

## USE FILMS TO GET GROUPS TALKING — AND LISTENING — TO ONE ANOTHER

The old adage is true: A picture is worth a thousand words. The imagery and sound of film has the power to capture attention and spur thinking in a way that words don't. That is why professional developers often use videos to convey important ideas. Sometimes a short clip is enough to get the message across. Other times, the message is too complex to communicate quickly, and viewing an entire film is necessary to explore a multilayered issue such as cultural proficiency.

Full-length films allow viewers to see the complexity and nuances of cultural interactions. Discussions following full-length films tend to be deeper and more insightful than those in response to a short clip. This makes watching full-length films an excellent strategy for helping teachers unpack beliefs, values, and stereotypes. The challenge with using full-length films is finding time to show them. Some films take as little as 30 minutes, but many films last an hour or more. Since most schools have few designated professional development days, it's hard to justify spending a large chunk of one watching a film. A better approach is to have teachers watch the film beforehand and spend the time together discussing what they saw.

There are a variety of ways to make the film accessible to teachers before the session. One is to designate a room in the school where the video and equipment for viewing will be available, allowing teachers to view the video at their convenience. Another possibility is to schedule viewing parties. These can be held at school or at a private home. Teachers sign up for a particular party and bring snacks to share. A third option is to obtain multiple copies of the film for teachers to check out individually. Public and school libraries are a good source for this. Inexpensive used copies may also be purchased at video stores. Which of these strategies works best depends on how many people need to see the film and the amount of time available

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before the discussion session. Ideally, teachers should view the film within two weeks of the discussion session.

At the beginning of the discussion session, form small groups of no more than six participants each. Provide an overview of the film highlighting key events, and distribute a handout with character names and a plot sequence. This will serve as a reference for the teachers as they respond to discussion questions. Once each group is familiar with the plot and list of characters, distribute a list of discussion questions. Allow ample time for discussion. As the groups work, listen to what participants say, making note of important points and observations. Bring the groups back together to debrief.

During the debriefing, ask teachers to share key ideas from their small groups. Ask what they see as the main message of the film. As teachers share, the group will likely demonstrate that, although they all watched the same film, they have different interpretations and do not necessarily agree on the film's meaning. This is an important juncture in the discussion that can lead to a conversation about why students and families sometimes view a situation differently than school personnel view the same situation.



In each issue of *JSD*, Sarah W. Nelson, above, and Patricia L. Guerra write about the importance of and strategies for developing cultural awareness in teachers and schools. The columns are available at [www.nsd.org](http://www.nsd.org).

### WHAT TYPES OF FILMS?

Documentaries work particularly well for generating discussion about cultural proficiency. They often have accompanying discussion guides, making them easy to use in a group setting. An excellent source for documentaries related to culture and education can be found at Teaching for Change ([www.teachingforchange.org](http://www.teachingforchange.org)). Here are some of the documentaries we particularly like.

- “Breaking the Silence” by Roberta Wallitt. Asian-American students from refugee families share their educational experiences.
- “The Color of Fear” by Lee Mun Wah. Eight men of Asian, European, Latino, and African descent discuss race relations.
- “Fear and Learning at Hoover Elementary” by Laura Simon. Teachers respond to the issue of educating undocumented immigrants.
- “Out of the Past” by Jeff Dupre. A 17-year-old starts a Gay Straight Alliance at her public high school.



- “When the Levees Broke” by Spike Lee. This film examines what happened in New Orleans before and after Hurricane Katrina. These thought-provoking films address sensitive issues and will undoubtedly surface a variety of perspectives among teachers. We recommend using documentaries with groups that have been working on cultural proficiency for some time and have experience discussing cultural issues. Without adequate preparation, discussions following emotion-laden documentaries may become divisive and unproductive. Worse, they may leave teachers feeling defensive and reluctant to engage in further cultural exploration.

An alternative to documentaries is popular movies. Feature films tend to be less intense than documentaries, yet still provocative. They are a good choice for groups with limited experience discussing cultural issues. When selecting movies for this purpose, choose those that highlight the complexities of cross-cultural interactions. “Do the Right Thing,” “Double Happiness,” “Mi Familia,” and “Bend It Like Beckham” are examples. Be careful to avoid movies that reinforce stereotypes. One way to find appropriate films is to look for those written, directed, and acted by people of the culture groups represented in the film. However, an important point to keep in mind and to help teachers understand is that no one film captures all the diversity within a culture group.

A recent movie that is particularly good for exploring intercultural relationships is “Crash.” This film examines racial tensions through multiple, interconnected story lines that illustrate that no one is immune from cultural bias. While not a perfect film (“Crash” has been criticized for portraying Asian cultures too negatively), it provides a forum for initiating discussions about race and the role it plays in our society.

When using “Crash,” ask teachers to watch the film and select the character with whom they most closely identify and to note the important messages they take from the film.

For the debriefing, divide teachers into groups of four to five and give them a list of discussion questions such as:

- With which character did you most closely identify? Why?
- What differences in interactions and behavior did you see among the characters?
- To what do you attribute these differences?
- What values are reflected in the characters’ actions?
- What happens when people know little about another cultural group?
- What happens in times of stress between people of different cultural groups?
- How is your own behavior similar to or different from the behavior of the characters?



Lionsgate Photo by LOREY SEBASTIAN  
**“Crash” can be used to explore bias. From left, Peter (Larenz Tate), and Anthony (Chris “Ludacris” Bridges).**

Allow at least 30 minutes for discussion. During this time, move from group to group and listen carefully to the discussion. Acknowledge teachers for recognizing their own biases. Praise those who challenge others’ deficit thinking and stereotypes. Use questions to push the thinking of teachers who rationalize biased behavior as neutral. For example, in “Crash,” there is a scene in which Sandra Bullock is walking down the street with her husband. She draws him in closer when two young black men approach from the opposite direction. Many teachers will identify with Sandra Bullock’s character and admit to having a similar bias. Others will deny her action is racially based, either saying they would have had the same reaction regardless if the young men were black or white or rationalizing it as “women’s intuition” that danger is near. At this point, it is critical to challenge this thinking to surface the bias that may lie beneath the explanation. Questions such as, “Would your reaction be the same if the two men were white and dressed in polo shirts and slacks?” or “As women, what are we taught to be fearful of and who teaches us this?” help to bring out hidden beliefs.

Return to the large group and ask teachers to share insights gained from small-group discussions and the movie’s message. Themes that commonly emerge during this discussion include:

1. When little is known about a cultural group, individuals often resort to the use of stereotypes.
2. All cultural groups are guilty of cultural bias.
3. Cultural bias is conscious and unconscious.
4. Even individuals who advocate for social justice can fall back to biased behaviors, especially in times of stress.
5. Power can be used to oppress others.

Each of these ideas is important and will help move teachers toward cultural proficiency. However, it is unlikely that one session will be sufficient to thoroughly discuss all of these ideas. Select one or two to focus on for this discussion. Later, use another film to address other ideas. One of the strengths of using film to develop cultural proficiency is the strategy can be used repeatedly and still generate fresh ideas. ■