REVIEW OF *WAITING FOR SUPERMAN*

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Summary of Review

Waiting for Superman offers what appear to be straightforward, commonsense solutions to inequities in schooling. The film argues that heroic action can be taken to fix what it portrays as the disaster of public schooling. The film disregards poverty as a factor in school performance and connection—and therefore never addresses anti-poverty measures as potential solutions to the problems it identifies. While it raises issues that demand attention, including achievement gaps, high drop-out rates in some schools and districts, and the need for committed, well-prepared teachers, it offers solutions that are simplified, ignore research evidence, and are built on false assumptions.

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Davis Guggenheim's *Waiting for Superman* opens and concludes with clips from the 1950s television series featuring the Man of Steel. At the start of the film, the black and white clips **show Superman punching bad guys as Geoffrey Canada, the founder of Harlem Children's Zone,** talks about his devastation when, as a child, his mother told him Superman was not real and was not going to arrive to save him and his peers from the poverty of their urban neighborhood. Near the end of the film, another clip shows Superman swooping in to save a school bus full of children as it speeds, uncontrolled, down a steep hill. In between, viewers are introduced to five children and their families, each of whom, the film suggests, represent the millions of other children in need of being saved from the public school system. These first- through eighth-graders are the heart of the film, and each parent or grandparent who loves and cares for them desires nothing more than to provide opportunities for their children that will lead to college and to achievement of the proverbial American Dream. To pursue those dreams, each family has entered a lottery in hopes of attending a charter school. The film follows them all through the lottery process, presenting first-person interviews and footage of the children and family members in their homes and neighborhoods, interspersed with graphs, news footage, interviews with experts and others, and clips from popular media, as well as many animated illustrations of **the more technical aspects of the film's arguments.**

Superman is an interesting choice for the framing metaphor of this film. On the one hand, seen **in light of Canada's childhood story, the superhero is a powerful image, embodying hope for** rescue. And *Waiting for Superman* does present some of the stark inequities in U.S. schooling that demand to be confronted and addressed, including the existence of high schools throughout the country in which an unconscionable number of students do not make it to graduation.

On the other hand, Superman by definition has powers that lie beyond regular folks. As an individual with the capacity to step in and save the day, he is the opposite of a social movement for change; instead he is the ultimate rugged individual, standing tall with cape flying, fists on hips, wearing the confident half-smile of a job well done. No problem is very complex for Superman—he arrives out of nowhere, quickly disposes of the fiercest of obstacles, and leaves with the unfailing gratitude of the people. Similarly, the film *Waiting for Superman* swoops into the complex territory of educational reform and offers what appear to be straightforward, commonsense solutions to inequities in schooling. As the graphics that scroll across the screen **at the end of the movie inform viewers, the "steps are simple." The film argues that heroic** action, swift and sure, can be taken to fix what it portrays as the disaster of public schooling. Unfortunately, this appearance of simplicity is only achieved through omissions and **misrepresentations surrounding some of the film's key points of evidence for its claims. In what** follows, I discuss how the film takes contradictory stances on a number of crucial ideas related

to educational reform and equity, including poverty, grass-roots movements for change, theories of learning, and standardized testing.[1]

Waiting for Superman is not ambiguous in pointing to the villains from whom U.S. schoolchildren need saving. The blame is squarely placed on teachers unions, the bad teachers those unions protect, and the bureaucrats who maintain the status quo. In contrast, the film introduces several heroes, including Bill Gates and Michelle Rhee, who are presented as pursuing children's best interests in spite of those obstacles.

If any one figure in the film is presented as the Superman of the title, it is Geoffrey Canada. While none of the families featured in the film is shown applying for his Harlem Children's Zone schools, the focus on Canada is telling. The Harlem Children's Zone reform is an example of ambitious community-level effort that enacts the so-called wraparound model—providing services such as free medical, dental, and mental-health treatment, early-childhood programs, parenting workshops, asthma and anti-obesity programs, and K-12 school-based supports, such as intensive individual tutoring.

