year, focusing on the French language arts class taught by François Marin. His class is made up of diverse young teenagers—African, Asian, French, middle-Eastern; lower and middle class; native French speakers and French learners—whose main goal most days seems to be knocking Marin off track as he attempts to teach them grammar and literature. It is easy to assume these students don't "want to learn," based on their behavior, but I encourage

candidates to consider, as the film critic Roger Ebert (2009) pointed out, “None of them seem stupid, and indeed intelligence may be one of their problems: They can see clearly that the purpose of the class is to make them model citizens in a society that has little use for them.”

The film never really leaves the school, housed in a dreary, monochrome building that wraps itself around a courtyard where students assemble at recess and for physical education. As the months go by, the viewer gets to know Marin and some of his colleagues and students better—in particular, Esmerelda, an Algerian-French girl whose disrespectful attitudes camouflage a startling intellect; Khoumba, a Black girl who wishes her teacher realized she isn’t a child anymore; Souleymane, a surly immigrant boy from Mali who works to keep adults at bay; and Wei, a smart Chinese boy in France illegally. There are glimpses of other faculty and administration in meetings that often focus on how best to control or punish the students, and some parents are introduced at mid-term parent-teacher conferences.

The majority of the film, however, centers on Marin and his students, as he tries valiantly to get them to engage in the language arts curriculum and stay focused on assignments and class discussions. Marin is not Erin Gruwell from *Freedom Writers*; he makes too many bad choices and too often stoops to the level of his students rather than deflecting their barbs. Still, he displays a useful sense of humor and great resilience, and is one of the few teachers in the building who seems to recognize at least some potential in his students, as well as his colleagues’ tendency to label them.

Unfortunately, his good intentions are not enough to help Souleymane avoid expulsion after an explosive outburst in the classroom, brought about to some extent by Marin’s inability to recognize and productively harness the tensions that the racial, ethnic, social class, and religious diversity in his classroom engender.

The year ends relatively peacefully, as the viewer watches students report what they learned to their classmates and to Mr. Marin. Damien amuses his schoolmates by recounting his understanding of the reproductive cycle; Esmerelda shocks Marin by insisting that while she read nothing assigned for school, she did read Plato’s *Republic* on her own; and Carl recites the formula for creating combustion from chemistry class, while noting he has no idea why he needed to learn it. After everyone leaves, one quiet student,

Henriette, comes forward to tell Marin she understood nothing that was taught in the year just past, and with this confession, which Marin refuses to take seriously, the viewer is left unsettled.

How much has Marin’s focus on the troublemakers and class clowns, whether deliberately chosen or compelled, kept him from seeing other, less visible students? If he had stopped to listen more often, if he had known more about his students, even the ones he already knew, could he have avoided bigger problems? How could he have made more of a difference for his students in the challenging environment they shared? These types of questions are what my students consider as they reflect on *The Class*.

The Assignment

I ask candidates to consider *The Class* by responding to three questions in a final essay that serves as a final exam. The exact wording has evolved over the years, but the essential focus is on:

- How well did Mr. Marin know his students’ backgrounds, and did he use this knowledge to be a more effective teacher?
- How well did Marin make curricular and pedagogical choices that meaningfully engaged his students?
- How did Marin create (or not) a positive learning environment in his classroom, in terms of his own teaching style and classroom management?

In asking these questions, I encourage my candidates to move beyond initial “knee-jerk” reactions to Marin’s students and their racial and cultural backgrounds and their behaviors and attitudes, as well as their initial judgments about his interactions with them. I also structure these questions in an effort to have candidates begin to think about the edTPA assessment, which at this writing is being implemented in some fashion by 686 teacher preparation programs in 38 states and the District of Columbia (AACTE/SCALE, n.d.). edPTA asks candidates to reflect on the above three aspects of teaching, as well as other tasks like assessment and lesson planning (Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity, 2015).

We watch the film in chunks over a period of three classes, and discuss these sections immediately afterward. By the end of the semester, we have examined the influence of racial, ethnic, social class,

gender, language, and religious differences on teaching and learning (we also examine sexual orientation, but the only reference to this in the film occurs in a brief exchange between teacher and student regarding rumors that Mr. Marin is gay).

