Movie Review

Sidney Poitier in James Clavell’s production of: To Sir, with love

As a teacher I found To Sir, with love to be an excellent performance, demonstrating the crucial role that teachers play in society and although the movie was filmed in 1966, the basic principles taught stand true in 2010.

Sidney Poitier stars as Mark Thackeray, who was an engineer by training but was unable procure a position as an engineer and ended up taking a job as a teacher working with the most challenging teenagers in one of London’s working-class neighbourhoods. The classes at that school were made up of the rejects from every other high school in London. There was no form of punishment at North Quay Secondary School where his disrespectful, rebellious students try to wear him down in the hopes of causing him to lose control of the class. They did not succeed.

The movie depicts how quickly a good teacher must learn his or her students and what steps he or she must take to gain control of his or her class and be effective. From the outset Mr. Thackeray took on a positive attitude toward his teaching position. When asked by one of his colleagues how much teaching experience he had had, he replied that this was his first appointment. His colleague touted that most teachers refer to teaching as a job not an “appointment”. Another colleague took an undermining view of teaching, saying that that same group of unruly teenagers would soon be earning twice as much as they were and that an education is a disadvantage. Thackeray objected.

Mark Thackeray seemed to fit the profile of the intentional teacher perfectly. He possessed the necessary qualities to gain control of his riotous class and to quickly learn by reflection what he did not possess naturally. The movie impresses in my mind the importance of being a reflective teacher – revisiting situations in my mind to consider the most suitable ways of handling them should they occur again. Mr. Thackeray’s approach and demeanor was always very professional. He dressed impeccably and demanded the same of his students after deciding that he would treat them as the adults that they were. He once commented that he had seen garbage collectors who carried themselves neater and cleaner than some of the young men in his class. He thought on his feet and did not allow his students to outsmart him. He faced issues front on and let his class know the stance that he took. He set out to teach them about life and prepare them for the world they were about to face as young adults.

Sidney Poitier portrayed the role extremely well, in a heart-wrenching performance that ended with Mr. Thackeray realizing that his true calling was to be a teacher, as two more unruly teenagers entered the room where he sat looking at a gift he had received from his once undisciplined class. Those two immature, unruly teenagers pointed out to him that they would be in his class next year and he realized how much he wanted to help them in the same way that he had helped his graduating class and how much they needed a teacher like him. He ripped apart the job offer he had received from a private firm for an engineering position and threw it in to the garbage. He was now certain that he wanted to teach and this was the place he needed to be. He had gained the respect of the young adults in his class by treating them as such so that they would recognize the stage they were at in their lives, and he demanded the same respect from them, in a very diplomatic fashion. Mr. Thackeray possessed a deep care and concern for the well-being of his students and paid close attention to the affective side of teaching.

Mark Thackeray gained the respect of parents and people in the outside community, as they recognized his strengths as a teacher in gaining the respect of his students and managing his class so well. In the end he achieved a group of students who possessed a more mature outlook on life. As a black man from British Guiana he taught his students to put aside racial differences and fear of being criticized for being unprejudiced. As the theme song, sung by British songstress Lulu pointed out, a good teacher is a best friend and teaches you “right from wrong and weak from strong”. Mr. Thackeray – “Sir”, confirmed in my mind through this movie many important lessons and the tremendous responsibility that rests on a teacher’s shoulders that go beyond transferring book knowledge, but also perhaps the more important lessons of giving our students the skills they will need to survive in the real world. We will help our students to identify their talents and nurture them, so that they share their talents with the rest of the world and be a benefit to themselves in the process. Teaching is indeed a calling that is meant to make a difference in the lives of others while experiencing immense personal growth within oneself. “How do you repay someone who has taken you from crayons to perfume?” as the songwriter asked. One cannot repay someone from whom he or she has gained such invaluable lessons. The grateful hearts of the students whose lives I touch will be my reward.