Waiting for Superman does not show the extent and range of social services provided in the Zone to children from birth through graduation. Preliminary analyses of academic performance in the charter schools launched by Canada are mixed, finding little or no impact on achievement[2] or finding significant gains in some subject areas but not others[3]. Thus, while the

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movie asks viewers to focus on individual schools and heroic leaders, the reality is that the array of services provided by Geoffrey Canada's Harlem Children's Zone actually supports a counter argument: that schools are only one key ingredient in a much larger mix of social services necessary to mitigate the impact of multi-generational poverty in some urban neighborhoods.

Then there is the question of resources. Left out of the movie is the fact that Harlem Children's Zone enjoys assets of more than $100 million in funding from a variety of private sources, including the Gates Foundation.[4] Private funding of this sort simply cannot be broadly relied upon to create similar systemic change in all communities with underperforming schools. Certainly the filmmakers understood this, but the film includes no call for federal, state, and local governments to radically increase investments in neighborhoods to enact such wraparound reforms. The film's depiction of Canada as someone whose charter schools provide the model for what all urban schools can achieve belies the fact that his model argues for nothing less than a sea change in government intervention in poverty.

Throughout *Waiting for Superman*, poverty is both highly visible and shockingly ignored. The film employs poverty to advance its arguments, while disregarding poverty as a factor in school

performance and connection—and therefore never addresses anti-poverty measures as potential solutions. Throughout the film, we see and hear the impact of economic struggles on three of the five children. At the beginning, Guggenheim explains in voiceover that he was a believer in public schools, but when his children were ready for school, he opted for private school out of fear of sending them to a "failed school." He is lucky, he says, because he has a choice. Other children, he explains, are not so fortunate. The film then cuts directly to an interview with Anthony, an African American fifth grader in Washington D.C. who is being raised by his grandmother following the drug-related death of his father. As the film's website explains, "Anthony's neighborhood is plagued by drugs, crime, and violence. Anthony needs a way out."

This scene is soon followed by Daisy, a Latina fifth grader in Los Angeles, sharing that her father has lost his job and her family is surviving on her mother's job as a janitor in a hospital. Bianca's mother cannot afford tuition to her daughter's Catholic school, even though she works two jobs. In a clip showing Bianca, an African American kindergartner from Harlem, reading as part of her homework, the camera records her quietly reading aloud the sentence "You will have money and then you will be happy." Viewers are clearly being asked to frame the dire consequences of these children's educational circumstances through the lens of poverty.

Despite its use of poverty to pluck the heart strings of viewers, the film pays no attention to the systemic reach of poverty into health care, housing, and employment. It ignores also the demonstrated relationship between financial resources and educational performance and opportunity,[5] not to mention the corruption in the financial industry that fueled the recession that exacerbates financial hardships for these three families. Public schools are presented as the sole source of the struggles faced by the families, and escaping neighborhood public schools is the only solution proffered. Indeed, the film explicitly places the blame for "failing neighborhoods" on "failing schools." There is no mention of the responsibility of government— local, state, or national—to provide for its citizens' basic needs, nor of the local and national social, political, and economic circumstances that result in material and deeply felt consequences for families such as Anthony's, Daisy's and Bianca's. For the complex analysis demanded by serious inequities in schools, viewers will need to turn elsewhere. In contrast to the simplified view that the *Waiting for Superman* documentary presents, the fictional television series The Wire, for example, portrays the symbiotic relationships of systems of government, law enforcement, crime, poverty, and schools and the ways they intertwine to shape the lives and determine the opportunities for learning of inner-city school children.

The absence of discussion of government's role in supporting opportunity for children and families is perhaps most striking in the film's presentation of global data comparing U.S. test scores with those of other developed countries. In this comparison, Finland is offered in the film as the clear exemplar. The implicit assumption is that comparisons of test score data can be accurately made without attention being paid to the context in which those scores are attained. But an understanding of the details of Finland's education and social systems, which are not explored in the film, would undermine the primary assumptions on which the film is built.[6] Finland has a strong teachers union; an extraordinarily ambitious, government-supported system of teacher education and professional development; and robust social welfare programs for children and families. *Waiting for Superman* purports to hold adults accountable, but to

dismiss poverty and its impact on children is to let adults off the hook, particularly those adults setting economic priorities at the federal level.