These “identifiers” are readily evident throughout *The Class*, some more than others. For example, it appears as though the faculty and staff are largely White, well educated, and middle class, while many if not most of the students are from diverse ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds and from lower-income or working class families. Social class differences are explored as my students report their own disapproving reactions to the film’s students and their behavior and values, but also cringe as Marin’s colleagues label and diminish the kids they teach. Language differences are similarly highlighted; for a school with so many immigrant students, it appears that there is little recognition that translator services would be invaluable.

We learn, for instance, that Souleymane’s mother does not understand any of the notes Marin sends home detailing her son’s disciplinary and academic issues, because she does not speak French. Marin struggles to understand religious and ethnic differences and tensions, brought to a boiling point in a debate about soccer that gets out of hand. And over and over again, he attempts to engage students in the mastery of formal French as they question its value, and he dismisses their questions and points of view in his impatience to cover the material.

Candidates are required to draw on readings and other class materials from across the semester in order to bolster their analysis of *The Class* in their responses to the three essay questions (the script, available online at http://sonyclassics.com/the-class/externalLoads/theClass_script.pdf, is a very helpful resource, particularly for clarifying who’s who and who said what). Therefore, I prompt them to reference the class readings, videos, handouts, and other materials and to recall earlier conversations, as we process the film by writing the three main questions on the board and open things up for discussion. Depending on class composition and size, we may utilize whole-class discussion, or break into three smaller groups that each focus on brainstorming one essay question.

I describe below some of the ways my own students’ learning is brought to bear on their analysis of *The Class* and Mr. Marin, and begin by highlighting one reading in particular—a short essay, written

by a classroom teacher—that is rich with insights about classroom management, teacher expectations, culturally relevant pedagogy and curriculum, and sharing power with students. All of these aspects of teaching are particularly important considerations, especially when thinking about being an effective educator for middle and high schoolers.

Making Connections between Film and Literature: One Example

Classroom management is a significant focus in our class and for our film de-briefings, as my own students have now been prompted over the semester to recognize that not every future student will be cooperative (as a real time example, I ask them to reflect on their own class behaviors, such as with cell phones, as a reminder of how easy it is to disengage). They do recognize how much and how often Mr. Marin contributes to his own problems with his unruly students by becoming defensive rather than picking his battles and deflecting problematic situations in the first place.

For many aspiring teachers, classroom management is about controlling students and maintaining order. The authority inherent in the teacher role, presumably, will be enough to command attention and respect (Haberman, 2009). They do not think about classroom management as being proactive—setting up an environment where students' ideas and needs are important, where curriculum and pedagogy is meaningful and not boring, where expectations are high, where there is enough interesting stuff going on that there is less incentive to act out.

One reading I consistently use with our teacher expectations and classroom management units is “When Students Don’t Play the Game” (Towbin, 2010). Jessica Towbin, a high school teacher, begins her essay by arguing, “Students who broadcast their disengagement from school are challenging—but they can also be a blessing in disguise” (p. 42). She goes on to discuss how a job change that put her in a school with students unfamiliar with a “culture of compliance” forced her to reassess what and how she taught. Her students refused to play the “game of school,” openly broadcasting their lack of interest. They were alienated to the point that punishments and threats did not work, as they had with Towbin’s previous (middle class) students.

She found that becoming more directly engaged with her students allowed her to plan curriculum and assignments more thoughtfully, and also helped her learn to appreciate and address her students’ need to understand *why* something was important to learn, rather than see such questions as defiant. Letting go of the control Towbin initially attempted to impose was the key for her to become a student of her students. For example, she describes how she takes the risk of allowing one, Alexandria, to demonstrate her writing skills with a different writing assignment than originally assigned (which prompts my students to express grave concerns about the implications of treating one student differently than the others), betting that giving Alexandria some autonomy would pay off in increased engagement—which it does.

Drawing Connections

As we recognize, Mr. Marin and Towbin have students with much in common, including attitudes that reflect alienation, anger, and insolence. Such classrooms are very challenging for teachers, who may find it safer to label students as “resistant” or “unmotivated,” thereby deflecting their own responsibility for fostering a culture that supports learning (Haberman, 2009). The students in the film and in Towbin’s room want to know *why* what they are being asked to learn is important.

