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“When students get in touch with their own dignity as human beings, they grasp the meaning of learning.”

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Freedom in Film: *To Sir, with Love* (1967)

By Kathryn Hickok

Nearing the end of his patience, a first-year teacher challenges his scarcely literate students to think seriously about the lives ahead of them. What will happen after high school graduation? One academically indifferent girl supposes she'll get married, giggling that “everybody gets married.”

Such comfortable assumptions have disappeared since 1967; much else about the lives and troubles of at-risk teenagers hasn't.

[*To Sir, with Love*](#) stars Sidney Poitier as Mark Thackeray, an engineer who takes a temporary teaching job. The kids are rough, uninterested in school, and oblivious to the possibility that they could become more than they are. The gentlemanly Mr. Thackeray, called “Sir” by his students, is as much a culture shock to them as they are to him.

To Sir, with Love is like a time capsule of the late 1960s: Sentimental optimism contrasts with the grittiness of poverty, illiteracy, teenage rebellion, and rapid social change. There is a sense that Mr. Thackeray's class is careening wildly toward dead-end or delinquent adulthoods, and he has a few short weeks to reach at least some of his students before they are lost. His greatest asset as a teacher, though, has nothing to do with cutting-edge curriculum or teaching “best practices.”

It is culture. “Sir” is a living example of another world which his students could choose to enter, if only they could see themselves in it. Through him they experience, for the first time, what it is to have dignity. As the teenagers begin to awaken to their own self-worth, they start to grasp why people have manners, respect others, and behave in ways that draw respect in turn. They take interest in the written word and the process of intellectual inquiry.

Education is more than transmission of facts; it's an invitation to explore the world of the soul, of human creative capacity, and of the physical universe. When students get in touch with their own dignity as human beings, they grasp the meaning of learning. They no longer mark time until school is out; they transform as students and as people.

Great teachers help students discover the grandeur of human existence, potential, and achievement and that they are made for more than superficial pleasures and “easy outs.” *To Sir, with Love* shows what can happen when the right adult comes into a teenager's life at the right time—and why that's so important.

Kathryn Hickok is Publications Director and Director of the Children's Scholarship Fund-Portland program at Cascade Policy Institute. CSF-Portland is a partner program of the New York-based Children's Scholarship Fund.

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