Pointing out that *Waiting for Superman* lacks a deep analysis of poverty and of systemic inequities that reach well beyond schools does not mean downplaying the urgency of improving public schools. It also does not mean downplaying the role that those schools can and should play in providing opportunities for people engaged in an inter-generational economic struggle. The film's major failure is that it sidesteps a serious discussion about the kinds of resources—

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both human and economic—that are required to provide educational and social safety nets for all students. After all, the vast majority of poor students will never attend one of the minority of charter schools (approximately one in six, according to the Stanford CREDO study mentioned in the film[7]) that have been shown to make a positive difference in school performance.

The pamphlets passed to viewers outside of theaters at the end of *Waiting for Superman* and the messages on the film's website (waitingforsuperman.com) suggest that the filmmakers are calling for some sort of social movement. These messages also scroll across the screen at the end of the movie, declaring the need for "people like you" to get involved, "We know what works," "The steps are simple," "share this film," "millions of kids are waiting."

In interviews on The Oprah Winfrey Show and elsewhere, Guggenheim frames the problem of failing schools as one that will only be addressed by the involvement of individuals who commit to improving schools from the bottom up. Throughout, the film attempts to build the case that if adults moved beyond their own self-interests and committed to putting children first, students could be saved from the alleged destructive impact of the current public school system.

It is striking, then, to note how the film dismisses the efforts of the predominantly African American parents and other community members in Washington DC who protested the closings of their neighborhood schools as part of Michelle Rhee's decidedly top-down reforms. Making no distinctions among parents and other neighborhood residents, classroom teachers, the teachers union and local politicians, the film cuts from scenes of local meetings in which community members are shown making angry, passionate arguments on behalf of their neighborhood schools to an interview with Rhee, shaking her head and saying that "adults turn a blind eye" to the needs of children.

This part of the film reveals the missing voices. We never see successful neighborhood schools, and we never hear from parents or students who are committed to their neighborhood schools, community members with personal and family histories embedded in those schools, or public school teachers invested in the children and families who they serve.

Without doubt there are teachers in inner-city schools who do not have the skills, attitude, or commitment necessary to be effective. However, schools deemed failing also employ highly

committed, skilled teachers; their perspectives, along with those of parents and students, would have provided insights into the consequences of top-down, clean-sweep approaches to reform.

The film's celebration of Rhee's efforts to close 23 of Washington D.C.'s schools similarly leaves out findings from studies that show school closings can backfire on many of the students the movie is meant to support.[8] For instance, in a study of one high school closing, Kirshner, Geitner, and Pozzoboni (2010) found that achievement scores and graduation rates dropped significantly for those students who were displaced following the closing.[9] In short, Guggenheim demonizes (among others) African-American parents, community members, and public school teachers who are engaged in just the kind of neighborhood-level involvement in their schools **called for at the film's conclusion.**

The tendency in *Waiting for Superman* to oversimplify extends to its views of learning. For educators in its audience, one of the most striking images in the film is likely to be an animation of a child sitting at a desk whose skull opens like a hinged lid as a teacher walks up and pours knowledge from a pitcher into his empty head. The image is clearly intended as a positive, even ideal, view of learning, accompanied by a voiceover arguing that the bureaucracies associated **with local control of schools inhibit teachers' abilities to provide knowledge to their students.**

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The result of that inhibition, as the next image in the scene conveys, is that information falls from the teacher to the d**esk, missing the child's head altogether. It is the ultimate image of a** banking model of learning[10]—the child contributes nothing to the process but a skull waiting to be filled with knowledge provided solely by a teacher.