In one early scene, Marin challenges a student on the importance of using the imperfect subjunctive:

FRANCOIS [MARIN]: The first thing I notice is, before mastering something, the imperfect subjunctive, you’re already telling me it’s no use. Start by mastering it, then you can call its use into question.

ESMERALDA: Sir, why are you criticizing us?

FRANCOIS: What?

ANGELICA: They’re right, it’s not the way people talk now, that’s the way they talked in the old days. Even my gran didn’t say that.

BOUBACAR: Or your great granddad. It’s from the Middle Ages!

FRANCOIS: No, it’s not from the Middle Ages and for starters...

BOUBACAR: It is!

ESMERALDA: Of course it is!

KHOUMBA: It’s bourgeois.

ANGELICA: Tell me, when was the last time you heard someone talk like that? When

was the last time you heard someone talk like that?

FRANCOIS: Yesterday, with friends, we used the imperfect subjunctive... (he is briefly interrupted by jeers) All right, all right... Can I reply?

BOUBACAR: Yep!

FRANCOIS: I’m ready to talk this over, but calmly. All right, it’s true not everyone talks that way. In fact, people who do are pretty rare, I’ll grant you that. I’d even say only snobs use the imperfect subjunctive.

ANGELICA: What’s a snob? (Cantet, Campillo, & Bégaudeau, 2008, pp. 18-19)

This exchange beautifully illustrates an authentic discussion around language occurring between teacher and students. Coming early in the film, it allows me to encourage candidates to see past the “talking back” of Marin’s students, to recognize how engaged they really are, at that moment, in examining language and its power.

As a follow up to the snob explanation and Marin’s directive to “... familiar, current, formal, oral and written... Move between them and use them all,” Lucie asks Marin, “How do we know [when to use a particular form]?” Earlier in the semester, my class discusses formal and informal language, including African-American Vernacular English, and candidates have become aware that they themselves, in their own lives, move between different types of English, based on who they are talking to and how (text, email, oral, written).

They may not always know the “correct” answer to Lucie’s question, but they recognize that the issues Marin’s students raise are meaningful, and that Marin’s job as a culturally relevant teacher is to help them understand why they might learn to value “code-switching,” or alternating between two languages or language varieties (Wheeler & Swords, 2006). Regrettably, Marin himself does not recognize this, as he is only able to offer his belief that “intuition” would help make the distinctions clearer on an applied level. One of my students reflected on this exchange in his paper:

It would have been helpful if François could have been clear in showing the difference between formal and informal language... Also the fact that François rarely showed his [own] ability to code switch tended to create a barrier between himself and his students. Because he was busy correcting his students’ use of language, he failed to hear what they were really saying.

Souleymane's Special Assignment

As mentioned above, Towbin's choice to allow a student to do a writing assignment in a more appealing format tends to draw dismay from candidates in their initial reading of the article. There is concern about whether other students would resent this allowance or whether it would set a risky precedent, leading everyone to ask for exceptions. Coincidentally, in *The Class*, one of the most affecting moments in the film comes when Marin chooses to allow the generally uncooperative Souleymane to turn in his self-portrait assignment as a display of photographs rather than a paper.

Marin's students have been complaining about the assignment anyway, asking what about their lives is so interesting, but reluctantly turn to typing up characteristics, likes and dislikes, hobbies, and other items in the computer lab. Souleymane has managed to eke out only "I'm Souleymane. I have nothing to say about me because no one knows me but me" for his paper, but Marin notices him uploading pictures in the lab and admires his photography.

Initially, Souleymane is embarrassed, protesting that his photos are "crap." Marin helps Souleymane consider legends for his pictures, and has him print them. He then takes the photos and pins them to a bulletin board, as Souleymane asks what he is doing:

FRANCOIS: As you can see, I'm putting the photos up to get a global view. The others read out their self-portraits, so you're going to put yours on show.

SOULEYMANE: My photos suck, you know that.

FRANCOIS: Not at all, they're very good.

SOULEYMANE: Sure...

FRANCOIS: And when a student does good work, I let the whole class see it.

SOULEYMANE: You're just doing this to wind me up.

FRANCOIS: No, I wind you up if I feel you can do better. This is good.

SOULEYMANE: That's bullshit.

