TO BE AND TO HAVE [“Etre et Avoir”] [2002, directed by Nicolas Philibert]  The title of this wonderful documentary is based on the two key verbs of the French language [and possibly most other languages]. This is a very gentle and quiet film. As a documentary, it is certainly very different from a feature film. Yet, in some ways, the chief “character” in the film still has a good deal of star quality. The film is entirely in French with subtitles.

It is always fair to wonder why a particular film is being shown in a social science class. What does it have to do with the problems of social differentiation and inequality?  For one thing, we are looking at what goes on in another society. Therefore, one focuses on differentiation in order to think about what societies have in common and what makes them distinctive. Second, the film is about education and schooling. In a sense, everyone considers himself or herself to be an expert on education since we all spend [or have spent] so much time in school. Yet, what some societies think should be stressed in school may be different from the priorities of other societies. This gets us into the general subject of culture. From there, it is not much of a leap to get into matters of skills and resources. What kinds of skills does a society demand of its teachers? What kind of support does a society give to education? This question in turn gets us into the issue of status. How much status do teachers have in different societies? How much freedom of action does a teacher have in deciding curriculum or in making decisions on how to run a classroom? Do all the schools in a nation receive the same kind of support and is the curriculum nationally determined, or is there a situation like the one in the U.S. where much of what goes on in a school and how much money is spent depends to a considerable extent on local decisions.

While France has one of the best educational systems in the world, the system is also highly centralized and sometimes accused of being old-fashioned and rigid. In the opinion of some, too much emphasis may be placed on uniformity and discipline. And, then, there is the question of “real vs. real.” A system that works well in affluent Paris neighborhoods may not work so well in rural areas or in immigrant slum neighborhoods on the outskirts of Paris. [In France and other societies with old cities, the suburbs are often poorer than city centers]. This is something that would have been in the minds of French audiences seeing this film but probably not a concern of foreign audiences.

Some other things to consider: The school in the film looks like it is in a remote area. In fact, while the terrain is rugged, it is not that far from major urban centers. French farmers are often quite prosperous and people in this region—the Auvergne—produce some of the best pork and cheese in the world. Many of the houses in the area are vacation homes for people from Paris and nearby cities. This kind of “single class” school used to be much more common in France and, of course, was fairly common in parts of the U.S. as well.

The status of the teacher is a general one [teachers in France have higher status than in the U.S.] but also specific: He has been a continuous authority figure for some of these children for about a decade. It is also possible that, to many people, a male teacher has additional status. Listen to what he says about his parents’ hopes and expectations for
him. Pay attention to his interactions with children and parents. Do the children seem to like and respect him? If so, how is this manifested? France is a very secular society. Are there any references to religion in the film? Some of the students seem to have emotional or learning-related problems. How optimistic can we be about their prospects when they go to the next level where they will not know their fellow students or their teachers? How much diversity is there in the classroom? How much emphasis is there on academics as opposed to the emotional development or self-esteem of the children? Note the emphasis in the classroom on dictation: The teacher speaks or reads something and the students have to write what they hear. When I took French in high school, this was a central feature of the class. This is an old tradition and is in part related to the fact that, as in English, sounds in French may be written in a variety of ways. Would you say that the teacher is less self-conscious about physical contact with his students than might be the case in a similar setting in the U.S.? Some of you are considering a career in teaching. Are you encouraged by this film? Is there anything in the teacher’s approach you would consider using?

Finally, think about why this film was so successful both in France and in other countries. Critics and audiences have been very enthusiastic. If you share this perception, fine. If you do not, think about why your perceptions are different. It is not so much a matter of determining who is right so much as understanding differences.