

# The Movie That Changed My Life, And May Change The World

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Some things change history. This article documents the first film and song in a series of events that will eventually change human history. Find Bill Allin at <http://billallin.com>

## The Movie That Changed My Life, And May Change The World

If you plan for one year, plant rice.

If you plan for ten years, plant trees. If you plan for 100 years, educate mankind.

- Chinese proverb

1967 proved a banner year for young movie star Sidney Poitier, with three major films in a single year to his credit. The least popular movie at the time was the British school flick *To Sir, With Love*. The song of the same name, sung by Scottish actor/singer Lulu hit number 1 on the US pop Billboard charts and was rated the best pop single of 1967 by billboard.

While the music of the song was spectacular (I could have lived in Dreamland with that song), its lyrics may have ruined the extremely important message made by the film. "How can you thank someone who has taken you from crayons to perfume" made parents believe the movie was about a lovesick teenage girl who had a crush on her teacher, and who needed another one of those? Are teachers really teaching about perfume in school?

The movie took place in an East London high school where the senior class wanted nothing more than to get out of school and find jobs. The curriculum had so little bearing on their future (Denham: "I've me own barra when I'm finished here") that disruption of class became their primary objective in life. New teacher Mark Thackeray (Poitier) had no more success than his predecessors. Those kids were more misbehaved than any teacher deserves. They took in nothing of the lessons anyone taught.

Then Thackeray had an inspiration. Denham needed to know more about life than just how to conduct business from a fruit and vegetable stand (barrow). They needed life skills. When he changed his teaching from "This is the grammar and arithmetic the school wants me to teach you" to a "This is what you need to know to get through each day of your life" style, he had their attention. The misbehaviour stopped like magic. Of course it worked out beautifully, it was a movie. But its message was critically important for me then and it's critically important for each of us today. (I became a teacher and studied the sociology of education.)

No child starts out life wanting to be antisocial, to be a misfit. Before anything else, they want to know what they need to get through their lives. They want to know what problems they will face as they get older and how to cope with them. They want to know how to make friends, how to patch up broken friendships, how to find a mate, how to act with a boyfriend or girlfriend, what skills they need to know in their heads in order to survive the working world. They need to know the survival skills of adulthood.

To most kids, social and emotional needs take precedence over intellectual needs and sports. If they can't find answers to their questions on these subjects, they can't bring themselves to care about the school curriculum. They don't care much about learning to read if their parents fight at home every night. Sometimes they know inherently that they need something, but don't know what. They expect their parents or teachers to provide that information without their having to ask. When it doesn't come, they object. They misbehave. They bully. They steal. They take drugs. They do whatever they can to make up for the lack that has turned into a permanent hurt.

They are broken. Why try to fix broken people if you can prevent them from breaking in the first place?

[Turning It Around](#) makes clear proposals that will prevent kids from breaking, from becoming social problems for their communities and heartaches for their parents. The book has answers, solutions that are virtually without cost, but require some changes in what teachers are allowed to teach, what they are allowed to tell the kids whose futures are in their hands

To Sir, With Love was far from the last attempt the film industry made to try to turn school curriculum away from traditional lessons that kids know they will never use to material that every one can and will use in their lives. *Why Shoot the Teacher?*, *The Principal*, *Conrack*, *Stand and Deliver*, *Lean on Me*, *Teachers*, *Dead Poets Society*, *Dangerous Minds*, *Mr. Holland's Opus*, *Music of the Heart*, *Take the Lead*, *Freedom Writers*, *The Ron Clark Story* and *Sister Act 2* picked up on the same theme.

Still, in most school jurisdictions, curriculum remains mired in the 19th century. Discipline is worse than ever before. The admonishment to "return to the basics" has failed. The basics of life are not reading, writing and arithmetic, but life skills. If you don't know how to cope with your problems, what good will it do to know the rules of grammar or how to do trigonometry? What good is a job with high pay if half or more of it goes to the spouse you couldn't manage to live with because you didn't know how?

The students who were in high school in the late 1960s and succeeding decades have become adults and now constitute the main constituency that operate our companies, that elect our political leaders, that make decisions that affect our lives. When the most common medical prescription in the USA is Prozac and use of marijuana and alcohol has become so pervasive that they can't be evaded at parties and social gatherings of all sorts, we must wonder if our schools are teaching what the future adults who run everything really need. When we examine the politics of the USA, Egypt, Israel, Sudan, Russia, China, Indonesia and many other countries, we must ask ourselves if we are teaching what kids really need. If we taught what they need, they wouldn't mess up their lives so badly.

The world is indeed a messy place to live. At this time we have little choice but to live in the mess. But it doesn't have to remain a mess.

The means and opportunities to correct our problems are in our schools. We elect the people who set school curriculum. We can make changes if we speak up about them.

As always, if we leave it to others to make decisions for us, they will make decisions that will benefit them more than the rest of us. Change happens at the ballot box. That kind of change can only happen when we all help to inform others about what is needed. Spread the word.

Education is your affair, not something you leave to leaders of industry and political parties.

Speak up. Talk to others. Forward this article to other people you believe might care.

Bill Allin is the author of ***Turning It Around: Causes and cures for Today's Epidemic Social Problems***, a guidebook for changing school curriculum and teaching by parents that will help make the 21st century the one that finally gets it right. Kids matter and this book teaches us how to make that work for all of us. Learn more at <http://billallin.com>

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