FRANCOIS: If you've finished, come and take a look at Souleymane's masterpiece. Slowly. We'll straighten them after. (Cantet, Campillo, & Bégaudeau, 2008, pp. 67-68)

Virtually all my students are charmed by the look on Souleymane's face as Marin displays the photographs. Finally, they see Souleymane as a delighted but embarrassed kid who is openly proud of his work for the first (and last) time in the film.

They begin to consider whether it might be all right to bend a bit, to allow students to have some options for presenting their learning, and to recognize that the classroom does not always have to spiral into chaos when teachers are reasonably flexible. This, obviously, is not "hero" behavior, as much as the simple understanding that allowing students some choices as to how they present their knowledge can be a way of engaging even the most recalcitrant.

There are many strong articles written by K-12 teachers and sensitive researchers that can be used in tandem with *The Class* to further develop and complicate preservice teachers' understandings of teaching and learning in challenging classrooms. Blogs, magazines, and newspapers often feature excellent writing about public schools and the issues teachers confront, and writers like Greg Michie and Gloria Ladson-Billings on race and ethnicity, Paul Gorski on social class, and Martin Haberman on urban teaching have been illustrative and thought-provoking for my own students.

Making connections between the scholarly literature and the dilemmas and opportunities illustrated by *The Class* in our de-briefings after watching sections of the film has proven to be fruitful, both for deeper understanding and for encouraging the use of these resources to bolster their arguments in their final written work.

Student Backgrounds, Teaching Choices, and Teaching Style

How well did Mr. Marin know his students' backgrounds, and did he use this knowledge to be a more effective teacher? How well did Marin make curricular and pedagogical choices that meaningfully engaged his students?

We learn early on that Marin has taught a number of his students already, when he asks them to create name cards and Louise protests "You had us last year." Despite these prior relationships, the film reveals that Marin only knows parts of their stories. He is not aware of Esmerelda's intellect, or Koumba's development into adolescence. He is not aware that Souleymane runs the risk of being sent back to his village in his home country of Mali if he cannot assimilate into the French culture. He does not know, or does not care, that Wei spends many hours on his computer playing video games. Throughout the film, students try to let Marin know that his curriculum does not reflect their lives or needs, but are often unsuccessful in being

heard. This, not surprisingly, results in acting out. As one candidate wrote:

It could be argued that the students are almost always engaged in the classroom, but rarely are they engaged in the curriculum. Throughout the film the classroom is constantly disrupted by off course comments and questions.

Besides the aforementioned questioning of the imperfect subjunctive, two other pedagogical choices Marin makes tend to emerge from class analysis focused on his knowledge of students and his use of this knowledge to shape his teaching. Prior to the language discussion, Marin asks students to name vocabulary words they are unfamiliar with from their reading. He uses a sentence ("Bill enjoys a succulent cheeseburger") to try to get them to understand what succulent means, and his students are quick to criticize his use of "Bill":

KHOUMBA: What's with the Bills?

FRANCOIS: What bills?

KHOUMBA: Not bills, the name Bill.

ESMERALDA: Bill and Ben.

KHOUMBA: You always use weird names. Why don't you use...

FRANCOIS: It's not a weird name. A recent U.S. President was called Bill, remember.

KHOUMBA: Why don't you use Aïssata or Rachid or Ahmed or...

ESMERALDA: You always use Whitey names. It's wicked.

FRANCOIS: Koumba, if I start choosing names to suit your different ethnic origins, it'll never end.

KHOUMBA & ESMERALDA: But change them a bit...

FRANCOIS: So what do you suggest?

KHOUMBA & ESMERALDA: Er, Aïssata...

STUDENT: Mamadou, Bintou...

KHOUMBA & ESMERALDA: Fatou. No, Aïssata. Aïssata! (Cantet, Campillo, & Bégaudeau, 2008, pp. 11-12)

As one candidate noted, "They wanted a name they have heard before, a name that their best friend could have. Something as simple as that also conveys how the curriculum didn't tie into the student's [sic] life."

As another example, Marin has his students read *The Diary of Anne Frank* as a prelude to writing their own autobiography. It is evident they are not

interested; no one has read the chapter, and the camera pans the classroom and reveals heads on desks, doodling, and glazed eyes as Esmerelda reads a passage. Later on as Marin tries to explain how Anne, and now they, could use writing to reveal themselves, he again encounters resistance from his students who protest that their lives are not as gripping, and at ages 13 and 14 they have little to tell. They express some doubt about Marin's true intentions (Angelica, for example, tells him he is only pretending to be interested in their lives to "get us to talk and stuff"), but he is able to coax them into sharing some of the things they are ashamed of or afraid to reveal about themselves, and we again have a few minutes of students who are genuinely engaged.

