

Critical Reflection and Action: Social Justice Recommendations for *The Class*
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Introduction

In the film *The Class* (Cantet, 2008), we see well-intentioned teachers like Mssr. Marin working to connect with and support the students in his diverse classroom. There are moments in the film that show Mssr. Marin attempting to advocate for his students, valuing their creativity, and showing interest in their lives outside of school to build relationships—all of which contribute to effective multicultural education (Osei-Kofi, 2011, p. 388; Paris, 2012, p. 94; ARCDO uToronto, 2014). Alas, many of the practices that Mssr. Marin and other teachers engage in and the attitudes that those practices reflect are deeply problematic and not only hamper good learning and good teaching, but also reinforce social inequity. To remedy some of these problems, I recommend that the staff of the school 1) acknowledge and reject deficit theory, and 2) acknowledge and reject the privileging of dominant norms and knowledge in the school's curriculum, practices, and policies.

Acknowledge and Reject Deficit Theory

Gorski (2008) wrote that deficit theory “holds that inequality is the result, not of systemic inequities in access to power, but intellectual and ethical deficiencies in particular groups of people” (p. 518). Gorski (2011) added that deficit theory asserts that “people are disenfranchised due to their own ‘deficiencies,’” and blames the victims of oppression for their oppression.

In the film, the behaviors of teachers and the systems in place make evident that deficit theory is a framework through which the school and staff make meaning of and interact with their students, especially students of color. For example, when teachers are given their lists of students at the beginning of the year, we see one teacher reading another's list and labeling each student as “nice” or “not nice.” This practice reflects the deficit theory of the veteran teacher, and plants the seeds of deficit theory in the mind of the new teacher: even before this new teacher has met his students, he expects many of them to be “not nice” and has defined them as problems, not as students who are valuable and have potential. Put differently, these teachers are focusing on some students' perceived “deficits” rather than their assets. In a different scene, we see a frustrated teacher venting to his colleagues about his students, saying that they behave “like animals” and that they deserve their difficult lives. Other scenes reveal that teachers describe students using disparaging terms like “limited,” “not normal.” This language epitomizes deficit theory by describing students as inherently deficient and claiming that their disenfranchisement is a logical and just result of their own faults (Gorski, 2011).

Deficit theory is also present beyond the behaviors of individual teachers, and it permeates systems in the school. Although there are a few examples of positive reinforcement (by giving good grades or putting students on an honor roll), the school's system for impacting and controlling student behavior is largely based on punishment. Several scenes show Mssr. Marin and his fellow teachers meeting to discuss and evaluate students, and their conversations consistently focus on what a student has done wrong and how to punish that student, rather than examining why the behavior occurred and what they can do to alter the learning environment so it better meets the needs of the student. This system manifests deficit theory by aiming to punish and alter disenfranchised students “rather than...redressing the conditions which disenfranchise them” (Gorski, 2011).

Accordingly, I believe that what is needed is a “deep shift in consciousness” among the school staff (Gorski, 2008, p. 517). Staff require professional development that helps them recognize deficit theory in their attitudes, behaviors, and systems, and then calls on them to reject this theory. Gorski (2011) affirms that a commitment to “rejecting deficit ideology” is an essential step for all aspiring multicultural educators. In place of deficit approaches, staff should be trained in “resource pedagogies,” which view students, their communities, and their “funds of knowledge” as resources on which to build rather than as essentially deficient (Paris, 2012, p. 517). As a result of such professional development, teachers should alter their own approaches to teaching and interacting with students, but should also work to replace the existing system of punishment with a system of behavioral intervention that is positive, reflective and culturally responsive.

Acknowledge and Reject the Privileging of Dominant Norms

Paris (2012) noted that deficit theory is often accompanied by the privileging of “White, middle-class norms” in schools which positions cultures, knowledge, and experiences that fall “outside those norms as less-than and unworthy of a place in...schools and society” (p. 93). In the film, the norms of the dominant group are ever-present and valued in the classroom, while the knowledge and experiences of other groups are absent or devalued. For example, when Mssr. Marin creates example sentences while teaching grammar in class, he uses “white” names (which a student notices and challenges). Mssr. Marin also privileges white, standard French over the languages and dialects spoken by students, and rejects students’ remarks that the language he was teaching was irrelevant to their lives. Mssr. Marin also designs assignments based upon white cultural norms; when he asks students to write a self-portrait, he assumes that students share the dominant group’s norm of individuality and will enjoy writing about their private lives. This assumption is incorrect, and his assignment causes some students in his class to feel uncomfortable, since writing about or sharing their private lives is in conflict with their cultures and values. The pervasive privileging of white ways of knowing and being creates a learning environment which is unwelcoming and uncomfortable for many students, and which creates a divide between their cultures and the school which inhibits the development of a positive academic identity.

I recommend that the staff of the school must recognize and reject the myriad ways in which white norms and knowledge are privileged in their classrooms. Indeed, they should work to create an environment which “seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain...cultural pluralism” and the home cultures of students (Paris, 2012, p. 93). In order to achieve this, staff must first increase their understanding of students’ families, cultures, and lived experiences. This could be accomplished by having earlier and more frequent face-to-face interactions with families, involving families in decisions, and hosting “culturally relevant school events” (Theoharis, 2007, pp. 236-238). In addition, prioritizing the hiring of diverse staff is an effective way of bringing other knowledge and ways of being into the school’s culture and curriculum (UCLTV, 2014; ARCD O uToronto, 2014). In the classroom, teachers can make changes including personalizing exercises to reflect the identities and experiences of students, revising the curriculum so that it is relevant to the lives of students, and “relocate[ing] nuanced representations of difference as integral to the curriculum” (Khalifa & Gooden, 2010, p. 314; Asher, 2007, p. 66).

Conclusion

In order to provide students with an education and educational environment that is equitable and affirming, the teachers in *The Class* (Cantet, 2008)—and all teachers—must work for both internal and external change. They must first (and continually) engage in honest self-examination to identify their biases and attitudes, on both an individual and group level. They must then take action and engage in “the messy work of social reconstruction” in order to create systemic and meaningful change (Gorski, 2008, p. 516).

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