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SAC: Film Analysis

Superstar Instructors

Urban classroom settings are often molded by the personalities of both the students and teachers in the classroom. In many cases it is the relationship that is built between the students and teachers that creates a safe and encouraging atmosphere that promotes students to pay attention and learn. It is pretty often that a student-teacher relationship in an urban classroom becomes hostile due to miscommunication between the two parties. In the film *Take the Lead* directed by Liz Friedlander, circumstances based on a true story about a dance instructor, Pierre Dulaine, illustrate a very particular relationship between teacher and student with many differences between the two. Although this film addresses a unique circumstance because it did not begin directly in a classroom and the progression of the film was not based in an academic setting, Dulaine was in fact teaching students and he used several techniques that proved to be rather effective.

Initially the way that Mr. Dulaine is introduced into the urban school environment is because he catches a student vandalizing the car of the principal. Mr. Dulaine took it upon himself to then meet with the principal of this school to see if there was any way that he could help. Unlike a teacher that is actually employed at the school and expresses that he does not want to waste his time with students that have not earned it, Mr. Dulaine was willing to sacrifice his personal time and offer his resources to help discipline these students in a manner that would promote team building and focus. This simple introduction into a classroom setting where Mr. Dulaine actually wanted to make a difference in the lives of troubled students was indicative of “culturally responsive classroom management (CRCM)” as described by Bondy et al. As Mr. Dulaine continues to teach his course through the end of the school term, he further utilizes the strengths of CRCM.

Although Mr. Dulaine comes from a middle to upper class background with privileges that many of the students in this urban community had not experienced, he somehow managed to have a grasp on what the students thought of ballroom dance and thus worked with their likes and dislikes in his favor. Mr. Dulaine asked the students to dance while he played some formal ballroom music and the student challenged his authority by refusing to stand. Mr. Dulaine then preyed on their dislikes by turning up the volume on his music until the students chose to stand in order to seize the overwhelming volume of the sound. On some level, Mr. Dulaine was earning the respect of the students because the students were able to recognize that Mr. Dulaine was not going to back down because he was in unfamiliar territory or because the students were attempting to intimidate him. Mr. Dulaine then continues to push the students to raise their standards by being willing to work with peers that they would not normally work with. By encouraging unique behavior and earning their respect, he was in fact displaying CRCM.

At another lesson, he realizes that bringing in an attractive partner and showing that ballroom dance, in this case tango, can be very seductive, he peeks their interest. After Mr. Dulaine had gotten the students comfortable with each other and the idea of learning ballroom dance, he then uses a fusion of some of the students popular hip hop in conjunction with some salsa to work with the students current interest to create an easier path into the familiarization with ballroom music. He then tells the students that they too can be successful ballroom dancers like himself and the partner he brought with him, and incentivizes them with an official competition. Similar to Ms. Bronzic in “Tough Fronts,” Mr. Dulaine is using the strengths of his students to prompt their interest in learning and to subtly force them into succeeding by having high expectations for their own accomplishments. By offering the students part of his world and by integrating himself into their urban school setting, Mr. Dulaine acquired both the social and cultural capital necessary to build a strong and positive relationship with his students.

From Mr. Dulaine’s first few lessons, it is appropriate to say that he was implementing Gloria-Ladson Billings’ theoretical construct of “culturally relevant pedagogy.” Ladson-Billings constructs this with three propositions, students’ academic achievements, cultural competence, and socio-political consciousness (110-111). Mr. Dulaine, although he did not directly teach an academic course, encouraged students to come to his dance class everyday, which also encouraged them to come to school. His disciplines also taught his students to focus on higher achievement instead of just reaching for minor goals. By having them embrace their culture and integrate their style of music into his style of dance, he enabled them to have cultural competence. Finally, by introducing them to an entirely knew world of dance with new societal hierarchies and political implications, e.g. cotillions, Mr. Dulaine has increased their socio-political consciousness. In addition to these measures, he provided these students with an alternative use of their time that introduced them to new ways of thinking and also encouraged them to step out of their comfort zone to try something new. The students were able to release tension by channeling their focus into the art form of dance.

Having attended a public middle school with a dance program, I was shocked at the amount of people that had street credit but chose to spend their time in dance. The only dance course that was offered was a cross between modern dance and an intro ballet course but it was offered as an alternative for physical education. Because of this, many students signed up for it not knowing that it was an actual formal dance class with French vocabulary for given moves and shows at the end of each term. What I found interesting was that although this was a unique class that many “lazy” students signed up for, the class itself was taken very seriously because of the demeanor of the instructor. Mrs. Gelber pushed each and every one of her students to their highest potential so that they could develop their skills as modern dancers; because she had an equal respect for the potential of every individual, much like Mr. Dulaine, she received respect and acquired both social and cultural capital.

On an observational level outside of the classroom, the reason I was surprised to see certain students in her class was because I was familiar with the social circles of a lot of these people and I would not have registered them as fans of the arts, let alone a highly disciplined form of modern dance. I knew that these students and their friends, much like the students in the film, spent their time after school making trouble because they had nothing better to do or doing illegal activities in order to make ends meet. That being said, both the students in my school and the students in the film, by being in these dance classes used much of their free time outside of school both practicing for the show and having outside rehearsals. These dance programs enabled these students to apply themselves to something that they could be passionate about; it gave them goals to work towards.

I believe that both Mr. Dulaine and Mrs. Gelber recognized this, even if the students did not, and they did in fact change the lives of many people. They were ideal teachers in urban schools, and even though they were not in academic classrooms, they aided the success of students in the academic setting. I am sure that the students were appreciative of these instructors and I think it would be extremely beneficial if urban schools had teachers like this within every classroom.

Works Cited

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