Some of *my* students, however, felt he could have done more to promote and incorporate his students' lives and experiences:

He could have made Anne Frank's diary more relatable by explaining that she was their age when she wrote it. He could also have made the assignment more interesting by having the students focus on their connection to Anne Frank's emotions. Emotions are universal and teenagers all go through scary, heart breaking moments. Mr. Marin could have had students write about times they felt scared or heartbroken and relate it back to when Anne Frank felt that way.

Another of my students had this insight:

In the French class, the differences in race and religion repeatedly come up in conversation and feelings get hurt because the students do not know how to deal with their own diversity or express their curiosity. If François had created a safe way for students to ask these questions, the diversity would not have been such a big deal. Literature is full of racial references and opportunities to demonstrate positive interactions between cultures, so I wish he had taken advantage of this.

Again, candidates are not pointing out the need for spectacular measures, but instead are identifying the need for Marin to actively create ways to connect with his students.

Despite the variety of nationalities found among the student body, there is little awareness on the part of school staff as a whole that language is a barrier for some families. Marin does not speak anything but French, although he does allow Wei and another Chinese student to work together in their home language in the

classroom (an accommodation my students have learned is an important one to make for non-English speaking students). We see him struggling to understand Wei's parents in a conference, and he only learns belatedly that Souleymane's mother does not speak French and does not know her son is in trouble. Even when he realizes this:

The administrative board had little or no regard for the fact that French was not the only language spoken in S's [Souleymane's] home, and Mr. Marin can be partially to blame for this as it was made painfully clear during his parent-teacher conference, but it was never addressed at any teacher meetings, especially those that concerned Souleymane... In other words, the school failed to look into the backgrounds of each student to better understand them before just instantly reprimanding them, therefore belittling them as people in their school.

A Note about Sub-Titles

Besides the three essay questions, I ask candidates to reflect on the experience of watching *The Class* with sub-titles (the DVD provides dubbing and sub-titles in Spanish and English). Some are familiar with foreign language films, but the majority is not. I deliberately show the movie with English sub-titles as the characters speak in French, because the translation for dubbing resulted in some important language changing. For example, in one scene, Marin, in frustration, accuses two of his female students of having acted like "skanks" during a meeting. The dubbed version changes the word to "bitches," which takes away the power of the moment and renders later dialogue confusing.

Reading sub-titles does present a challenge for some candidates, and to mitigate that I always check in to find out if there are confusions that can be cleared up in discussion, and remind the class that the script is available so dialogue can be checked. After viewing *The Class*, many report having a greater understanding of how stressful it can be for ELLs to navigate school. Two comments convey developing understanding:

I could not understand [the movie] by listening but we had the sub-titles, which helped, but students who are ELLs are not as lucky when it comes to language. It is not as if they have glasses on that translate what is being said into words of that student's native language. Watching this movie gave me an insight into what students go through and that the education system is not perfect, teachers are not perfect and students are not perfect.

I was really starting to think that this guy [Marin] was a total jerk. It was not until someone [another student] mentioned his sarcasm that I realized he was only kidding. If no one had told me that, my opinions of Mr. Marin would have been completely different.

How did Marin create (or not) a positive learning environment in his classroom, in terms of his own teaching style and classroom management?

Candidates discuss various aspects of Marin's teaching style, including his penchant for getting involved in power struggles with students and his authoritarian demeanor; his limited expectations for achievement, and his classroom management. They do recognize, as one put it, that Marin and many of his students know each other from previous years and experience "that previous closeness and understanding." They also see Marin as the only teacher who sees some potential in Souleymane and is willing to keep working with him when other teachers are reduced to routinely throwing him out of class. However, by and large, deep concerns are voiced about missed opportunities and disastrous choices.

Power Struggles / Authoritarianism

Candidates notice Marin's "do as I say, not as I do" manner quickly. From the very first day of class, when he wastes time lecturing his students on wasting time, to his toleration of insults and profanity among students that stops when the language is directed at him, "Mr. Marin seems to think that since he is a teacher he doesn't need to earn respect," according to one candidate.