Of course, decades of research into the process of learning refute this image, and Guggenheim and his team would be hard pressed to find any accomplished educator who would advocate the head-filling approach. Some may dismiss these animated images as facetious, but they accurately reflect **the filmmakers' assumptions. With just a few exceptions, the positive models** of classrooms offered in the film reflect highly traditional, teacher-centered views of teaching **and learning. For instance, when comparing U.S. students' performance to those in** other countries, the film shows a clip of a large group of Chinese students, dressed in identical blue and white track suits, engaged in coordinated calisthenics, suggesting that such regimentation and discipline represent valuable qualities that are lacking in U.S. schools. Other clips from an array of classrooms in the U.S. and other countries show students sitting in rows with teachers instructing from the front of the room.

Why does this matter? It matters because children in high-poverty schools already receive fewer opportunities than wealthier children to experience rigorous curricula, including the kinds of hands-on, inquiry-based learning that emphasizes higher-level thinking and problem-solving.[11] These are the very skills valued in an information age economy and those the film

laments that graduates of public schools supposedly lack. The film risks reinforcing the notion that poor children require highly structured, teacher-centered instruction in order to learn effectively.

Further, when the film states that U.S. schools were among the highest performing in the world until the 1970s, Guggenheim shows clips from mid-century television shows such as Leave it to Beaver, leaving the impression that these images of primarily white, upper middle-class schools illustrate the vision of public schooling to which we should return. Never mentioned is the fact that school desegregation efforts lasted primarily from 1965 until the mid-1970s—so the idealized period when the U.S. was leading the world was also a period when many of the students in this film would have been systematically and intentionally segregated into separate school systems.

Finally, *Waiting for Superman* tries to have it both ways on the question of standardized testing. Throughout, the film presents standardized scores uncritically, as if they represent **transparent measures of students' learning and potential. Whether comparing the U.S.** education system **to those of other countries or making the case that U.S. students' reading and** math proficiency levels represent a state of emergency, scores from national assessments and state proficiency tests are presented as unambiguous representations of the successes and failures of public schools. The story changes, however, when we are introduced to Emily, an upper middle-class eighth grader who is desperate to avoid having to attend her wealthy, state-of-the-art neighborhood high school, which was ranked by Newsweek as one of the top secondary schools in the country. Why is she hoping to escape this fate? Because the school

Waiting for Superman tries to have it both ways on the question of standardized testing.

relies on test scores to sort students into classes (so-called ability grouping, or tracking), and Emily does not perform well on standardized tests. The film shows a highly engaged Emily sitting on the edge of her seat in one of her classes, making smart, articulate comments, and then cuts to animation scenes of students, one of them representing Emily, being sorted on conveyer belts into higher- and lower-tracked classes. The cartoon Emily ends up on the lower track, clearly a mistake given the intelligent, committed girl we have been shown.

The school which Emily has her heart set on attending is a charter school that does not track students based on test scores; all students, the voiceover tells us, take college-preparatory **courses. The role of testing in Emily's story is highly revealing. When the film di**scusses an individual, like Emily, it presented test scores as inadequate as an accurate assessment of a **student's potential as a learner and the richness of their learning. However, when the film** discusses students in the aggregate, it presents test scores as the clear and unquestioned representation of everything associated with learning and connection to school. Tellingly, whether scores are presented as an accurate means of measuring school and teacher performance or, instead, testing is admonished as a **flawed indication of a child's potential, charter schools are poised and ready to save students. Thus, Emily's story, and the role of** testing in *Waiting for Superman* it reveals, suggests that evidence takes a back seat to the

filmmaker's pre-conceived message that charter schools represent the answer to school reform.

Waiting for Superman raises issues that demand attention, including achievement gaps, intolerably high drop-out rates in some schools and districts, and the need to fill schools with committed, well-prepared teachers who believe all kids can learn. However, as several policy experts have also emphasized, the solutions offered by the film are simplified, ignore research evidence, and are too often built on false assumptions that undermine the need to examine the systemic inequities and consequential reforms and policies that surround schooling in the United States.[12] **These inconvenient truths are the kryptonite to Guggenheim's *Superman*.**

Notes and References

1 The film has already received a great deal of scholarly commentary, much of it highly critical. Perhaps the most high-profile critique was offered by Diane Ravitch in the New York Review of Books. Ravitch raises many issues not covered below, so interested readers may also want to read that article:

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