As one example, Marin forces Khoumba to stay after class to apologize when he deems her refusal to read a *Diary of Anne Frank* excerpt aloud as insolent. It takes a while, but she finally forces out an apology after warning him "I can't stay a kid forever," then retracts it on her way out the door. The body language in this scene, with Marin and Khoumba on opposite sides of a desk, passing her report book back and forth, conveys the tension in the room as Marin struggles with his frustration and inability to really see the young woman in front of him. This is one example of how

Francois falls into the trap of trying to control the individual students rather than the classroom by constantly responding to his students' "insolence" with knee-jerk reactions rather than thinking the situation through. By focusing on individual students, he forgets how he affects other students in his class.

This occurs again later in the film, when a debate that veers into soccer loyalties goes awry as Marin allows tempers to rise and, too late, tries to restore control. Rather than being proactive and putting clear boundaries on students' speeches, or redirecting the conversation when it is apparent tensions are rising, Marin seems to believe that his authority as a teacher will be enough to silence the ugly language that starts. When it isn't, he is drawn into the argument:

Mr. Marin argued back and forth with the class... He was not just acting immature, but also wasting the entire class period arguing about something that was not getting him anywhere.

He fought with his students like he was another kid but expected them to treat him with total respect because he was the teacher.

Limited Expectations

Esmerelda surprises Marin at the end of the year with her summary of Plato's *Republic*, smirking that "It's not a skank's book" as Marin ruefully smiles. It is a fitting coda to a year that features too many examples of low expectations, all too common for poor and minority students in challenged schools (Gay, 2000). Marin rebuffs his history teacher colleague's request to co-teach, as well as his literature suggestions, claiming every text as too challenging. He mocks—with some affection—students' attempts to conjugate verbs, calls Souleymane "limited" in a formal meeting with colleagues, and finds it hard to believe that Khoumba and Esmerelda can find their way around Paris on public transportation. My students feel that for the adolescents in Marin's classroom, there are many wasted opportunities:

Marin expects his students not to challenge themselves and not be able to read at a difficult level. He never asked his students or challenged them by using a hard book because he did not expect anything more from them... I think that the teachers let so much go because it is what they expect from them. They have let it go on for so long that they do not think they can change it now.

The lack of reflection by Marin—a skill most preservice teachers likely become weary of hearing about from teacher education faculty—is striking:

It almost seems that he has equated behavior issues with lack of intellectual capabilities: which is a false and inaccurate equation. Being a quiet and reserved student does not always translate into

being a good student, or vice versa... Perhaps if Mr. Marin was more aware of the academic side and not so focused on the behavioral considerations, he would have noticed this earlier on.

Classroom Management

Our discussions of classroom management focus on being proactive about organizing a classroom to promote learning and engagement rather than attempting to force compliance (Wong & Wong, 2005). One candidate, channeling Towbin's (2010) insights about students who "did not play the game," expressed empathy for Marin's charges, writing, "Students will not think that they are capable of doing anything good if they are always being punished for doing something bad." Marin spends his time putting out fires and as a result has little energy to reflect on his own role in the classroom dynamic. He aspires to be the "sage on the stage," and becomes frustrated when his students do not "essentially sit down, shut up, and listen," as one comment put it.

Of course, the outside world intrudes upon the classroom in ways that might be hard to relate to if one's primary experience in the classroom has been relatively satisfactory. *The Class* is very useful for bringing to life the overall atmosphere of the school community, with its dispirited faculty, its intimidating physical layout, and its seeming obliviousness to the needs of a diverse student body. The new year starts with teachers receiving class assignments and one teacher animatedly pointing out which students are "nice" and "not nice" to his colleagues.

Another teacher, Vincent, explodes three months into the school year, overwhelmed and frustrated, calling his students "animals" and "clowns" as his colleagues silently listen. The most anyone can do for him is accompany him outside to get some air. The vice principal brings faculty the news that Wei's mother is being deported to China because she does not have papers; there is a brief moment of regret and concern expressed for Wei, and then Sophie, another teacher, announces her pregnancy and champagne is shared while baby names are discussed.

This abrupt switch in mood strikes many candidates as evidence of the faculty's lack of sensitivity regarding students' lives outside school. No one who works at the school is evil or mean, but the staff does not seem to know what else to do to accomplish what looks to be the main priority—keeping students in line—outside of

attempting to construct more effective punishment schemes. Marin himself struggles with feeling caught in a system he has little control over—but does not push back in a truly significant way—throwing up little resistance, for example, to Souleymane's expulsion.

Most of my students react to a scene that begins with one such conversation about punishment that quickly goes nowhere. In a faculty meeting, the principal and teachers go round and round about a proposed disciplinary point system; eventually Marin and Frederic, the history teacher, begin debating the usefulness of teacher flexibility in applying rules. To everyone's relief, a more compelling topic—the price of coffee in the teachers' lounge—must be addressed so that the meeting can end on time. As one of my students perceived it:

It seemed like the teachers nor (sic) administration did not entirely seem to know how to help their students; instead they were all treated like delinquents, and I feel like that ties in with the perceived characteristic of the school's neighborhood (lower-income).

Knowing students and building strong relationships can go a long way in reducing the likelihood of classroom management issues. This is particularly true with adolescents, who are struggling within themselves to establish their identities, frequently in disconcerting ways, and who can spot insincerity a mile away. Good advice for Marin comes from this candidate, who muses at length:

If François had paid attention to his students' motivations rather than making assumptions about them, had engaged in their interests instead of trying to tell them what they should be interested in, or had made an attempt to know what they liked to do outside of class instead of belittling them for his immediate understandings of their interests, he might have been a lot better off [...] Instead, he engaged in a lot of deficit thinking by making assumptions about the students' behavior that may not have been at all true.

Conclusions

Marin's fatal flaw as a teacher cannot be confirmed (as he is but a movie character) but it is likely that he is indeed teaching as he was taught, and expects his students to learn as he learned. As one astute reviewer or the film put it, "There are multiple instances where if [Marin] stopped explaining his point of view long enough to listen to what one of the kids is saying, he could avert bigger problems" (Rich, 2009).

Becoming competent and caring teachers of diverse learners is in part a result of helping teacher candidates recognize the egocentrism that can set them up for disappointment in and frustration with diverse students—a disappointment that preserves their own sense of confidence in being a “good teacher” (Gay, 2000; Schulte, 2008). Especially (though not exclusively) in settings where teacher candidates have had little meaningful exposure to diversity and have developed expectations and assumptions about teaching and learning through their own life experiences, which includes consumption of popular media, *The Class* offers a revealing look at “a teacher who wants to do good and students who disagree about what “good” is” (Ebert, 2009), and makes it brutally clear that loving students is not enough (Grant & Sleeter, 2012).

While there are candidates who interpret the film as reinforcing their negative perceptions (*Why should he have to address immature and rude comments from his class?*), the majority of them, stepping back to consider Marin’s style and effectiveness, see that teaching and learning is a two-way responsibility, and that genuine respect, interest, and knowledge about students and their lives are just as critical, if not more so, than “loving” them, and certainly more than being superhuman. Sometimes students are just not lovable. The mouthy Esmerelda, for example, seems to go out of her way to keep teachers at bay, but one of my students found her relationship with Marin “the most interesting”:

The interesting thing to me was that she always had to make everything into a conflict just so she could be heard and listened to in the class.... From the beginning Esmerelda became the reason that the students would question the assignments and the curriculum. [She] would call the assignments stupid and wonder why they had to learn certain things. ...Behind her loud mouth and disrespectful attitude, she really did play a major role as the voice for all the other students. It was not until the end of the film that Mr. Marin saw what her true potential was.

This type of challenging, frustrating, and potentially rewarding relationship is probably not what most preservice teachers envision when they imagine their future classroom, but they need to understand that such relationships offer promise and possibility despite presenting very differently than what they might be used to.

The Class helps to introduce my class to an educational environment richly

populated with real people—students and teachers—and provides a window into a world that makes quick work of the hero teacher role. Film analysis based on relevant, engaging class resources has proven to be a meaningful catalyst for examining not only my students’ assumptions and biases, but also their own expectations of themselves as teacher.

I send my students off at the end of the semester with a reminder to remember that their future students need a miracle worker less than they need a mentor and role model who demonstrates authentic care and interest—and hope teacher educators after me reinforce this same message.

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